

WRITING AND REBELLION IN PLÁCIDO'S POETRY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On June 28, 1844, Cuban colonial authorities publicly executed Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés – popularly known as Plácido – and ten other men in a Matanzas cemetery. They had been convicted of leading a vast conspiracy to overthrow the colonial government. The deafening shots of gunfire announced the murder of a poet, and the birth of a martyr. From that moment forward, political and social movements have invoked the young mulatto’s name as an emblem for a range of struggles from independence and abolition in the nineteenth century to socialism and democracy in the twentieth. A handful of Plácido’s poems have been reprinted in hundreds of newspapers, journals, propaganda tracts, and anthologies. Many have been translated into English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese. Yet, the poet’s martyrdom has often overshadowed his contribution to Cuban literature, and the bulk of his poetic corpus has not been reprinted since 1904.¹

Plácido’s execution has contributed toward sentimental distortions within the critical analyses of his works. Many favorable critics have read his poetry through a paternalistic filter, in which his writings are considered a byproduct of the author’s “unfortunate” situation as a free mulatto living in a slave society (Horrego Estuch 298-

¹ *Poesías de Plácido*, published in Paris in 1904, was the last major anthology of Plácido’s works. Since then, Cuban publishers produced two other collections, *Poesías selectas de Plácido*, in 1930, and *Plácido como poeta cubano: ensayo biográfico crítico* (an essay accompanied by a selection of poetry), by Jorge Casals in 1944. Another book, *Los poemas más representativos de Plácido (Edición crítica)*, edited by Frederick Stimson and Humberto Robles in 1976, includes some fifty poems. The three aforementioned books of selected works were published with small pressruns.

99).² Others have accused the poet of cynically selling his talent to the white elite for profit. A third camp of critics argues that the poet's works represent a general weakness in nineteenth-century Afro-Cuban literature.³

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed seismic historical changes that spawned the growth of new theories, giving readers better tools with which to study Plácido's creations. Anti-colonial struggles exploded throughout Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean in the twilight of the Second World War. Colonial subjects not only stormed the stage of history, but also won the sympathies of millions of youth in the imperialist centers. The July 26 Movement triumphed in 1959, overthrowing a U.S.-backed dictator and promising a new dawn of socialism three years later. The American Civil Rights Movement uprooted Jim Crow segregation in the U.S. South and challenged racial discrimination throughout the country. These and other struggles of subaltern groups radicalized an entire generation of intellectuals, many of whom entered academia with a critical eye toward prevailing theories in the social sciences.

The birth and evolution of postcolonial theory and cultural studies have contributed to a reappraisal of works by authors historically excluded from the Western canon. Research has shifted away from efforts to seek out binary dichotomies and toward investigations of internal contradictions, in-between spaces, and ambiguities in texts, giving readers sophisticated theoretical tools with which to approach writings of those who do not comfortably fit Linnaean classifications imposed by dominant culture.

² Horrego Estuch develops this paternalistic theme throughout his book, *Plácido, el poeta infortunado*. Francisco Calcagno draws similar conclusions in *Diccionario biográfico cubano*. Sebastián Alfredo de Morales and Enrique Piñeyro also focus on what they dub the "wretched" condition of the author.

³ José Jacinto Milanés, Manuel Sanguily, and Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo are among those who dismiss his work as fawning, while Miriam DeCosta argues of "defects" in Afro-Cuban authors of the nineteenth century.

As a free mulatto living in a slaveocracy ruled by the Spanish Crown, Plácido operated within Cuban intellectual circles dominated by white elites while confronting the enormous contradiction of being part of a small community of free people of color who faced growing repression by the racist colonial regime. Not surprisingly, Plácido's poetry exemplifies the complexity of his precarious situation. He wrote and performed hundreds of poems praising aristocrats, military officers, and slavers who profited from the subjugation of the Cuban nation and the enslavement of people of color. Yet, he wrote dozens of trenchant barbs against imperialism, racial castes, and servitude. He utilized Neoclassic formulas, Romantic tropes of anguish and freedom, and other Europeanized discourse, while cleverly displacing time and place to address burning political questions in his homeland. Curiously, while many critics consider him one of the most influential poets of nineteenth-century Cuba, his contradictory works continue to face marginalization from the literary canon.

This thesis examines a range of Plácido's poems within their sociohistorical context to uncover both their liminality and their subversive subtexts. In this reappraisal, I draw from Frantz Fanon, Kelly Oliver, and Homi Bhabha's theoretical contributions toward colonialism, racial violence, inferiority complexes, and identity formation. I also apply James Scott's political theory of hegemony and everyday resistance to tease out camouflaged meanings in the poet's polysemic texts.

This thesis is divided into six chapters: an introduction, four main chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter II provides a backdrop to the epoch in which Plácido lived and wrote. It addresses political upheavals on the Iberian Peninsula, the Haitian Revolution, and other international developments that influenced the political views of people from

all social strata in Cuba. It also examines internal factors, such as the rapid rise in sugarcane production, which spawned debates, movements, and open revolts over political independence and abolition of slavery. To contextualize the uniqueness of free people of color in Plácido's Cuba, the chapter explains the social and economic function of a significant layer of free Afro-Cubans who comprised a nascent working class and petty bourgeoisie whose very existence called into question the island's social order. Lastly, the chapter provides a brief biographical sketch of Plácido to help situate his writings within the social, historical, and personal circumstances under which he wrote. Although the division is somewhat artificial, my intention is to guide the reader through the labyrinth of forces that directly and indirectly contributed to Plácido's vacillating poetic creation.

The third chapter examines several poems of occasion written and performed for white elites during birthday celebrations, holidays, confirmations, and other gatherings. My analysis draws on Frantz Fanon and Kelly Oliver's psychoanalytic theories of the agency of colonial subjects. In particular, I apply their arguments regarding the dominant culture's denial of individuality of nonwhites and the subsequent internalization of inferiority among people of color. James Scott's differentiation between "public transcripts" that defend relations of power and "hidden transcripts" created by the oppressed to subvert hegemony provide additional theoretical support for a reexamination of encomiums that contain implicit themes of resistance.

Plácido imitated European literary forms, themes, and symbols in his writings, leading many critics to conclude that he "wrote white." Chapter IV reveals the subversive role of psychological displacement of time and location, sublimation of emotion, and

fantasy – elaborated in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory – in Plácido’s mimicry of European literature. Several epic romances and political sonnets demonstrate how the poet manipulated literary and psychological devices to write both *within* and *against* the rules of Western discourse. Bhabha’s study of the manner in which slippages of difference contribute toward subversive agency and the questioning of “the conceptuality of colonial man as an *object* of regulatory power” contributes to my analysis of Plácido’s poetic imitations (Bhabha 129) (emphasis in original).

Chapter V addresses one of the major accusations leveled against the writer – his supposed avoidance of racial issues and the slave system. This claim is closely related to arguments regarding imitation of European discourse and praise for the Spanish Crown and its white benefactors. I apply Scott’s theory of public and hidden transcripts in my analysis of love poems and fables that surreptitiously critique racial purity, caste division, and slavery.⁴ The chapter examines Plácido’s use of romantic themes in semi-autobiographical poems to promote miscegenation and expose race as a social construct artificially dividing the island. It also studies two fables that exalt Afro-Cubans and the poor as morally, psychologically, and physically superior to those of higher *castas* and social classes.

Standing in the threshold between the white elite and Afro-Cuban slaves, the free population of color occupied an unstable and ever-shifting liminal space. Under heavy

⁴ I occasionally use the English term “caste” in reference to “racial *castas*.” The Spanish term *casta*, however, is more accurate. Caste, most commonly used in Hindu social classifications, refers to distinct, hereditary social groups that are restricted from social relationships with one another. Spanish colonial authorities also classified Cubans into specific castes based on the percentage of a person’s European and African ancestry (a quadroon, for example, is somebody with one black grandparent). Although colonial law prohibited intermarriage between members of certain *castas*, a small but significant number of people from different categories intermingled, “adopted” children from a lower *casta*, and entered in romantic relationships. Thus, the system of *castas* in Cuba was more slippery and ambiguous than the English word “caste” would suggest.

ensorship and the watchful eye of colonial regimes that feared people of color, Plácido persevered against tremendous odds to become one of the most prolific poets of his generation. The highest echelons of Cuban society sought out his talent, yet he lived in penury, earning most of his money through crafts such as combmaking. Although his contemporaries said he could pass for white, Plácido was constantly reminded by slavers and liberals alike that he was different. My goal is to analyze the works that highlight the liminal space that Plácido occupied and the subversive connotations of his verse, given the suffocating restrictions he faced as a free mulatto in early nineteenth-century Cuba. Through this process, I intend to offer a modest contribution toward the reappraisal of the poet's work, already initiated by Jorge Castellanos, Enildo García, Sibylle Fischer, and other literary critics.

CHAPTER II

PLÁCIDO'S CUBA: IN THE MAELSTROM OF SPAIN'S POLITICAL CHAOS, LATIN AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE, AND THE RISE OF THE ISLAND'S SUGAR SLAVEOCRACY

The contradictory nature of Plácido's works, ranging from eulogies to slaveholding elites to combative compositions opposing all forms of oppression, can only be understood within the context of tumultuous change in early nineteenth-century Cuba, Latin America, and Spain. Slaves and free blacks in Saint-Domingue stormed the stage of history in 1791, forming the first nation to free itself from the grip of French and Spanish colonialism in 1804.⁵ Their struggle signaled the beginning of an era of independence victories that swept nearly all of Latin America within twenty-two years. Mass sugarcane production rapidly shifted from Haiti to Cuba, expanding Cuba's slave population and placing free Afro-Cubans in an increasingly precarious position. Meanwhile, victorious bourgeois-democratic revolutions in the United States and France fostered rising polarization between liberal elites and their pro-feudal conservative counterparts in both Spain and the Caribbean, further destabilizing Cuba's political climate.

After more than three centuries of colonial domination of Hispaniola, black and mulatto revolutionaries rose up against their French colonizers and established the first liberated nation in Latin America in 1804. Inspired by a long tradition of slave revolts, Toussant L'Ouverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, and others seized upon the French

⁵ For a more detailed explanation, see Burrowes 116–118 and 164–169. See also Laurent DuBois's *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* and David Geggus's *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*.

Revolution to unify various slave uprisings and pro-independence struggles into a revolution, which culminated in the construction of a republic with a constitution officially abolishing slavery, the color-based caste system, and land ownership by white Frenchmen and creoles (Heinl 129). Most colonists fled to Louisiana or Cuba. Three thousand who stayed behind were executed at the behest of Dessalines, who declared: “We have repaid these cannibals, war for war, crime for crime, outrage for outrage” (Heinl 122-23).

A wave of panic among whites spread across the Caribbean, as they feared that slaves and free blacks in their own territories would emulate Haiti’s example. Their apprehension was justified, since word of the revolution spread rapidly, contributing to growing unrest among Afro-Cubans. The foreign policy of Haiti’s new rulers only heightened colonists’ concerns. In the opening years of the nineteenth century, Dessalines sent agents to Cuba and other colonized territories to help organize rebellions of slaves and free blacks (Luis, *Literary Bondage* 13). Simón Bolívar considered Haiti a safe haven for South American *independentistas* and visited the nation in 1815. Two years later, Alexandre Petión provided financial and military support for Bolívar’s effort to liberate Venezuela on condition that *El Libertador* abolish slavery upon victory (which Bolívar refused to do).

Haiti was the most powerful of many external threats to social peace in Plácido’s Cuba, but it was far from the only one. As the eighteenth century came to a close, revolutionary crises ripened across Latin America as creole elites found themselves at odds with peninsular Spaniards and other Europeans who continued to dominate trade and stand atop the mercantile bourgeoisie. Paradoxically, Spaniards profited handsomely

as merchants in the New World during the same epoch that Britain and France eclipsed the decaying Spanish Empire politically, economically, and militarily. In Spanish America, independence movements utilized Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808 to advance their cause. Venezuela declared independence in 1811 and fifteen years later all of Spanish America, with the exception of Cuba and Puerto Rico, had broken away from the metropolis.⁶

While the Crown maintained control of its Caribbean possessions, Spain was engulfed in violent political zigzags internally as the declining aristocracy and clergy traded blows with the rising bourgeoisie and working class. During Spain's "War of Independence," the *cortes* of Cádiz adopted the Constitution of 1812, limiting feudal privileges and providing more individual freedoms. Fernando VII regained his throne in 1814, after the defeat of the French occupation, and dismissed the new constitution. He ruled with an iron fist until a revolt led to his house arrest and the beginning of three years of liberal rule – accompanied by civil war – in 1820. With the support of French troops, Fernando VII restored his absolute monarchy in 1822, but the war-weary and impoverished government could not stop creoles in the Americas from breaking away from the mainland.

An uneasy *détente* between absolutist and liberal forces reigned over Spain until Fernando's death in 1833, when his three-year-old daughter Isabel was pronounced queen. Isabel's mother, María Cristina of Bourbon, was given the powers of the queen regent until Isabel reached adulthood. Fernando's brother, Carlos V, launched a six-year insurrection with the backing of reactionary aristocrats. Liberals and moderates backed María Cristina's forces, transforming the regent and her daughter into symbols of the

⁶ For a more detailed analysis, see Keen and Haynes 162-69, and Stimson 22.

liberal cause. Meanwhile, idealistic youth, adventurers, reporters, soldiers of fortune, and radicals of various stripes poured into the peninsula from across Europe to witness what they considered a major showdown between bourgeois liberals and feudal absolutists, which would affect the entire continent.⁷ In 1844, the year of Plácido's assassination in Cuba, Ramón María Narváez y Campos seized power, once again strengthening the hand of reactionary aristocrats on the peninsula. In the midst of Spain's political convulsions, Cuba's maritime ports, which served as strategic stopping-points for transatlantic shipping, facilitated the rapid transmission of news from other lands to the Cuban populace, both free and enthralled.

Political upheaval and debate in early 19th century Cuba

The three aforementioned external factors – political chaos in Spain, Haiti's example of a black-led revolution combining slave revolts with liberal-democratic demands, and the spread of independent states across the Americas – weighed heavily on all sectors of the Cuban populace. These *political* pressures, however, coexisted with a gigantic *economic* paradox on the island. After its revolution, Haiti never recovered from the combined effects of mass destruction of sugar plantations, loss of foreign investment, and the flight of technicians with the necessary skills to organize sugarcane production. In 1824, several colonial powers forced the fledgling nation to pay France \$100 million in war reparations to avoid crippling trade embargoes.⁸ Large-scale sugar producers fled Haiti and quickly shifted production to Cuba, exponentially expanding the latter's slave population.

⁷ For a description of the political fervor of the period, see Castellanos 86.

⁸ For a more detailed explanation, see Walters 204.

Some 325,000 slaves entered Cuba between 1790 and 1820 (Landers 223). Slaveholders transformed Matanzas province into an economic powerhouse producing one-fourth of Cuba's sugarcane by 1827. Blacks composed sixty-six percent of the province's population by that time, with some 2,602 free blacks and mulattos and 26,522 slaves. By 1841, Cuba's population had grown fivefold in just sixty-seven years, with 418,000 whites, 153,000 free persons of color, and 436,500 black slaves (persons of color were even more prominent in Matanzas, where 27,000 whites, 4,700 free blacks and mulattos, and 54,000 black slaves resided) (Knight, "Prologue" 14; Landers 225).⁹ The sugar industry transformed Cuba into a majority black island for the first time in its history. Meanwhile, expanded production required the development of infrastructure and communication. The first railroad in Latin America broke ground in 1836, connecting Matanzas to Havana, the commercial and cultural center of the island (Landers 225).

Cuba's massive expansion of sugar cultivation came at a historical moment when liberals in both Europe and the Caribbean promoted an end to the slave trade and abolitionism. Anti-slavery sentiment and the yearnings for independence among a layer of the creoles created an explosive and contradictory atmosphere. In 1809, a small group of creoles led by Joaquín Infante conspired to gain independence, drafting a constitution that maintained slavery and pronounced Catholicism the official religion (Suchlicki 57). One year later, Román de la Luz and Luis Francisco Bassave y Cárdenas led blacks and mulattos, including the *Milicias Disciplinarias de Pardos y Morenos*, in an anticolonial revolt.¹⁰

⁹ For a statistical breakdown, see Knight's Prologue to García, *Cuba: Plácido*; and Landers 225.

¹⁰ See Luis's Introduction to *Literary Bondage*, especially 14, for a historical explanation of nineteenth-century Cuba.

In 1812, as William Luis points out, a broad range of forces unified for the first time in the island's history to struggle for both independence *and* abolition of slavery (*Literary Bondage* 14). This effort became known as the Aponte Conspiracy, after its mulatto organizer, José Antonio Aponte. A known carpenter, a corporal of Havana's Batallón de Morenos, and a civil and spiritual leader of his community, Aponte leveraged his status to bring together blacks and mulattos, as well as white liberals, into the uprising. He met with a general of Dessaline's military to learn about the Haitian Revolution firsthand and looked to Haitian leaders as potential providers of material aid. Nonetheless, Aponte could not maintain unity among the ranks (some blacks decided to back Spain) and the rebellion was crushed. The conspiracy fueled white paranoia of "another Haiti," which reactionary forces used to try to dampen abolitionist discourse.

Political tension continued to rise throughout the following three decades. In 1822, Félix Varela used his position as elected *Diputado a Cortes* to call for an end to slavery. Adopting the same discourse as slaveholders, Varela suggested that blacks were an inferior race. However, he argued, slaves did not accept their inferior station and their rapidly growing numbers posed a mortal threat to the prevailing social order (Luis, *Literary Bondage* 30-31). In 1825, Cuba's Captain General, concerned about the restive Afro-Cuban population and abolitionist white creoles, established a spy network of "Military Commissions" to root out any potential conspiracies (Landers 229-36; Childs 135-36). In the same year that the Military Commissions were created, a revolt that began on the El Solitario plantation near Matanzas mushroomed into a major uprising destroying twenty-four estates before authorities drown it in blood. Six years later, the leadership of the free pardo and moreno militia of Matanzas was arrested for allegedly

gathering at the home of the free mulatto carpenter Bernardo Sevillán to honor Simón Bolívar. Although the group claimed to be a theatre company, authorities found a library of revolutionary literature, including the *Diccionario o Nuevo vocabulario filosófico democrático, indispensable para todos los que desean endender la nueva lengua revolucionaria, El bosquejo de la revolución de Méjico*, and other subversive material.¹¹

In the midst of uncertainty and fear, colonial authorities censored, repressed, and exiled many creoles they considered a threat to the dominant pro-slavery discourse.

General Miguel Tacón, appointed Captain General of Cuba in 1834, exiled José Antonio Saco, a creole who opposed slavery with arguments similar to Varela's a decade earlier (Stimson 23). Meanwhile, the British Crown ended slavery in its Caribbean colonies and forced the Spanish government in 1835 to enforce an 1817 treaty with Spain to abolish the slave trade. The treaty permitted British authorities to inspect every ship that entered Havana.¹² In 1841 – a year in which slaves led a rash of uprisings – the *Anti-Slavery Report of London* claimed that the mood among creoles seemed to be shifting toward abolition. It stated: “It is my pleasure to inform you that the abolitionists’ principles are beginning to take root in this city and in Matanzas” (qtd. in Luis, *Literary Bondage* 15). Political developments were quickening, as polarization produced more uprisings and then a major crackdown in 1843-44 under the pretext of the Ladder Conspiracy.

Free blacks and mulattos in early nineteenth-century Cuba

It is especially important for readers to consider the sociopolitical context in which Plácido wrote because the island's slave system was markedly different from that

¹¹ For more information about subversion among free people of color and corresponding colonial repression, see Landers 229-36.

¹² See Luis 34-36.

of the antebellum South (in addition, readers need to be on guard against ahistorical or presentist traps). While hundreds of thousands of West Africans were uprooted from their homelands and forced to work under brutal plantation conditions, colonial law permitted individuals to purchase their manumission and owners to grant it freely through *coartación*. Although sugar planters often ignored the law, urban slaves faced better odds and by the middle of the nineteenth century, some 150,000 people of color were free. Slavery was not more “humane” in Cuba than in the U.S. South, but the island population’s stratification was certainly more complex, with several murky layers of racial and economic *castas*.

The social and economic role of free blacks and the rise of a petty-bourgeois layer threatened the racist order in early nineteenth-century Cuba. By the mid-eighteenth century, an increasing number joined military companies and even began sending their sons to universities. Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux’s *El negro en la economía habanera del siglo XIX* details Plácido’s Cuba, noting that free urban blacks and mulattos reached the peak of their socioeconomic power between 1820 and 1845 (197). The historian notes:

Es de observar, como a través de la primera mitad del siglo XIX, los cabildos y los batallones de Pardos y Morenos Leales, fueron factores de innegable influencia en el ascenso social de la población de color.... [Entre 1820 y 1845] 26 individuos de diferentes categorías militares – cabos, sargentos, subtenientes, teniente, capitanes y comandantes – eran dueños de 64 casas, fincas, sitios y 140 esclavos, con un poder económico, valorado en \$330,000. (198-99)

The Spanish Empire attempted to maintain social peace and loyalty to the crown by permitting a small layer of free blacks to live a relatively privileged lifestyle compared to other Afro-Cubans, both free and enslaved. Some militia and *cabildo* leaders not only backed the colonial system, but also partook in the purchase of slaves. Below them, a

much larger layer formed an emerging petty-bourgeois class of *creolized* artisans in Havana and Matanzas. They worked in a range of occupations, as farmers, barbers, tailors, craftsmen, carpenters, midwives, musicians, and dockworkers (Landers 232-33). Several occupations proved lucrative, fostering middle-class aspirations among other free blacks and mulattos who, like Plácido, struggled to make ends meet.

Free blacks used religious associations and militias as tools to discuss politics and organize cultural presentations influenced by European liberals. They formed groups, purportedly to share literature as well as perform plays, dances, and music. Even under the watchful eye of spies and censors, those with relatives in the United States received shipments of abolitionist newspapers, pamphlets, and other propaganda that they, in turn, shared with others.¹³ This independent organization increased fears among colonial authorities and other white elites of the possibility of “another Haiti.” Francisco Dionisio Vives, Captain General of Cuba from 1823 to 1832, expressed his concerns regarding Cuba’s volatility by arguing that free people of color were the main threat to stability. In a brief to the Spanish Crown, he declared:

The existence of free blacks and mulattos in the middle of the enslavement of their comrades is an example that will be very prejudicial some day, if effective measures are not taken in order to prevent their [the slaves’] constant and natural tendency toward emancipation, in which case they may attempt by themselves or with outside help to prevail over the white population. (qtd. in Paquette 105)

Any assertion of self-confidence and independent association, even among the most benign of groups, called into question the legitimacy of colonialism and of the slave system that fed the coffers of white landowners. Paradoxically, as Luis explains in his analysis of Juan Francisco Manzano’s *Autobiografía*: “Slave rebellions and the killing of

¹³ For a more detailed account, see Landers 232-33.

whites represent a rejection of white values, but the process of writing is an acceptance of and a communion with Western culture and history” (*Literary Bondage* 84). Acts of cultural *communion* further blurred racial delineations that were already eroding through interracial sexual relations. Literacy and cultural expression among nonwhites subverted the claim of racial superiority that served to justify the colony’s *casta* system that ideologically propped up the slave economy.

Since a sizeable percentage of blacks and mulattos were free, relations between people of different racial *castas* were complex and shifting. Plantation owners were infamous for raping slaves and many illegitimate children were the product of such horrors. However, there were many instances of consensual interracial relationships in spite of colonial laws prohibiting marriage and deep-rooted prejudices among clergymen, family, and society in general. Hundreds of petitions from the early nineteenth century still exist, documenting attempts to consecrate “adulterous” relationships. Many petitioners acknowledge that they are attempting to marry outside of their *casta* and offer a range of arguments to request exemption from the law.¹⁴ In the Havana neighborhood of Jesús María, where a significant number of families of color were considered “acomodadas,” some white petitioners argued that while it seemed they were “marrying down,” their prospective wives actually belonged to a higher social class (qtd. in Deschamps Chapeaux 191-92). They claimed, in essence, that their request should be granted based on a cost-benefit analysis. “Marrying up” economically compensated for “marrying down” racially.

¹⁴ In the early years of the Spanish Conquest, Isabela encouraged racial intermarriage over concubinage, but laws later changed to coincide with the rise of slavery and a plantation-based economy. In the nineteenth century, fathers trying to protect their children from the consequences of rising racist sentiment petitioned to sanction their romantic relations.

Evidence of these petitions does not mitigate the brutality of the island's slaveocracy toward Afro-Cubans. Enrique Piñeyro, a literary critic who was a child during the Ladder Conspiracy, observed in his biography of Plácido:

[E]n Cuba el más rudo e ignorante campesino, venido del fondo de Galicia o de León, se juzgaba un ser superior a todos los mulatos, y al poco tiempo de estar allí creía tener el derecho de que todo hombre de color, por libre que fuera, le hablase con respeto de inferior, con el sombrero en la mano.” (343-44)

Free people of color faced systematic legal and de facto discrimination. As the writings of Del Monte, Saco, and other creole intellectuals underline, Afro-Cubans confronted racist paternalism from white reformists and abolitionists as well. Meanwhile, black slaves continued to revolt while hundreds – perhaps thousands – fled plantations in Matanzas and elsewhere to form *palenques* in the mountains. While free urban blacks established vibrant communities, they were members of a social layer consisting of several substrata, divided loyalties, and an uneasy relationship with other social groups.

Franklin Knight succinctly states:

The intermediate free persons of color represented the most ambiguous group of all, accepted neither by the majority of the enslaved nor the minority of free white persons. In addition, the overlapping layers of caste and socio-economic class divisions made the communities inherently explosive by fueling dissatisfactions of all sorts and frustrations along the penumbra of rank and privilege. (“Prologue” 13)

These are the turbulent waters that Plácido navigated as a free mulatto and the orphaned son of a furtive interracial relationship. Under onerous conditions, the young man asserted his creativity through hundreds of seemingly mercurial poems that both lauded and condemned the colonial system under which he suffered.¹⁵

¹⁵ Several currents in literary theory urge readers to ignore biographical data of authors because such information may prejudice the study of their works (the Intentional Fallacy). Ignoring Plácido's life would not only limit our understanding of his poesy, but it would lead to erroneous analyses that ignore the

Plácido: a brief biographical sketch

Since each of Plácido's poems refracts an element of his life and surroundings, I have provided a brief biographical sketch to help inform my study of his works. Biographers have divided the poet's life into several distinct periods, based on pivotal moments when he moved localities, changed jobs, or shifted the themes of his writings.¹⁶ The first stage encompasses his childhood and adolescence. Born in 1809, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés was the illegitimate son of a quadroon hairdresser, Diego Ferrer Matoso, and a Spanish dancer, Concepción Vázquez. Although interracial relationships existed, they remained socially unacceptable and could damage reputations and careers. A tryst between a white woman and mulatto man drew even more attention (especially since the woman was a Spaniard), since it was very rare and received more scrutiny. To cover up her illicit relationship with a mulatto, Vázquez abandoned her baby in the Casa-cuna o Real Casa de Maternidad, a Catholic orphanage in Havana, where children were given the surname of the patron Valdés. Plácido's biographers offer conflicting and inconclusive evidence regarding his early childhood, although many agree that his father was initially unaware of his mistress's actions. At some point, Ferrer brought the child home to be raised by Plácido's grandmother.

Details of his formal education are sketchy. Documents indicate that he studied under Pedro J. de Sol between 1819 and 1821 and later attended the Colegio de Belén, founded by a family friend, Juan Francisco Carballo. Based on written accounts, however, he likely received most of his education under the guidance of liberal friends

liminal space occupied by the free mulatto intellectual who appeased white elites as a poet of occasion; expressed liberal and abolitionist ideology under heavy censorship; used verse to fashion his individual identity; and worked in combmaking and other crafts to make ends meet.

¹⁶ For more biographical data, see Stimson 35-85; Castellanos 16-19; and García 20-40.

Manuel González del Valle, Plácido Fuentes, Ignacio Valdés Machuc, and Ramón Vélez Herrera.

While he received scant formal education, Plácido learned several trades considered more appropriate for a person of color. He apprenticed under the black portrait painter Vicente Escobar at the age of twelve, worked as a carpenter, and became an apprentice typesetter at age fourteen. Two years later, he left the print shop to learn the craft of carving tortoise shell combs, a business that offered a higher income. During this period, roughly between 1823 and 1826, Plácido participated in informal competitions of improvised *décimas* – known as *pie forzado* – in which a new improvisation begins with the last line of the previous poem. According to his close friend and one of his earliest biographers, Sebastián Alfredo de Morales, the poet demonstrated his quick wit as a prolific and creative improviser: “Era prodigiosa su memoria al extremo de conservar íntegros al día siguiente o más las improvisaciones por extensas que fuesen” (qtd. in Stimson 54).

Plácido moved to Matanzas in 1826, where he met Domingo del Monte and participated in his *tertulias* with a range of other intellectuals who fostered the city’s reputation as the “Athens of Cuba” (Stimson 55). Later, critics would dub the decade between 1830 and 1840 as the “Década de Oro” for the wealth of literature produced by those in and around Del Monte’s *tertulias* (qtd. in García 25).¹⁷ Although Plácido’s relationship with Del Monte is unclear, the young poet’s six years in Matanzas contributed profoundly to his formation. Del Monte introduced both Neoclassicism and Romanticism to the island after his visit to Madrid and remained the chief mentor of an

¹⁷ See also Luis 27-81.

entire generation of authors.¹⁸ The liberal emphatically promoted didactic literature, bordering on propaganda, to enlighten the Cuban elite. He also emphasized a nationalist discourse to capture *lo cubano* in descriptions of landscapes, expressions, and idiomatic expressions. Didacticism underpins dozens of Plácido's fables and other poems, especially works like "Al Pan" and "A el Yumurí," which anticipate the Siboneist movement that glorified Cuba's Native American past.

Plácido read a range of works from classic, neoclassic, and romantic peninsular authors as a participant in Del Monte's *tertulias*. While he incorporated several structures and themes in his own works, the young mulatto also built a reputation as a poet of occasion. Invited to social events of the Matanzas elite to recite memorized encomiums, Plácido soon acquired the honorific of "Vate de Yurumí" (named after the Yurumí River that passes through the province). In spite of his popularity, Plácido received little or no compensation for his laudatory verses and earned most of his income as an apprentice comb maker.

The young man continued his comb-making business in Havana from 1832 to 1836 while gaining wider distinction for his verse. In 1833, after the death of Fernando VII, María Cristina appointed the Spanish Romanticist and liberal Francisco Martínez de la Rosa as prime minister. The following year, Cuban reformists who hoped to win concessions from the Crown organized a poetry competition in honor of Martínez de la Rosa. The young mulatto entered the contest and won, defeating twelve whites with his panegyric "La siempreviva." When the Spaniard invited Plácido to the peninsula after reading the poem, Plácido declined claiming that he was "too much a Cuban ever to leave

¹⁸ See García 81-82 for a fuller explanation.

his beloved homeland” (qtd. in Stimson 58).¹⁹ Plácido’s victory, however, catapulted the twenty-five year old to fame. His success, combined with the liberal atmosphere surrounding the Queen Regent of Spain, emboldened Plácido to write several of the most explicitly political poems of his repertoire. Although most poems are undated, biographers offer strong evidence that he wrote “¡Habaneros, libertad!” and “La sombra de Padilla” – works promoting independence and resistance against despotism – later that same year. The defiant tone of the latter work resulted in Plácido’s brief imprisonment.

Plácido returned to Matanzas in 1836 and stayed until 1840. There, he continued his comb-making craft and was contracted to publish poems in the daily newspaper, *La Aurora de Matanzas*. In 1836, José María Heredia, a famous poet and Cuban political exile who was briefly allowed to return to his homeland, paid a surprise visit to Plácido. After witnessing Plácido’s poverty, the exile offered to help him migrate to Mexico. Plácido once again turned down the offer to leave the island, citing that he was too Cuban. It was in this same epoch, in 1838, that he published his first book of poems, *Poesías de Plácido (Diccionario 1061)*.²⁰

Although the young poet earned a reputation beyond the island as both a poet and Cuban patriot, creole and Spanish elites continued to pressure him to write poems of occasion for birthdays, confirmations, funerals, and other events between 1836 and 1840. Several of Plácido’s writings refer to the stinginess of his clients, the template-quality of such hollow verse, and the poet’s feelings of being prostituted. Some white intellectuals viewed their mulatto colleague as a sellout. One poet, José Jacinto Milanés, published “El poeta envilecido,” insulting Plácido’s oeuvre as low quality and fawning, and suggesting

¹⁹ See also Horrego Estuch 110.

²⁰ According to Horrego Estuch and Stimson, the collection of ninety-one poems was published in 1839 (Stimson 62-63).

that the mulatto's race was partly to blame. According to Milanés, writers "de color negro o cobrizo" are incapable of producing brilliant work because "su horizonte es sombrío... Su amor de hiel" (qtd. in Figarola-Caneda 201)

In 1840, several Villa Clara creoles organized a failed conspiracy to overthrow Spanish colonial control of Cuba. That same year, Plácido began traveling back and forth between Matanzas, Las Villas, and Santa Clara, spending extended periods in Santa Clara. He published several incisive poems attacking authoritarianism and colonial government, including "A Polonia," "A Grecia," and "Una lágrima de sangre." He contributed to another newspaper, *El Eco de Villa-Clara*, printed tri-weekly. Through its editor, he became friends with several middle-class families, black and white. Meanwhile, he published more books of poetry, including *El Veguero* in either 1841 or 1842, *Poesías escojidas* [sic] in 1842, and the fable, *El hijo de la maldición*, in 1843 (*Diccionario* 1061).

The political climate was rapidly changing. Leopoldo O'Donnell, a savvy opportunist in Spanish politics, took over as Captain General of Cuba in 1843 with the task of increasing exports of sugar, coffee, and tobacco. His brutal methods of ensuring economic growth quickly overshadowed his predecessors. O'Donnell stepped up arrests of liberals of all hues, especially targeting blacks and mulattos. Authorities arrested Plácido in April and incarcerated him for six months in Trinidad. According to the poet's letters, his mother intervened to win his release. Soon after, O'Donnell used a series of slave revolts as a pretext to frame free people of color whose increasing political and economic presence threatened the colonial order. This culminated in the roundup of hundreds of free and enslaved Afro-Cubans for their alleged involvement in the Ladder

Conspiracy. Authorities once again imprisoned Plácido, accusing him of masterminding the supposed plot. Through torture, his captors coerced a confession, in which he implicated Juan Francisco Manzano, Domingo del Monte, and others in the conspiracy (Friol 233).

Although slaves led several rebellions in Matanzas in 1834, most historians do not believe that free people of color plotted a coordinated revolt. There is no physical evidence linking Plácido to a conspiracy, much less suggesting that he organized one. O'Donnell likely fabricated the conspiracy to attain his principal goal of decimating the emerging black and mulatto middle class and dealing a blow to the struggles for both independence and abolition. Thousands of Afro-Cubans were arrested, hundreds were exiled, seventy-eight were executed, and several hundred more died at the hands of their torturers.²¹

Plácido continued writing verse during his final imprisonment. Not surprisingly, several poems were among his most explicitly political and sentimental. On the eve of his execution, according to the governor of Matanzas, friends and family who were allowed one last visit spent their time copying Plácido's poetry to distribute throughout the island after his death (Landers 222, 241). On June 28, 1844, the poet and ten other compatriots marched past a crowd of thousands to the Cemetery of San Carlos in Matanzas and faced the firing squad. Witnesses wrote wildly different accounts of the fateful morning. One said the poet recited "Plegaria a Dios" during the march while another heard "A la fatalidad" (Stimson 84). Others reported that, facing the shooting squad, he yelled "¡Adios patria querida!" and "¡Fuego aquí" (Horrego Estuch 249, 259; Stimson 84)

²¹ See Vidal Morales y Morales 297; Stimson 78.

On June 28, the thirty-five year old was transformed from an accomplished poet of color to a martyr, a legend, and a hero. Nationalists, democrats, and socialists alike have invoked his name as an emblem of their causes. Several of his most famous poems have been published hundreds of times in anthologies, newspapers, and political tracts, while the large majority of his works have fallen out of print for more than one hundred years. Many literary critics, including those who acknowledge his literary contribution, have denigrated most of his works as hackneyed, mimetic, and prosaic.²² In the following chapter, I will argue that once Plácido's corpus is placed within the sociohistorical context I have outlined above, a radically different picture emerges.

²² Sympathetic critics in this category include Bar-Lewaw, Castellanos, Fischer, García, Kutzinski, Sanguily, Stimson, and Vitier.

CHAPTER III

FROM PRAISE TO SUBVERSION: PLÁCIDO'S PRAGMATIC USE OF ENCOMIUMS AND METACOGNITIVE POETRY

“Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism.” – W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (127)

Over the last 150 years, literary critics who have studied Plácido's writings tend to fall into three general categories. Many accuse the poet of helping perpetuate Spanish domination of Cuba and the colonial slave system that provided the peninsular aristocracy with such tremendous wealth. On the other end of the spectrum, some have chosen to analyze a selection of poems that best fit their exalted opinion of the Vate de Yumurí as a rebel. They tend to focus on Plácido's "greatest hits," dismissing his encomiums as a symptom of his "unfortunate" position as a mulatto. Recently, several readers have suggested a more nuanced approach, taking a close look at his laudatory verse and weighing it against his works of protest. They tend to emphasize the sociohistorical limitations placed on the young mulatto who was trying to establish himself, under heavy censorship, in a racist society.²³

²³ Del Monte, Milanés, Sanguily, and Menéndez Pelayo are among those who dismiss his work as fawning. A much longer list, including Sebastián Alfredo de Morales, Calcagno, Piñeyro, and Horrego Estuch give more attention to the "unfortunate" aspect of Plácido's life. Stimson, Fischer, Nwankwo, and Castellanos stand out among those who acknowledge the contradiction of Plácido's corpus as the product of complex social and political relations in early nineteenth-century Cuba.

This chapter attempts to problematize the arguments of those in the first and second categories. I will examine several poems in which Plácido exalts the virtues of well-known slavers, colonial officials, the Queen of Spain, and others who profited handsomely from the sugar slaveocracy and low-cost services provided by pauperized free blacks and mulattos. James Scott's theory of subaltern resistance and Frantz Fanon and Kelly Oliver's theories of the colonial subject's psychological epidermalization of inferiority help frame my analysis of this group of laudatory works.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Scott argues that societies divided by social class or by religious, ethnic, or racial castes foster two distinct forms of discourse, which he calls "transcripts." Any discourse that reinforces power relations is a "public transcript," since the discourse appears in newspapers, reports, legal documents, and quite often, in the plastic and literary arts. Meanwhile, subordinate groups create another "hidden transcript" that critiques the status quo and serves to undermine the prevailing social order (xii). Scott's theory contributes invaluable insight into the polarized sociopolitical situation that Plácido confronted. Both slaves and free people of color faced persecution for openly challenging their subordination to the white elite. Although rebel slaves faced the gravest consequences – routine torture and even death – for their purported or actual sedition, Plácido's incarcerations and eventual execution underscore the severe constraints placed on free Afro-Cubans as well.

"Such forms of oppression," Scott notes, "deny subordinates the ordinary luxury of negative reciprocity: trading a slap for a slap, an insult for an insult.... Short of an actual rebellion, powerless groups have... a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic *appearances*" (my emphasis) (Scott xii). Prudence, fear, and desire drive

oppressed people to dissimulate to flatter representatives of power and remain in their good graces. Plácido's performance of this public transcript took many forms, from deference (Plácido refused to eat at the same table as white elites when they invited him to their homes) to fawning poetry at galas and other events promoting the haughtiness of slave masters and colonial officials. Given the political climate of his day, a young talented mulatto did not have the freedom to turn down "offers" to perform poems of occasion or improvisations. Since he was a person of color, who also hailed from a lower social class, wealthy creoles and Spaniards treated Plácido as part of "the help" and expected him to act as such.²⁴ He felt compelled to accept the meager remuneration his clients offered because any snub could put his career, or even his life, in danger. He understood clearly that people of color faced constant surveillance as potential troublemakers. Ironically, Plácido also used his celebrity as a poet of occasion to seek the intervention of powerful figures during at least two of his incarcerations.

The existence of a public and a hidden transcript does not imply a dichotomous relationship in which Plácido's panegyrics were hollow pretenses while his critical works represented his "genuine" views. Such a conclusion would ignore the power relations that pervade all facets of life, including the unconscious mind. In his groundbreaking book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explains that colonized subjects – especially people of color who face the additional scourge of racial prejudice – internalize an inferiority complex. This complex develops through the double process of economic oppression and what Fanon calls the "epidermalization" of inferiority (10-11). Although Plácido was considered "almost white," like all people of color he was always conscious

²⁴ For a more extensive explanation of social relations between Plácido and white elites, see Bar Lewaw 130.

of his difference from the white Other. Kelly Oliver notes that “the colonial situation produces a double consciousness that locates authority, autonomy, and agency in a beyond,” always out of reach (7). The dominant white culture of Plácido’s time placed high value on individuality while simultaneously denying individuality to nonwhites through racial stereotyping. As Fanon succinctly states: “The black soul is a white man’s artifact.... It is the white man who creates the Negro” (qtd. in Oliver 28).

I do not claim *a priori* that the poet’s laudatory poems were either dissimulating “public transcripts” or expressions of an internalized inferiority complex. A reader who makes such a claim would fall in the trap of Intentional Fallacy. However, the theoretical approaches of Scott, Fanon, and Oliver can help contextualize the range of encomiums that lay bare the psychological complexities of Plácido’s life and creation.

Plácido’s poetry of occasion: fawning praise and creole critics

Manuel Sanguily, one of Plácido’s most virulent critics, argues that the poet “[ha] llegado á prostituir el Arte,” citing “Al Marqués de Casa-Calvo: En el restablecimiento de su salud” and “El lirio: a la memoria del Sr. Ángel Laborde” as prototypical examples (111).²⁵ The former is dedicated to the marquis, Sebastián Nicolás de Bari Calvo de la Puerta. Calvo served as a Cuba-based Spanish officer, launching military expeditions in Louisiana and Texas in an effort to protect the Crown’s control of Spanish North America from Anglo-American expansion (Holmes). Although historians do not know the full extent of his relationship with Plácido, the marquis hired the poet to recite poetry

²⁵ See Sanguily 93-121 for his complete analysis.

on several occasions. In “Al Marqués de Casa-Calvo,” the poetic voice compares his affection toward the colonial officer to Plácido’s first kiss with his lover Fela²⁶:

Que lleno de placer y de entusiasmo
Exclamé al punto: – Casa-Calvo vive
· · · · ·
Creedme, Señor, tres veces en mi vida
Colmarme he visto de placeres caros,
Una vez el beso que la vez primera
De Fela recibí
· · · · ·
Fue la segunda, cuando generoso
Por siempre me ofrecisteis ser mi amparo,
Aquesta es la postrera, en que os saludo
Al veros ya de vuestro mal salvado,
Contándome dichoso, mientras viva
El ilustre “Marqués de Casa-Calvo.” (*Poesías* 283-84)²⁷

The poem contains so much hyperbole – comparing the marquis’s “hechos generosos y bizarros” to Fela’s passionate kiss – that the author feels obligated to proclaim his sincerity to the suspicious reader, stating: “No la humillante adulación me inspira / Ni el sordid interés” (283). The claim, however, serves to draw even more attention to the embarrassment of heaping praise on somebody whose views and career are so antithetical to those of Plácido.

In “El lirio,” an elegy to the Spanish naval captain Ángel Laborde written in 1834, the poetic voice addresses the Spanish Crown by praising one of its important military leaders (Bar-Lewaw 174). Like the previous poem, “El lirio” is marked by exaggerated sentiment. Innocent Havana spills “copioso llanto” over the death of Laborde, while the poetic voice expresses “[un] amor inmaculada” for the purportedly generous and pious

²⁶ According to historians, Fela is a pseudonym for Rafaela, a *mulata* slave whom Plácido met in 1831. She became his third romantic interest and the subject of many of the author’s love poems after she died during the cholera epidemic that swept Havana in 1833. See Stimson 37-40 for more information.

²⁷ This is hendecasyllabic poem with assonant rhyme in the even verses. Since Plácido did not date most of his works, the original publication dates of the majority of poems cited in this thesis is unknown. For all poems with a verified original publication date, I have included that information.

man (583-85). The poem repeatedly references the virtues, purity, industriousness, and talent of the captain while remaining silent about his role in defending the Spanish Empire. In his biting study of the poem, Sanguily sarcastically remarks, “en esa misma composición llama *noble* á Cuba que disputaba por entonces al Brasil la Gloria de ser el emporio de la trata de esclavos!” (111-12). After all, for decades Laborde led several expeditions to protect the colonial status of Cuba against foreign intervention. He also fought against South American independence struggles, and even attempted to reconquer Mexico.

Both “El lirio” and “Al Marqués de Casa-Calvo,” along with dozens of other laudatory poems, seem to bolster Sanguily’s argument that Plácido forsook his principles for money, writing poems supporting the colonial slave system and its leaders. Several people, from contemporaries of the poet to more recent critics, agree with Sanguily.²⁸ In his 1963 tome, *Panorama histórico de la literatura cubana*, Max Henríquez Ureña argues: “Plácido prodigó y malbarató su talento en composiciones poéticas de ocasión, a veces en honor de gente pudiente que lo recompensaba” (166-67).

These readers neglect to address the unique circumstances surrounding Plácido and the range of plausible explanations for his fawning verse. They fail to address the reality that unlike Plácido, many Afro-Cubans actually preferred Spanish colonialism over independence because they believed that Hispanic religious protections and the Constitution of 1812 offered better conditions to advance their rights than a white creole-led local government would provide. While Plácido advanced national sovereignty, he faced obstacles far greater than nearly all of his contemporaries within the free population because of his status as an educated mulatto and an accomplished poet. Not only does his

²⁸ The list includes Bueno, Hostos, and Henríquez Ureña.

situation call for a more nuanced analysis, but it also suggests that his encomiums themselves may offer hidden *symbolic* meanings that run counter to *literal* interpretations.

An excellent place to start is with “El lirio: a la memoria del Sr. Ángel Laborde,” the poem condemned by both Sanguily and Henríquez Ureña. A close reading provides hints that the poet wrote to more than one audience and may have inserted several subversive elements. Although the work is sixty verses long, the poetic voice makes only one reference to Laborde’s military career, and then only to clarify that the encomium does *not* offer praise “á tus triunfos militares” (*Poesías completas* 585). This negation delegitimizes the single most defining feature of Laborde’s life – his role as enforcer of Spanish hegemony. While explicitly silencing the officer’s career, Plácido devotes seven lines to Cuba. Through proto-Ciboneyist descriptions, the poetic voice presents an island paradise with a lush countryside full of roses, lemon and orange groves, pines, and palm trees. The fauna serves as a metaphor for the people who inhabit Cuba, people whom Ángel Laborde had “befriended” as an outsider stationed in what the poetic voice calls “la patria mía” (585). The officer’s greatest virtue seems to be his connection to the island.

In the closing lines of “El lirio,” the poetic voice claims:

Su aroma [de Cuba] al cielo en tu demanda suba,
Y al doliente sonar del pecho mio
Respíralo feliz, y acoge pío
El puro llanto de la noble Cuba.²⁹ (585)

²⁹ All poems quoted in this essay have been reproduced as they appear in the primary source. I have not changed typographical or orthographical errors. “El lirio” is a polysyllabic elegy with a varied rhyme scheme. The quatrain cited above includes hendecasyllables with an ABBA consonant rhyme scheme.

The noble character of Cuba stands above Laborde and his military accomplishments. Although the overarching theme of saccharine adulation runs throughout, the poem's emphasis on Cuban patriotism runs counter to the life and role of Laborde. The speaker claims the island as his *patria*, establishing a clear distinction between Cubans and their Spanish visitor, Laborde, and Cuba is personified as virtuous and beautiful, a common trope among Latin American Romanticists. Plácido addresses two audiences simultaneously – his primary readers who represent colonial authority and a secondary group of nationalists who have to read beyond the literal to recognize the poem's irony. In "El lirio," the young mulatto imbeds his public transcript with subversive declarations of patriotism that wink at supporters of independence.

In spite of subversive undertones within several of Plácido's most fawning writings, Sanguily and Henríquez Ureña have not been the only critics to dismiss the polysemy of the mulatto's works. Eugenio María de Hostos, a Puerto Rican patriot and *letrado* of the second half of the nineteenth century, was particularly critical of Plácido's poems exalting the Queen Regent María Cristina and her daughter Isabel. Speaking of Cuba and Puerto Rico, Hostos argued:

En tanto que las dos islas desgraciadas maldecían a Isabel II, [Plácido] la cantaba; mientras ellas vituperaban a Cristina prostituta; él celebraba las glorias de al Reina Madre. A los generales-gobernadores que Cuba culpaba de su opresión, él los ensalzaba en sus versos lisonjeros, y una gran parte de sus poesías está consagrada a rimar la adulación. (71)

Hostos wrote critically from the privileged position of a wealthy creole. Like Sanguily, he seemed to ignore the difficult situation facing free people of color and the fact that many Afro-Cubans thought the Crown protected them better than local conservatives did. His criticism also demonstrates a blindness of Plácido's ambiguous language.

Many uncontroversial sonnets dedicated to María Cristina and Isabel II, to which Hostos takes umbrage, include themes of tyranny and national sovereignty. Two sonnets that did not raise suspicion among authorities, “A Doña Isabel Segunda, en su día” and “En los días de S. M. la Reina Gobernadora,” discuss repression and national liberation against foreign occupation (Plácido, *Poesías completas* 20-21). María Cristina and her daughter became symbols of liberalism in 1833, when the former was granted the powers of Queen Regent and entered in a bloody power struggle with the reactionary forces of Carlos V. Although María Cristina did not improve the political conditions in Cuba, liberal writers invoked her name as a proxy for advocating wider freedoms and national sovereignty. This allowed them to get their writings past the censors to disseminate their ideas to a wider audience.

Plácido displays this paradox to the point of absurdity in “A Doña Isabel Segunda.” In the poem, God himself speaks to the child queen, declaring that Spain breathes free because of Isabel. Meanwhile, an unnamed traitor from the north, an obvious reference to Carlos V, has offended God’s law through trickery. “Los déspotas del Norte,” the *Carlistas* waging war in the north of the peninsula, tremble in fear of God’s chosen leaders. Without needing to mention either Cuba or colonialism, the sonnet declares freedom a divine law. Since divine law is absolute rather than relative, “libertad y gloria” apply to all of humanity.³⁰ This includes Cubans – presumably free and enthralled – since the Almighty stands above earthly laws created to naturalize social division and oppression. The poem can be read as both a public transcript hailing Isabel II and a partially disguised transcript championing liberation as a divine right.

³⁰ It is also possible that the poet is using “praise” ironically to mock the Spanish monarchy, since he devotes his panegyric to a child incapable of the feats mentioned by God in the poem. We have no evidence that Plácido’s contemporaries read the poem as sarcasm, however.

In the poem, “En los días,” devoted to María Cristina, Plácido returns to these themes of national sovereignty and liberty through his description of three people – the queen regent, General Francisco Espoz y Mina, and Plácido himself. María Cristina is portrayed as the angel of Spain, bringing freedom to her homeland with the help of the “guerrero generoso” General Mina (21). Reference to the general is highly suggestive. As one lucid nineteenth-century critic, Aurelio Mitjás, noted in 1890, Plácido’s encomiums, “lejos de contener torpes lisonjas son elogios de la libertad.... Cuando luchaban en España facciones de significación opuesta, ponerse al lado de Isabel y Cristina era ser liberal y patriota” (qtd. in Castellanos 96). Mina, a democrat who publicly despised aristocrats, was forced into exile under Fernando VII and returned to Spain after María Cristina assumed power. In 1835 he commanded the fight against the *Carlistas* although many members of Cristina’s government feared that his political views were too radical. Plácido then characterizes himself as “Un vate libre de la ardiente Antilla” (21)

Once we examine the symbolism of each of the three characters, the encomium gives way to an act of rebellion. Since María Cristina symbolizes freedom and Mina represents the most radical element of democratic revolution, the poem’s central theme is liberalism. Mina, as a military leader, is the antithesis of Ángel Laborde and other officers who propped up the colonial regime in Havana. Plácido positions himself alongside María Cristina and Mina as a defender of liberalism, while differentiating the Antilles from Spain and proclaiming his own freedom. Hostos’s claims notwithstanding, the poet subverts Western tropes – praise of the monarchy and military heroes – to advance the theme of liberation of his homeland.

Plácido wrote dozens of other seemingly innocuous panegyrics to the Spanish Crown and colonial officials containing similar subversive language.³¹ As a free mulatto living in a slave society, the poet felt pressure to exalt his “protectors” and clients, and perhaps he even believed they were praiseworthy people of authority. We do not know to what degree he *epidermalized* his oppression as a person of color trying to curry favor with a white audience and to what degree he felt obligated by circumstance to perform the public transcript. Nevertheless, regardless of his intentions or personal feelings, Plácido breached the public transcript. Such breaches, as Ranajit Guha explains, “disrupt or desacralize the ceremonial reverence.... [as] acts of insubordination” (qtd. in Scott 105).³² Curiously, very few of his encomiums raised suspicion among colonial officials and their publication did not stop well-connected families from requesting that the poet recite for special occasions.

Poems of occasion as acts of defiance

Until now, I have addressed poetry that received approval from colonial authorities. There were several notable occasions, however, when Plácido manipulated poems of occasion to invert their signification from fawning praise to declarations of protest, imbedding subversive themes that proved too explicit to go unnoticed. Not surprisingly, these same poems stand out among Plácido’s most incisive and polished verse. One of his most celebrated examples is “La sombra de Padilla (A la Sra. Doña María Cristina de Borbón),” composed toward the end of 1834 for the annual festivals celebrating the birthday of the queen regent. The poem so brazenly addresses issues of

³¹ See, for example “En los días de Doña Cristina de Borbón,” “La Ambarina,” and “En los Días del Señor Antonio Buitrago, Gobernador de Matanzas” in *Poesías completas* 22, 180, and 161.

³² See also Chapter II of Guha.

liberty, Cuban sovereignty, and rebellion that he was imprisoned for advocating sedition (Stimson and Robles 106).³³

The twelve-stanza poem is written as a daydream in which a *vate* (Plácido) meets the Greek goddess Artemis and the Spanish *comunero* hero Juan López de Padilla.³⁴ The opening lines set the stage for the fantastic scene that follows. The poetic voice demands that the queen regent “Oye la voz de un vate que respire / Aura de Libertad, oye un cubano” (qtd. in Stimson and Robles 106).³⁵ From the beginning, the poem inverts power relations by turning the sovereign into the silenced Other who must listen to a mere subject (in this case, a colonial man of color). To underscore his defiance, Plácido adds that he may not be the most eloquent bard María Cristina has heard but he is the most free.

The three stanzas that follow establish the setting of his dream. As the poetic voice sings a hymn to Spain’s nascent freedom, Artemis and Juan López de Padilla appear before him. Padilla then begins a long monologue, addressed to Plácido, in which he speaks of cruel kings who decimate faraway lands while repaying their finest soldiers with exile, dungeons, and torture. Inverting the signifier-signified dyad, the hero declares that tyrants are society’s “esclavos” while those who resist oppression in the name of “patria y libertad” are real men because, “vale más ser presa de la parca / que privado de un déspota monarca” (107). Padilla then presents the example of John III Sobieski, the Polish king who in 1683 led Polish, Austrian, and German troops in a war to liberate

³³ As I addressed in Chapter II, Plácido wrote several poems of protest in 1834, the year he won a writing competition that pushed him into the national spotlight and when a liberal government was reinstalled in Spain.

³⁴ The poem follows the *octava real* stanza structure of eight hendecasyllabic verses (ABABABCC) with consonant rhyme. The *octava real*, originally from Italian, is commonly used to narrate events.

³⁵ For “La sombra de Padilla,” I used the critical edition of Plácido’s poetry, because it includes valuable footnotes by Stimson and Robles.

Vienna from Turkish invasion. For his military victory, the pope and other European leaders dubbed Sobieski the “Savior of Vienna and Western European civilization” (Mizwa 103). The poem paraphrases the appellation, then condemns the “ingrata Viena” for helping partition Poland into three parts ruled by Prussia, Russia, and Austria in the late eighteenth century, and then chaining it to czarist Russia several years later (Stimson and Robles 108).

The poem’s last two stanzas serve as a call to arms for all oppressed peoples. In the penultimate, Padilla declares:

Caerá la tiranía: en todas partes
Será el hombre benéfico y humano;
Florecerán las ciencias y las artes.
Del ancho Obi, hasta el muro Gaditano
Tremolarán los libres estandartes,
Y deponiendo el fanatismo insano,
Del progreso serán a las lecciones,
Justos los hombres, libres las naciones. (109)³⁶

Padilla and Artemis, hand-in-hand, begin to rise into the ether. A faint voice, like a harmonious echo, can be heard calling: “¡Gloria a la libertad! ¡Gloria a Padilla!” (109).

As the above summary suggests, “La sombra de Padilla” goes well beyond previously discussed poems of occasion. Plácido constructs a complex work that utilizes the fantastic space of the daydream and the displacement of time and location to address burning issues facing his homeland. Sigmund Freud’s essay “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” and Kelly Oliver’s discussion of the colonization of psychic space help underscore the challenge of unpacking the various components of such a poem.

According to Freud, daydreams fit within the shifting impressions of a subject’s life and leave a “date-mark” capturing a present desire (147-48). The present fantasy, based on

³⁶ The “Obi” and “Gaditano” are rivers in Siberia and Cádiz, respectively (109).

the memory of an earlier experience when the wish had once been fulfilled, creates a bridge to an imagined future in which the wish is fulfilled again (this follows a linear pattern: past wish fulfillment – present daydream/desire/bridge – future re-fulfillment). As a free mulatto with little freedom to express his opinions in face of censorship and white fear of people of color, Plácido leverages his popularity after winning the poetry contest months earlier to take an even bolder political stand.³⁷

The political space that Plácido has carved out proves tenuous, as the poetic voice explains in “La sombra de Padilla.” In the poem, the *Vate de Yumurí* sublimates his rebellious beliefs regarding Cuba by invoking the image of a long-dead Spaniard and a Greek goddess placed on the Iberian Peninsula.³⁸ Padilla was a Castilian hidalgo who led an insurrection of *comuneros* from 1520 to 1521 against exuberant taxes imposed by local authorities and against the Holy Roman Emperor, Carlos V. He was an early democrat who abolished noble privilege and granted basic rights to the people his junta briefly ruled. In the early nineteenth century, Padilla’s image became a symbol of Hispanic liberalism and resistance against foreign occupation. Castellanos notes that liberals who participated in the war against Napoleon’s invasion of Iberia called themselves “Hijos de Padilla” and Martínez de la Rosa wrote and staged the play *La viuda de Padilla* in Cádiz when the Constitution of 1812 was adopted (90-91). The Spanish historian Francisco Martínez Marina further popularized Padilla in his *Teoría de*

³⁷ Plácido won the contest with “La siempreviva,” dedicated to the newly appointed Spanish government official Francisco Martínez de la Rosa.

³⁸ As a defense mechanism, sublimation occurs when the mind redirects potentially harmful impulses, emotions, or ideas to an acceptable and “socially useful” substitute. Sublimation occurs when displacement “serves a higher cultural or socially useful purpose, as in the creation of art or inventions.” Although most psychoanalysts consider sublimation an unconscious act, I do not delineate between Plácido’s unconscious and conscious will, since his poetry represents and intermeshing of both. Any attempt to find the points of demarcation does not contribute – in my view – toward a clearer understanding of his creation. For more information, see Wade and Tavis 478.

las Cortes, in which he claimed that the *comuneros*' defeat had led to three centuries of despotism and slavery. By the time Plácido wrote his poem, the rebel hidalgo had already become a "sagrada reliquia del ayer y bandera gloriosa del mañana" (91).

Artemis's presence heightens the symbolic effect of "La sombra de Padilla." The hunting goddess, a venerated mother figure in Ancient Greek society, accompanies Padilla through a bucolic landscape of chirping birds and dew-scented greenery. Worshipped as a goddess of fertility, Artemis's presence at daybreak represents the birth of a new world. Padilla introduces her not as a deity, but rather as "la Libertad," suggesting that the poet is dreaming of a new dawn of freedom in the near future. In stark contrast to the caged birds of many of Plácido's verse, Artemis's nightingales are free to sing in the wild under their divine protector. Sacred law stands above the petty power grabs of tyrants who betray their own people for personal ambition.

Although the next chapter will focus on imitations of European style, structure, and imagery, a few points bare mentioning about this poem. Plácido adopts the Neoclassic aesthetic and form, using hendecasyllables with a consonant rhyme pattern. He alludes to both Greco-Roman mythology and legendary heroes of the Spanish national imaginary to present a didactic work aimed at rallying Cubans around the themes of homeland and freedom. Padilla's heroism and the poem's rural setting also fall within Romanticism, another European tradition borrowed by Latin American writers at the time.

Kelly Oliver's study of the colonization of psychic space helps place this mimetic approach in its proper context. As she notes, the agency of the colonial subject exists "in a beyond." This is especially true for a mulatto intellectual who stood in the threshold

between a white society of which he could never be a member and black slaves who viewed him with suspicion as an urbane man of privilege. He was unable to replace the word “tirano” with “Tacón,” “Polonia” with “Cuba,” or “libertad” with “abolition.” Nor had the antislavery struggle among blacks reached a stage in which an independent black consciousness could develop. The conceptualization of new non-Western structures or Afro-Cuban imagery was beyond the horizon of intellectuals of color in Plácido’s time and would not develop until many decades later after the abolition of slaves and the advance of struggles for equal rights. Stimson, DeCosta and others view this as a limitation that weakens Plácido’s works.

Curiously, most critics of Plácido, including many who have championed his poetry, argue that the *vate* either glosses over or completely ignores the issue of slavery in Cuba. A narrow reading of his works would confirm this claim, since he never explicitly calls for abolition in any of the hundreds of published poems to which we have access today. Such a reading, however, ignores Plácido’s inversion of the slave-master dialectic in works like “La sombra de Padilla.” In the poem, Padilla declares the Spanish Crown “esclavos,” suggesting that the chief benefactors of colonialism and slavery have psychologically enthralled themselves to ambition and power. The young mulatto, who also serves as the poetic voice, shoving the *reyes*, *tiranos*, and *déspotas* to the background to declare his freedom and join with a revolutionary democrat who rallies around “patria y libertad.” As a self-proclaimed Cuban, Plácido uses the oppressor nation’s national imaginary to project a distinct national community in Cuba.

Once the reader uncovers the rather transparent allusions, it becomes clearer that “La sombra de Padilla” advocates nothing short of revolutionary change. In a poem

claiming to laud the queen regent of Spain, the poet indicts oppression and colonial occupation by drawing on examples of rebellion from Europe's own history and mythological constructs to justify his argument. Since his audience consisted of white intellectuals (and a small number of Europeanized blacks), Plácido's conflation of Spanish nationalist and liberal discourses brilliantly exposes the hypocritical double standards between the metropolis and the periphery as well as between whites and blacks in Cuba itself. Although he sublimated his political vision through a daydream, the poem's meaning was not lost on his contemporaries, including the colonial authorities who threw him in jail for writing it. Once the displacement of time and space are seen as strategies to elude censors and protect the free mulatto from prosecution (this time, without success), the poem can be understood as a bold – albeit implicit – stand against Tacón, O'Donnell, and other colonial officials and plantation owners who profited from slavery.

Reciclaje, template poems, and the “consejos” of a self-critical poet

Plácido used certain laudatory poems like “La sombra de Padilla” to protest power relations on the island, yet several liberal creoles accused him of helping prop up the colonial order. In 1838, José Jacinto Milanés published “El poeta envilecido” in the Havana periodical *El Plantel*, attacking the young mulatto for “prostituting” his poetry. Other contemporaries almost certainly made similar statements during his lifetime.³⁹

Either in response to detractors or in an attempt to placate his own conscience, Plácido

³⁹ In 1845, one year after Plácido's death, Domingo del Monte wrote a letter comparing the works of the Plácido and Juan Francisco Manzano, in which he stated: “Plácido se complacía en cantar las pompas y los triunfos de los grandes de la tierra” (qtd. in Friol 227). Del Monte cited two stanzas of Milanés's poem and repeated the latter's argument that Plácido was a “poeta envilecido” (227-28).

wrote several metacognitive fables, sonnets, and romances in which he addressed his critics.⁴⁰

Many tongue-and-cheek poems express Plácido's views toward unequal relations in Cuba and his own place within the island's intellectual community. Several sonnets and romances mock both his poems of occasion *and* the people who requested them. In "A mi cumpleaños," published in 1837, Plácido draws up a list of what he does *not* wish for his birthday. These include praise from the gods, laurels, and the spoils of war. Instead, he jokes: "Todos mis gozos quedarán completos, / Con que se vuelvan, ciegos, mancos, mudos, / Cuantos piensen mandarme hacer sonetos" (*Poesías completas* 11).⁴¹ The light-hearted comic style veils the frustration of a man of color who feels obliged to meet the demands of white elites.

On another occasion, he offers advice to a fictitious narratee regarding encomiums. The poetic voice of the *romance* "A Elinio. Un consejo" urges Elinio to write fifteen or twenty generic sonnets that he can then recycle by simply substituting the name of one person for another to fit the occasion: "Haz quince ó veinte sonetos, / Y cuando te pidan uno / Donde diga Anton, pon Diego" (106-07). In the postscript, the poetic voice suggests that Elinio ask for an advance payment to address two additional issues. The request will reduce the barrage of demands for poems of occasion and Elinio will be certain to receive full payment, since many dishonest patrons "huyen / De mandarte hacer sonetos" (107).

⁴⁰ The fable "El hombre y el canario," to be discussed in Chapter V, answers Plácido's critics through a dialog between a caged canary and creole elite. In it, the canary confronts racial discrimination, Spanish colonialism, and the hypocrisy of liberal creoles while justifying its own actions.

⁴¹ "A mi cumpleaños" is a sonnet (of Italian origin). Sonnets contain two quatrains of hendecasyllables (ABBA ABBA) and two tercets of hendecasyllables that generally follow the CDC DCD rhyme pattern.

“A Elino. Un consejo” gives the reader insight into why Plácido’s laudatory poems are of much lower quality than his other verse and suggests a subversive playfulness to his encomiums. The poetic voice claims that Plácido’s wealthy white clients were both stingy and unworthy of the young man’s best work. Perhaps more damning – like Rubén Darío’s infamous “rey burgués” a half-century later – the island’s elite were too self-absorbed and ignorant of the arts to even recognize the difference between high-quality poetry and template-driven singsong rhymes. The poem includes the formulation “mandarte” instead of another verb such as “pedir” to underscore the unequal power relationship between middle class people of color and white elites. Patrons “ordered” or “demanded” that he write sonnets rather than asking for his services. “Mandarte” suggests that the Afro-Cuban writer was not in a position to decline requests for poems of occasion. In light of “A Elino. Un consejo,” Plácido’s public displays of praise seem to belie his contempt for clients who exploit members of other racial *castas* and lower economic classes. Since he feels obligated to meet their demands, he tricks them with template poems and secretly chuckles at their vanity and lack of sophistication.

“Consejos a un poeta” addresses similar themes. The speaker tells an unnamed poet that if he exalts loathsome characters, his audience will call him “un vendido” who degrades his profession (121). Plácido references liberal creoles like José Jacinto Milanés and Domingo del Monte – who publicly disdained the young man’s “prostituted” poetry – by incorporating their voices into the poem. According to the speaker, however, not all intellectuals were born wealthy like Plácido’s critics, who do not understand his situation. Since poor poets need to scrounge for money, they must set aside the heroism portrayed in works like *The Iliad*, ignore their critics, and write panegyrics. A great poet, he

explains, must balance pragmatism with passion, writing some verse for money and other verse “del corazón” to attain eternal “fama” and “gloria” (122). Returning to another theme of “A Elina. Un consejo”, the poetic voice urges his pupil to ask for payment up front to avoid “majaderos” and reduce the frequency of requests to a more manageable number (122).

Plácido addressed a range of frustrations disguised as *consejos*, fables, and light parodies in several other poems in order to expose the tension between free creative expression and the sale of his talent.⁴² Perhaps he felt obliged to contest the creole “nationalists” who publicly accused him of prostituting himself with dozens (perhaps hundreds) of laudatory poems to agents of Spanish colonialism. He may have also recognized his own inferiority complex as a mulatto trying to reach literary fame in a white-dominated system and felt guilty for praising his political enemies. Possibly, the young poet simply felt trapped under circumstances that placed tremendous pressure on people of color to *perform* for what society considered their racial and class “superiors.”

Some have speculated on Plácido’s motives for writing poems that span the spectrum from praise of slavers to calls for freedom. Scott and Fanon provide valuable theoretical frameworks from which to examine the poet’s works in the context within which he penned them. Scott explains: “Tactical prudence ensures that subordinate groups rarely blurt out their hidden transcript directly. But, taking advantage of the anonymity of a crowd or of an ambiguous accident, they manage in a thousand artful ways to imply that they are grudging conscripts to the performance” (15). This helps explain why Plácido wrote laudatory poems. He certainly faced greater repression than his white counterparts did. While creoles like Heredia faced exile for espousing his

⁴² For more examples, see “El Cordero de Filis,” “La sardina,” “Mi casa,” and “A mi cumpleaños.”

political beliefs, blacks and mulattos more often confronted prison, torture, and execution.

More importantly for literary critics, however, is Scott's suggestion that readers probe the ambiguities of the public transcript performances. Plácido wrote encomiums dedicated to the queen regent and Isabel II, which simultaneously invoked revolutionary democrats from the Iberian Peninsula, including figures like General Mina and Juan López de Padilla, to protest political oppression and foreign control, while exalting national sovereignty. As a "grudging conscript," he not only followed the example of other Cuban writers who turned María Cristina and Isabel II into symbols of liberalism, but also included radical figures from the oppressor nation's own imaginary to underscore the double-standard between the center and the periphery. Even in one of his most fawning of panegyrics, "El lirio," Plácido delegitimizes the military career of the Spanish officer Ángel Laborde while personifying Cuba as an independent actor in history, tipping his hat to advocates of pro-nationalist discourse.

Some of Plácido's works go further than mere ambiguity, breaking entirely from the public transcript. "La sombra de Padilla," for example, reads more as a satire on the poem of occasion. Plácido inverts significations with kings who become slaves of their own ambition and an Afro-Cuban who claims to be the freest subject under the Spanish Crown. Tongue-and-cheek works like "A mi cumpleaños" and "A Elino. Un consejo" essentially poke fun at the avarice and cultural ignorance of creole elites who hire the mulatto poet to perform at their galas. Even as they treat him as their hired jester, he claims to get the last laugh as their *intellectual* superior.

Separately, each of the aforementioned poems provides only a partial understanding of Plácido the poet. Together, they begin to paint a picture of the contradictory forces influencing Plácido and the tremendous complexity of his cultural project. The breadth of themes and boldness of some works speak to both his unique place in Cuban literature and to the wildly differing views regarding his legacy. The next chapter will discuss an issue that complicates the poet's legacy even further: the liminal space occupied by a free man of color who imitated European forms within a slave society in which Western culture dominated all intellectual discourse.

CHAPTER IV

NEOCLASSIC AND ROMANTIC FORMS, THEMES, AND SYMBOLS: RESISTANCE THROUGH IMITATION

Nearly all critics agree that Plácido imitated the popular European Neoclassic and Romantic poets of his day. Many have cited poems in which Plácido's phraseology is almost identical to that of other authors, including Tomás Iriarte, Félix Samaniego, José de Espronceda, José Quintana, Juan Nicasio Gallego, and Martínez de la Rosa.⁴³ Since Plácido was a mulatto living in a colonial slaveocracy, his imitation of major themes and forms of eighteenth and early nineteenth century European literature has become the source of numerous polemics over the quality, significance, and meaning of his verse. I will briefly review the arguments of several of Plácido's most notable critics, and then examine several imitative poems, applying Homi Bhabha's theory of the ambivalence of colonial discourse.

Plácido's harshest detractors argue that his writings represent a vulgar imitation of more accomplished writers. According to Manuel Sanguily, Plácido "imitó a cuanto autor estuvo a su alcance" (101). Menéndez y Pelayo goes further, stating:

[Plácido] estaba muy versado en la literatura poética de su tiempo, de donde toma además, su corta erudición, el caudal de nombres, propios, históricos, mitológicos y geográficos, de que hace infantil alarde en sus versos.... Era más bien un hombre semi-culto, de buena memoria y de ingenio vivo, en quien se estampaba como en blanda cera cuanto oía o leía, aspirando a remediar las bellezas de los grandes maestros, como lacayo que se viste con las ropas de señor. No sabemos qué poesías dará la raza etiópica entregada a sí misma, pero de fijo serán muy diversas de

⁴³ For a more detailed description of critics' assertions of imitation, see Stimson 111-18 and Bar-Lewaw 96-101.

los amanerados cumplimientos, insulsas fábulas y epigramas chabacanos con que Plácido inundaba los diarios. (153)

In his 1960 study, Itzhak Bar-Lewaw argues that Plácido was a Romantic who cultivated the polymetric style of his Spanish influences (99-118). Although Plácido drew from various pre-Romantic and Romantic authors, it was Espronceda who he read, admired, and imitated most, according to Bar-Lewaw. His mimicry, however, was that of an uneducated and uncultured man – “un primitivo.... que a veces canta como un pájaro en la selva, es decir, lo mismo y con frecuencia” (110). Eurocentric overtones notwithstanding, Bar-Lewaw makes an argument expressed by other critics about both the verse of both Plácido and his contemporary, the slave poet Juan Francisco Manzano.⁴⁴ Bar-Lewaw argues that the free mulatto wrote verse that was “exagerado y afectado” because he was driven by the desire to demonstrate his erudition in front of creole intellectuals. He overused citations of geographic, historic, and cultural events in an ill-fated attempt to conceal his intellectual poverty. According to Bar-Lewaw, Plácido’s lack of formal Western (i.e. white) education reduced him to a parrot-poet who tried to pad his writings with affect, exaggeration, and references. Miriam DeCosta presents a similar critique. In her book *Blacks in Hispanic Literature*, she states that the work of Plácido and Manzano illustrate “the defects of the period – a period of imitation” of European Romanticism by Afro-Cuban authors (115). In addition to producing “mediocre” and “sentimental” works, Plácido offers only vague references to tyranny, injustice, and oppression without squarely addressing slavery and other manifestations of racial oppression. In her judgment, the mulatto’s poetry is virtually indistinguishable from that of the liberal creoles of his time.

⁴⁴ Miriam DeCosta and Sylvia Molloy stand out among those who agree that the poets essentially imitated – albeit poorly – European discourse.

Other critics stand on the opposite end of the polemic, proposing that Plácido's writings represent a form of rebellion. Vera Kutzinski, Jorge Castellanos, and Richard Jackson are among those who hold this view. Jackson's argument goes the furthest, claiming that Plácido's poetry is "revolutionary" (31). In *Black Writers in Latin America*, he argues that while the author could have passed for white, he demonstratively wrote as a person of color who sought justice for Afro-Cubans, and by extension, all Cubans who suffered under the Spanish Crown. The critic cites Plácido's most overtly political poems, including "Muerte de César" and "La muerte de Gesler," as examples of his passion for liberty, and "El hombre y el canario" as a fable underscoring his ideal of equal rights for Afro-Cubans (38). Jackson's study, however, elides Plácido's imitation of European Romanticists and the poet's encomiums to colonial leaders.

Since the introduction of post-structuralist and postcolonial theories, many scholars have abjured the binaries that permeate much of the critical study of Plácido's corpus in favor of more nuanced interdisciplinary analyses of history and literature. Homi Bhabha's explanation of the colonial subject, in *The Location of Culture*, offers valuable insight to help readers gain a deeper understanding of the nature of Plácido's mimicry:

Almost the same but not white: the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them. (128)

Among those who have studied Plácido's works through this lens, Sibylle Fischer presents the most developed evaluation of the author's mimicry of European forms and tropes. Fischer rejects Menéndez y Pelayo's dichotomy between white and "Ethiopian" poetry and proposes to replace it with a muddier, contradictory continuum. According to

her, Plácido imitates that which he can never be and “falls into a dubious, embarrassing in-between space” (92).⁴⁵ He contaminates European forms such as the sonnet and romance by blending high and low culture. Simultaneously, he imports popular improvisation into pre-established structures, creating a syncretistic approach that defies traditional classification. Fischer’s discussion of contamination and in-between spaces and Bhabha’s analysis of the colonial subject inform my analysis of Plácido’s mimicry of European writers.

Inferiority complexes, mimicry, and menace: a closer look at “El bardo cautivo” and “Jicotencal”

Plácido was born a free mulatto, the illegitimate son of a Spanish mother who abandoned him at birth and a middle-class quadroon barber. Although some of his contemporaries said he could have “passed for white,” he was raised in the home of his paternal grandmother, a black woman and former slave.⁴⁶ He was a man of color and the colonial society, members of Del Monte’s *tertulia*, and society in general treated him as such. Biographers note that he acted according to his station through deference to whites (see Chapter II). Plácido also recognized his relative privilege compared to slaves and chose to exploit windows of opportunity to write poems protesting colonial and racial oppression. Despite these efforts, however, he never broke from the Eurocentric discourse prevailing among Cuban liberals. Why is this the case and how does this inform our study of his poetry?

⁴⁵ For more information, see Fischer 92-96.

⁴⁶ Antonio Eusebio Ramos, a chaplain at the Real Casa de Beneficencia y Maternidad, noted on Plácido’s baptismal certificate that the child, “al parecer blanco,” had been abandoned at the orphanage (Stimson 45). Sebastian Alfredo de Morales, a close friend and biographer of the poet, described his complexion as light (33). According to Del Monte, “por supuesto, su color era casi blanco” (qtd. in Friol 226).

Free blacks and mulattos living in Cuba's slave society in the nineteenth century found themselves in a contradictory situation. Although they had the right to sell their services freely, and even to purchase slaves, they remained suspect and faced persecution from their white counterparts. Among free Cubans, the only valorized culture was European and the language of power was Spanish. Written language was privileged over oral tradition, reinforcing written Spanish as the "cultured" medium of communication. Formal education emphasized Eurocentric culture, history, religion, and mythologies. Free people of color like Plácido's father generally lived in urban centers, disconnected from field slaves who more often preserved oral traditions and religious beliefs from their homelands in Africa.⁴⁷

Frantz Fanon notes that colonized people suffer an inferiority complex created by the death of their cultural identity. In the case of educated free mulattos with few, if any, direct ties to the African part of their heritage, the inferiority complex was intensified as they came "face to face with the language [and culture] of the civilizing nation" (25).⁴⁸ In order to prove their mettle to white colleagues, nonwhites needed to demonstrate their knowledge of the dominant Western cultural traditions. Imitation and exaggeration of Western expressions, phrases, and forms offered a (partial) sense of equality with the colonizing European and his creole descendants.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, an additional economic factor contributed toward the "Europeanization" of people of color. The free black and mulatto community was marked by class stratification, which fostered (petty) bourgeois

⁴⁷ Even slaves, torn from the African soil and pressed into servitude in a foreign land under the whip of white overseers, began to lose their native languages to Spanish and often felt pressured to conceal their beliefs within Catholic practices to preserve aspects of their home cultures.

⁴⁸ See Fanon 17-40 for a fuller explanation. Fanon uses "civilizing nation" ironically to express how people of European descent view their relation to the colonized.

⁴⁹ Sometimes imitation was a necessary component of gaining literacy, as Juan Francisco Manzano explains in his *Autobiografía*. Manzano learned to read and write by copying his master's letters.

aspirations. Many considered Europeanization as a necessary precondition for rising in social rank.

These factors helped negate the possibility of developing a distinct Afro-Cuban aesthetic that could acknowledge differences between white and black Cubans and openly exalt the cultural contributions of people of color. In fact, such an aesthetic did not develop until several decades after independence and the abolition of slavery, as the world emerged from the embers of the First World War. This display of land-grabbing and bloodlust belied the myth of a superior “white” culture.⁵⁰ In Plácido’s day, liberals and abolitionists wrote almost exclusively for a white or Westernized black audience. They framed their arguments within the only discourse they knew, adapted from the Old World to fit the Cuban condition. Plácido applied his genius to the one viable option he saw before him – mimicry of European Romanticists, with a heavy dose of classical references, fixed forms, and didacticism taken from Neoclassicism. Although DeCosta and other critics consider the lack of a uniquely Afro-Cuban aesthetic as a weakness, Plácido actually occupies a liminal space that sets his work partially *outside* of dominant European discourse.

⁵⁰ *Negrismo*, a postmodernist aesthetic, arose in Cuba concurrently with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. A range of factors contributed to black consciousness on the island. During the U.S. occupation of Cuba in 1898-1902, American forces segregated all military units and restricted immigration of blacks from Jamaica and Haiti. This reinforced the socioeconomic divisions between whites and blacks that already existed in major industries such as sugar and tobacco. In face of racial discrimination, the Partido Independiente de Color was founded in 1908, but was drowned in blood in the Race War of 1912. After World War I, books such as Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918) rejected Eurocentric discourse in favor of nonwhite cultures and peoples. The Harlem Renaissance, advocating black pride and protest against racial oppression, also influenced Cuban intellectuals in the early-twentieth century. *Negrismo* grew out of the search for a discourse that affirmed African heritage (countering racial attitudes) and as a nationalist banner opposing imperialist manipulation from the North. For more information on the rise of *negrismo*, see Luis 6-7, 162-99, and 213-16; and Kutziński 6-7 and 134-62.

One of Plácido's more complex poems, "El bardo cautivo," sheds light on the polemic regarding his imitation of others.⁵¹ Written as both a romance and a Moorish legend, the poem tells the story of Tarfe the Moor, the ruler of Amería who persecutes both Christians and Muslims, "fingiendo amar a Mahoma" (*Poesías completas* 64). In spite of the tyrant's religious pretensions, the poetic voice states: "Su lei es la fuerza, no hai Dios para él" (65). In one of Tarfe's prisons, a Moorish poet laments the injustice of his situation while nostalgically remembering his birthplace, Granada. In the second part of the romance, the bard daydreams that the Catholic monarchs Isabela and Fernando lead descendents of the Spanish national hero, El Cid, in a battle to topple the ruthless dictator.

Suddenly, the Moor snaps out of his daydream, disillusioned by his mind's fancy. In agony, he screams: "Mas cómo! ¿me engaña falaz la memoria / Creando en mi mente fantasmas de luz?" (69). Soon, however, the poet's hopelessness changes to jubilation when "los católicos" smash open the prison and liberate all the prisoners – regardless of religion or ethnicity – who pledge to fight the tyrant. The young Arab immediately converts to Christianity, joins the resistance, and fantasizes about killing Tarfe. A Spanish poet, Laso de la Vega, finds the dictator first and decapitates him. The former captive kisses the feet of Laso de la Vega and proclaims in the final stanza:

¡Ai del mortal que sin razon oprima
Al que ilumina inspiracion suprema!
Si lanza en él la maldicion, se cumple;
Porque bajan del cielo sus sentencias. (66)

⁵¹ Although many critics classify "El bardo cautivo" as a *romance*, the poem only partially follows the traditional metrification of the genre. The first and third parts include octosyllabic verses with assonant rhyme in the even verses (and occasional rhyme in the odd verses). Parts II and IV consist of hendecasyllables with the same rhyme pattern as I and III.

As Jorge Castellanos notes, the poem calls attention to itself as an autobiographical work (65). Plácido wrote the romance from La Ferrolana prison in Trinidad in 1843, while serving time for alleged subversion. Like the protagonist of the poem, Plácido is dreaming of freedom from tyranny during his incarceration. In the poem, the Moor uses the adjective “plácido” to describe his homeland of Granada, alluding to Granada as Cuba and the “bardo cautivo” as Plácido. By identifying himself with the Moor, the poet also calls attention to his Africanness. Assuming “El bardo cautivo” is an autobiographical protest against foreign tyranny and unjust incarceration, the poem reveals powerful insights into the liminality of Plácido’s writing.

Moorish Spain was a popular subject among Romanticists. *The Chronicles of the Conquest of Granada*, written in 1829 by the American Washington Irving, presents a Romantic history of Iberia. Not only was the book widely read in the Spanish-speaking world, but Irving devoted an entire chapter to the defeat of Tarfe. Martínez de la Rosa, Bécquer, and other Spaniards also wrote fictionalized accounts of the authoritarian ruler. At first glance, Plácido’s poem seems to follow this tradition, with Catholic Spaniards bringing progress and civility to people oppressed by Muslim North African despots. However, “El bardo cautivo” contains several inversions of Eurocentric discourse that distinguish it from the Romantic literature of Plácido’s creole counterparts. Bhabha describes mimicry of colonial discourse as “*a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (emphasis in original) (122). The works of colonial subjects include both excess (a major criticism against Plácido) and slippages that transform mimicry into menace. Slippages, either conscious or unconscious, are moments in which a text breaks from the

dominant discourse, revealing an Otherness that threatens the hegemony of the dominant culture.

In “El bardo cautivo,” Tarfe’s face should have the dark complexion of a North African, but the poetic voice describes him as “pálido.” The poem associates the despot’s whiteness with tyranny and the dark skin of the Moorish poet with resistance and freedom. Pale skin serves as a metonymy for the white authorities who oppress blacks and mulattos in Cuba. Just as Tarfe’s abuses of power reveal his religious hypocrisy – he claims to follow Mohammed while persecuting fellow Muslims – Cuba’s colonial regime rejects the tenet of Christian brotherhood by dividing the population into racial castes and profiting from slavery. The Moorish bard rises against this hypocrisy, implying that the mulatto poet Plácido dreams of a similar destiny.

The poem uses the trope of the Romantic hero, an innocent victim of an antiquated society who rebels against his oppressors. Like other protagonists of the genre, the Moor faces a moment of disenchantment once he recognizes that his dream of breaking free is nothing more than helpless fantasy. Whereas Romantic works end in tragedy, the Moor’s dream is a premonition of the rebellion that frees his homeland from Tarfe’s rule. The captive prophesizes the overthrow of despotism (“el cautivo moro / Profestizó”), suggesting that Plácido sees the same fate for Cuba. In his final words, the captive warns against authorities who go against God’s Supreme Law to oppress their people. This didactic moment, religious connotations notwithstanding, reflects the influence of Neoclassicism in Plácido’s otherwise Romantic work.⁵² The poet

⁵² This insertion of Neoclassic didacticism in Romantic romance is likely a result of Domingo del Monte’s influence on Cuban writers. In addition to being the primary literary authority to introduce both genres to Cuba, Del Monte urged his followers to write didactic works to serve the dual role of aesthetic creation and liberal propaganda.

manipulates both European traditions to transform “El bardo cautivo” into a call to action against specific injustices facing all people in Cuba, particularly people of color.

Just as he does in “La sombra de Padilla,” Plácido displaces both time and location to create a fantastic space as both a psychological response to oppression and a political strategy to speak against his imprisonment. Within the romance, the captive’s daydream splits as the subconscious space of wish fulfillment – the dream of overthrowing Tarfe – penetrates conscious space, transforming fantasy into reality. The fictitious poet’s thoughts alone have the power to foster revolutionary change.

In essence, Plácido employs the daydream motif to construct a literary version of Russian nesting dolls, forcing the reader to examine the connections between each layer of the poem to grasp its revolutionary implications. According to Freud, literary creation is the written codification of the author’s daydream. Plácido displaces his wish to overthrow Cuba’s colonial authorities by creating a fictitious Moorish poet. In turn, the Moor fulfills his wish for justice through another daydream that augurs the rebellion against Tarfe. The story is set in Spain, in the distant past, in which the victims of foreign occupation are the very ancestors of Plácido’s victimizers in Cuba. Images from Spain’s national imaginary are employed to promote armed struggle against foreign control of Cuba. The poetic voice alludes to El Cid (the appellation of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar), an eleventh-century military leader whose life and actions became the source of nationalist legends of resistance to Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula. The voice also invokes Fernando and Isabela, the Catholic Monarchs who oversaw the unification of rival kingdoms into one country, which included the invasion and reconquest of Granada. Paradoxically, these same sovereigns authorized Christopher Columbus’s expeditions to

the New World, inaugurating Spain's conquest of Cuba and most of modern-day Latin America. The poem also alludes to Laso de la Vega, the protagonist of Lope de Vega's comedy *Los Hechos de Garcilaso y el Moro Tarfe*, a fictional account of Granada's reconquest.

Through the seemingly harmless signifier of Spain's national imaginary, Plácido cleverly projects a Cuban nationalism that valorizes African influence. Nationalism in the Americas was constructed, in part, through what Margaret Olsen calls "an active reverence for what is ancient in that consciousness: indigenous roots, African ancestors, European traditions," or what Wallerstein refers to as the need for a "pastness" (qtd. in Olsen 145). Juan José Arrom notes, for example, that eighteenth and nineteenth century dramatists on the island frequently "Cubanized" Hispanic works to create a genre "que en Cuba se conoce como criollo, típico o vernáculo" (qtd. in Olsen 144). "El bardo cautivo" usurps the Spanish nationalism of Lope de Vega's play, as well as the images of El Cid and the Catholic Monarchs, to project a distinct Cuban national discourse. Freedom against a foreign occupier is won through armed struggle. The protagonist is an African who joins with Spaniards to overthrow Tarfe. Read within the context of Cuba's racial *castas*, a black man of letters joins forces with both whites and blacks to overthrow a white tyrant. Plácido advocates an inclusive nationalism, in which Cubans can only win independence through a united effort that valorizes both the African and European ancestries of the island's inhabitants.⁵³

⁵³ "El bardo cautivo" shares several striking similarities to Juan Francisco Manzano's 1842 play *Zafira: tragedia en cinco actos*. The latter closely follows both the Westernized Romantic and Neoclassic traditions, yet Cubanizes them and presents an African slave as hero. In the drama, set in sixteenth-century North Africa, the slave Noemí kills the foreign dictator Barbarroja and protects the legitimate heir to the kingdom's throne. As in Plácido's romance, *Zafira*'s protagonist is an African who employs violence to garner his freedom. Margaret Olsen argues that Manzano engaged in a dialog about nationhood that was "autonomous of white Creole designs" (135). Although my conclusions regarding Plácido's national

Plácido's use of the Moorish legend, popular among Romanticists, pits Spain's heroes from the past against nineteenth-century Spaniards who dominate Cuba, claiming that supporters of colonialism betray the values of their own national icons. Through poetic ventriloquism, Plácido uses the Moor's voice to warn his captors of the *sentencias* they will face for their role in upholding the existing order. Although colonial authorities are the target of this warning, he directs the message to another audience with a different goal in mind. The implied readers of the poem are liberal-minded intellectuals, not representatives of the Spanish Crown.⁵⁴ The intersecting themes of Cuban nationalism, foreign occupation, tyranny, unjust incarceration, democratic rights (defined as Divine Law), and racial oppression are not so much an *aviso* to Spaniards, as they are a *grito* to Cuban liberals – white and black – who comprise his target audience.

In “Jicotencal,” acclaimed as one of Plácido's best creations, the bard once again imitates Romantic structures and themes to create an original work problematizing Europeanized discourse.⁵⁵ Following the Romantic form of epic romance, Plácido writes in polyrhythmic octosyllables with assonant rhyme in even verses. The poem's protagonist, Jicotencal, is modeled on Rousseau's “noble savage,” a person more honorable than “civilized” man (another popular trope among Romanticists in the Americas) (Stimson 111-12).

imagining in “El bardo cautivo” are exclusively my own, I am indebted to Olsen's study of Manzano's engagement with creole nationalism in *Zafira*.

⁵⁴ Wolfgang Iser and other theorists of reader-response criticism state that all texts presuppose an implied reader with moral and cultural codes appropriate to that text. This implied reader may be different from an actual reader, who could be unwilling or unable to occupy the position of the implied reader. For more information, see Baldick.

⁵⁵ In 1911, Menéndez y Pelayo called the poem a “magistral y primoroso romance,” on a par with Góngora and declared it one of the top two poems ever produced in Cuba (151, 155). Bar-Lewaw considers it “una joya de las letras hispanas” (125). Fischer, García, Stimson, and others have made similar remarks.

The poem opens with Moctezuma's troops lamenting that their gods have brought them military defeat. The scene then shifts to Tlaxcala, where the townspeople gather to welcome the young hero Jicotencal as he enters the city gates. Virgins from a local religious order, elder senators representing the government, military warriors, and the plebian masses have all come out to sing the praises of the victor. As everyone prepares for the execution of the captured enemy soldiers, Jicotencal steps forward to model both good governance and human brotherhood, announcing:

Tornad á Méjico, esclavos;
Nadie vuestra marcha turba,
Decid á vuestro señor,
Rendido ya veces muchas,
Que el jóven Jicotencal
Crueldades como él no usa,
Ni con sangre de cautivos
Asesino el suelo inunda;
Que el cacique de Tlascalá
Ni batir ni quemar gusta
Tropas dispersas é inermes,
Sino con armas, y juntas. (*Poesías de Plácido* 19-20)

Jicotencal's benevolence toward the slaves places him morally above his Aztec enemy, and by analogy, other military and political leaders of his day. The warrior stands as a proto-liberal figure of good governance that others should emulate. His actions, however, reach beyond good governance.

Jicotencal frees all of Moctezuma's troops against the wishes of the newly liberated people of Tlaxcala. Although slaves of war – essentially captured soldiers – have no direct correlation to the African slaves who enriched Spain's coffers, Plácido's word choice is deliberate. He selects a signifier that provides multiple signifieds, creating a polysemic text that suggests multiple interpretations. In numerous other poems, Plácido employs the strategy of using the term *esclavo* and its various derivatives in reference to

oppressive conditions in faraway lands under various historical contexts.⁵⁶ Just as those poems allude to conditions in Cuba, “Jicotencal” obliquely addresses the need to abolish slavery after gaining independence from foreign control.

In the early nineteenth century, the island’s white creoles engaged in a range of polemics over independence from Spain and abolition of slavery. Although advocating independence was treasonous, in an island where the majority was Afro-Cuban, colonial authorities and creoles alike considered rebellions by nonwhites a much graver threat. In 1843, José Antonio Saco duly noted: “The fault of being a *negrophile* there [Cuba] is worse than that of *independent*” (qtd. in Luis, *Literary Bondage* 61). Other liberals expressed similar views. Many prominent creoles who supported abolition – including Saco and Félix Varela – argued against slavery from within a discourse of fear over the black population’s potential to revolt and destroy the agricultural economy of the island (even the most advanced creole thinkers wanted to avoid a repeat of the Haitian Revolution).⁵⁷

This may have been a discursive strategy, which allowed them to advocate for abolition under heavy censorship and appeal to ambivalent whites. Domingo del Monte, for example, raised concerns over a black rebellion, yet he promoted literature calling for abolition and envisioned a Cuban nationality that included people of color (Luis, *Literary Bondage* 28, 30). Juan Francisco Manzano actively participated in his *tertulia* and Plácido himself visited frequently.

⁵⁶ Plácido uses the term “slave” or “slavery” in “El hombre y el canario,” “El bardo cautivo,” “A Grecia,” “A Polonia,” and “La sombra de Padilla,” among other writings.

⁵⁷ Luis notes in *Literary Bondage* that Saco imagined a Cuban nationality that excluded people of color, while Del Monte’s concept of nationality incorporated everyone on the island. Varela, the first native-born creole to suggest abolition, based his argument on the fear of a black uprising supported by Haiti and other independent countries. See Luis 28-31.

“Jicotencal” dialogues with both independent and abolitionist discourse of liberal creoles by presciently suggesting that overcoming oppression requires the construction of a new order. Liberation from a cruel conqueror, whether Moctezuma or Spain, does not axiomatically uproot the social system built around the enthrallment of one group by another. Those who cherish the right to freedom from servitude must lead from a higher moral plain, not from a position of fear. Plácido cleverly sets the poem’s action in Mexico – the country where his *independentista* colleague José María Heredia lived in exile. Although he imitates the Romantic form of epic romance and the trope of *Indianismo*, Plácido turns European discourse on its head by rejecting the white ideologies of fear of and paternalism toward their Afro-Cuban compatriots. Jicotencal the leader symbolizes the ideal of national self-determination *and* the dismantling of systems that enslave one group to benefit another.

The political sonnets

Plácido elaborates on these themes of good governance and resistance in a series of openly political sonnets that include “Muerte de Gesler,” “A Polonia,” and “A Grecia.”⁵⁸ Each poem, located in Europe, addresses a pivotal historical event that helped shape the political landscape of the continent. Read together, the poems address interrelated issues of authoritarianism, solidarity and betrayal, and struggles against imperialist intrigue through Aesop-like moral tales.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The publication date of “Muerte de Gesler” is unknown; the others were printed in 1840 (Bar-Lewaw 175).

⁵⁹ Once again, Plácido sublimates his political beliefs toward the Cuban situation through displacing time and location and invoking images of the European imaginary. Castellanos notes Plácido’s “técnica esópica” in reference to “El juramento,” “Muerte de Gesler,” and “Muerte de César” (56).

“Muerte de Gesler” refers to the legend of William Tell, popularized in the nineteenth century by Friedrich von Schiller’s play and Gioachino Rossini’s opera, both of which interpreted the story as a precursor of the American and French revolutions. According to legend, Tell led a rebellion in 1307, in the town of Altdorf, Switzerland, against the brutal reign of Habsburg bailiff, Albrecht Gessler. The struggle snowballed into a nationalist movement that eventually led to Switzerland’s independence.

Plácido’s poem casts Tell as a semi-mythical hero who defeats a diabolical enemy. When Gessler dies, his black soul takes the form of a serpent that descends into hell. William Tell stands atop “un monte de nieve transparente” – a symbol of both purity and freedom – while the despot’s body lies dead on the beach, pounded by waves that refuse to accept him into the sea (*Poesías completas* 32). In typical Romantic fashion, various forces of nature heighten the emotional intensity of the scene. In the first tercet, nature conspires with the liberator to torment the agent of the Habsburg Empire:

No encuentra humanidad el inhumano...
Y hasta los insensibles elementos
Lanzan de sí los restos del tirano. (32)

Since Cuban intellectuals learned about the legend through Schiller and Rossini, both of whom were influenced by events in the United States and France, “La muerte de Gesler” can be read as a symbol of the triumph of anticolonial and democratic revolution. In fact, free blacks in Matanzas theater companies kept William Tell plays in their libraries. Just as Jicotencal frees his people from Moctezuma’s forces, William Tell liberates the Swiss from an imperialist occupier with the support of a divine power.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ I already discussed an example of divine justice in “El bardo cautivo.” Another sonnet, “Muerte de César,” portrays the protagonist as a legendary hero who must murder an evil power (“mónstruo feroz”) to free his people (*Poesías completas* 34). In the poem, Brutus murders his uncle to save his “patria” Rome from “el tirano” (34).

In two other sonnets, Plácido tempers the almost mystical optimism expressed in “Muerte de Gesler” to probe darker events in European history. In “A Grecia,” imperialist intrigue stains the virtuous struggle for independence. The poem opens with the quatrain:

Como las olas de la mar sombría,
Tal es la libertad, pues por un lado
Un pueblo cubre, y deja abandonado
Otro pueblo á la horrenda tiranía.

And closes with the tercet:

Que abrasaban las naves sarracenas,
Cantó la Grecia el himno de victoria,
Pasaron á Polonia sus cadenas. (32-33)

Plácido refers to the Greek War of Independence, which overthrew the Ottoman Empire in 1827 with the support of the Russian, French, and British governments (Fischer 100). According to the poem, after suffering under the tutelage of the Turks, the people of Greece turned over their chains to the Poles. The Russian czar’s alliance with the Greeks was a political tactic serving the Great Russian Empire’s long-term strategy of expansion into other areas. The czar’s invasion and annexation of Poland fit within the same strategy (Fischer 99-100). Rather than breaking the cycle of foreign oppression, Greek independence actually contributed to the perpetuation of colonialism, according to the poem.

Plácido further develops and then problematizes this argument in “A Polonia.” The sonnet addressed to Poland urges the nation to forget the horrors of the past because “mil pueblos se hicieron opresores / Y sufrieron después la tiranía” (*Poesías completas* 33) At first glance, “A Polonia” seems to reinforce the fatalistic belief in the cyclical

history expressed in “A Grecia.” The final two tercets of the poem, however, reject this cynical view and suggest a more politically sophisticated analysis:

Si andando el tiempo con la Europa embiste
Horda inmensa de bárbaros armada
Y ves al Czar doblar la frente triste,
Exclamarás á su enemiga aliada:
“Esas son las cadenas que me diste,
Tuyas son, te las vuelvo, estoy vengada. (33)

Fischer reads the poem as a polemic advocating abolition as a necessary precondition for freedom:

[The poem] could be read as a way of *separating* the issue of national sovereignty from that of liberty. In this picture, national liberation may not serve the cause of liberty at all. Indeed, if we were to read “A Polonia” as an allusion to Cuba, we might conclude that once liberated, the oppressed Cubans might turn into oppressors. Are we to understand that unless slavery is abolished, independence would not further the cause of liberty? Perhaps. (99)

Fischer’s argument is very plausible. Many of Plácido’s poems set in Europe allude to the Cuban condition, and works such as “El hombre y el canario” and “Jicotencal” distinguish between national sovereignty and freedom from servitude.

Fischer’s analysis provides a good starting point from which we can tease out some of the questions imbedded in the text. The immense horde of barbarians who will one day overrun Europe are presented as liberators willing to bring Russia to its knees and open the door to Poland’s independence. Assuming that Poland is Cuba and Russia is Spain, who is the “horda inmensa de barbarous armada” that will free the island from its colonial yoke? This could be an allusion to the people of Saint Domingue, whose leaders combined slave revolts with an independence war to liberate Haiti from French imperialism and set an example for others throughout the Americas. Just as Plácido chooses the linguistic sign *esclavo* in “Jicotencal,” he uses *cadenas* in his poems

dedicated to Greece and Poland. Although *cadena* figuratively refers to the slave-master relation between the colony and metropolis, it also refers to the chains that bind men and women as the property of others. The Haitian Revolution not only posed the greatest threat to colonial authorities in Cuba, but was also the *only* example of a victorious struggle uniting national liberation with emancipation. Through the gaze of the white Other, Haitians were certainly viewed as a barbarous horde.

An allusion to Haiti fits with the political climate of the early nineteenth century. The unique position of Polish troops during and after the Haitian Revolution was widely known in the Caribbean. After Poland was carved up in 1772, many of its soldiers searching for allies to regain the nation's sovereignty joined the armed forces of Republican France and the American Revolution. Although Napoleon sent 5,200 Poles to Saint Domingue, the troops quickly earned a reputation for treating Haitians better than the Frenchmen did and for expressing sympathy toward the Taino and Arawak Indians whom the French and Spanish colonial authorities had annihilated.⁶¹ Dessalines urged Haitians to treat Polish prisoners better than captured Frenchmen. After the revolution's triumph, when the Dessalines government murdered three thousand colonists who remained in the country, Poles were the only whites granted permission to become citizens or return to France at the Haitian government's expense. These events helped spur many tales – many exaggerated or even fictional – of Poles who deserted the French army to join the Haitian cause.

⁶¹ For more information about the role of Poles in Haiti, see Pachonski and Wilson.

This may explain why Poland appears at the center of many of Plácido's works addressing solidarity between nations. The Polish soldiers' conduct in the Caribbean sharply contrasted the treatment of Poles in Europe. In "La sombra de Padilla," Vienna protects itself while permitting expansionist powers to partition Poland. In "A Grecia," Greece wins independence for itself, but never come to the aid of its Polish brethren. Lastly, in "A Polonia," the cycle of oppressed becoming oppressor haunts Europe until an outside force breaks the circular pattern.

Although several critics argue that Plácido was a vulgar imitator who haphazardly tossed around Western citations to appear erudite, overwhelming evidence suggests otherwise. The mulatto poet deliberately chose words, historical events, fables, and legends that provided the most space to advance his political views under the formidable conditions of colonialism, heavy censorship, and racial oppression. Bhabha notes that "[T]he *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts authority" (126).

Does Plácido directly attack Spanish colonialism or explicitly call for independence and abolition of slavery and racial castes? No. In his epoch, such statements would have been suicidal. Instead, the poet copies Romantic forms and Europeanized tropes, not to create virtual replicas of his white counterparts' works, but to subvert the discourse of white supremacy. His poems condemn European nations and "pale" despots while elevating nonwhite liberation fighters such as Jicotencal, the Moorish poet, and the so-called barbarous hordes. In "A Polonia," Europeans are incapable of saving themselves from the cycle of imperial domination until a nonwhite group charges in.

To make his arguments, Plácido employs displacement and polysemic language to write about his nation's situation. Cubans, like their Polish counterparts, can only win independence through revolutionary struggle – taking political power by force of arms – a course that the poet advocates in “La sombra de Padilla,” “El bardo cautivo,” “El hombre y el canario,” “Muerte de Gesler,” and “Muerte de César,” and “¡Habaneros, libertad!,” among other writings. Independence, however, is insufficient without the abolition of all forms of servitude that deny true freedom. Plácido may follow Europeanized Romantic and Neoclassic discourse, but his between-the-lines polemics subvert this very discourse from within. Only through such tactical sophistication does the mulatto poet succeed – temporarily – at placating the island's censors while imagining a radically different Cuban society.

CHAPTER V

MISCEGENATION, RACIAL *CASTAS*, AND THE COLONIAL SLAVEOCRACY: AN EXAMINATION OF POEMS ADDRESSING RACE IN CUBA

In Chapters III and IV, I discussed Plácido's poetry of occasion and his imitation of European forms and tropes. In particular, I examined various manifestations of Plácido's liminality as a free mulatto living in a slave society, revealing slippages, ambiguities, and subversions within poems ostensibly written for a white and Europeanized black audience. Now I will turn to what has been the most scathing critique of the mulatto poet, namely that he ignored issues of race and slavery.

Even several critics who view Plácido's corpus positively, including Frederick Stimson and Humberto Robles, conclude that the poet "wrote white" by safely staying within the confines of liberal ideology (143).⁶² They make a convincing argument, since there is no evidence that Plácido wrote any works explicitly opposing slavery and racial *castas* in Cuba. Such a claim, however, ignores the tremendous surveillance under which people of color lived in the first half of the nineteenth century and the precarious situation Plácido faced as a mulatto daring to proclaim himself an intellectual equal in a white supremacist society. As the previous chapters discussed, once the reader goes beyond the literal, a between-the-lines counter-discourse (as proposed by Bhabha) emerges in many of the poet's works. This chapter will analyze love poems, fables, romances, and epigrams employing satire, metonymy and other literary devices that not only broach the issue of race, but also vigorously promote racial miscegenation and condemn slavery.

⁶² According to Stimson, Plácido "was not a political poet. Foremost he was a poet of occasion and of the exotic and fanciful" (143).

Hidden transcripts in love poems: racial miscegenation as a tool of subversion against caste divisions

Plácido wrote a series of four blossom poems, in which the speaker compares his love interest to the flowers of various Cuban fauna. Many readers highlight the series as being among Plácido's best works for their original wordplay, eroticism, humor, and levity (Stimson 116). The poems are also recognized for their *siboneísta* qualities of overlaying Neoclassic and Romantic forms with imagery that glorifies the island's natural beauty, transforming Europeanized verse into a nationalist discourse. Curiously, most critics have ignored the most controversial subject matter in each poem – racial miscegenation.⁶³

The most politically complex of the blossom poems, “La flor de la caña,” is written as a letter to a tobacco picker with whom the lyrical voice has a secret affair.⁶⁴ In the opening stanza, he describes the *veguera* as a “Trigueña tostada, / Que el sol envidioso... Le quemó la cara” (*Poemas completas* 430-32). The word *trigueña* (wheat-colored), as Kutzinski explains, was commonly used in nineteenth-century Cuba as both a polite colloquialism for *mulata* and a term of endearment (86).⁶⁵ Although the *trigueña* works in tobacco, the poetic voice compares her to the cane sugar flower in the last verse of each stanza. This superimposition of cane and tobacco – two of the three largest cash crops in Cuba – calls attention to their relation to the island's economic system.⁶⁶

According to Kutzinski, “Plácido's strange hybrid, at once tobacco flower and sugarcane blossom, resonates with the multifaceted historical entanglement of tobacco and sugar

⁶³ One of the few who address race is Ifeoma Nwankwo, who urges readers to “look behind the metaphors of love, native, and nation” to uncover Plácido's discourse on race (105).

⁶⁴ “La flor de la caña” is a hexasyllabic *letrilla* with assonant rhyme in the even verses.

⁶⁵ See Kutzinski's full analysis of “La flor de la caña” in 86-100.

⁶⁶ Coffee cultivation exploded in Cuba after the Haitian Revolution.

within the realms of economics, politics, and culture” (92). What at first glance looks like a playful love poem in fact presents an oblique commentary on sociohistorical conditions in Cuba.

Fernando Ortiz addresses the historic conflict between tobacco and sugar production in his seminal work, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y azúcar*. By the mid-nineteenth century, tobacco, endogenous to the island, was largely cultivated by white and black wage laborers who worked small plots of land (Ortiz 31; Knight, *Slave Society* 64-65). Tobacco *vega* owners worked alongside wage-laborers or slaves and had a vested interest in their well-being because cultivation required training and skill (Ortiz 41). Ortiz compares *vegueros*' training to a guild apprenticeship, which almost certainly would have fostered a sense of self-worth and a degree of technical education among field workers. For many contemporaries of Plácido, tobacco represented the antipode of sugar, the latter being a foreign commodity symbolizing colonialism, enslavement of blacks, and concentration of land and wealth in the hands of a tiny elite (Ortiz 7, 62, 221). While tobacco represented independence from Spain and a degree of camaraderie between whites and people of color, sugar symbolized absolutism and concentration of wealth through the expansion of slavery and racial division. Plácido lived in an epoch of immense conflict between these antagonistic modes of production and witnessed the decline of tobacco as sugar planters clear-cut forests and gobbled up tobacco and coffee plantations to fuel a massive expansion of cane production (Pérez, *Cuba* 73-74).

Plácido problematizes this dichotomy by connecting the *mulata*, who shares both European and African ancestry, to both modes of production. The poetic voice calls her a *veguera*, while simultaneously comparing her to a sugarcane blossom, a synecdoche for

the sugar plantation in which both the product and the producer are property of the master. The poem further suggests that the lover is enslaved, either literally or figuratively, as a “free” person of color denied full human freedoms within a racist social system. In the second stanza, the poetic voice states:

Llevaba una gorra
De brillante paja,
Que tejió ella misma
Con sus manos castas,
Y una hermosa pluma
Tendido canaria,
Que el viento mecia
“Como flor de caña.” (*Poesías completas* 430)

Although she has a very light complexion, with white hands and a face resembling the white sugar blossom, the canary feather suggests she faces, at the very least, the same double-standard that the “almost white” Plácido confronted. In his poetry, caged birds symbolize both literal and metaphorical slavery. In particular, the canary, known for its beauty and sonorous call, is highly symbolic of the stifling of nonwhites’ free will and creativity.⁶⁷ The *trigueña* wears the symbol on the straw hat that defines her as an exploited agricultural worker. Although Cubans in Plácido’s day often considered tobacco farming a more “delicate” and skilled form of agricultural labor, the poet suggests a different condition, one that the traveler William Henry Hurlbert called “the greatest severity of toil... [under] owners whose poverty of means, and love of luxury make them utterly inhuman” (qtd. in Pérez, *Slaves* 111).

The poem’s imagery presents autobiographical connotations as well, suggesting that the secret lover is Fela, the mulata slave with whom Plácido fell in love. This is all the more plausible when we consider that Plácido wrote scores of poems dedicated to his

⁶⁷ See my analysis of “El hombre y el canario” later in this chapter.

late beloved.⁶⁸ In the poem, the speaker feels obliged to maintain a furtive relationship, in which the two can only share their feelings during church Mass, at dances, and in letters. Under a system rigidly divided between racial castes and social classes, free men are not to have romantic relationships with slaves, while people of color face additional familial and societal pressure to “marry up” to “whiten” the bloodline (or at least stay within their racial *casta*). The poetic voice, like the author himself, defies Spanish colonialism’s Linnaean taxonomy by professing his love to the *trigueña*. This very act lays bare the arbitrary and shifting nature of the social constructs of class and race imposed on the island’s population.

The love theme of “La flor de la caña” bares a striking resemblance to the novel *Francisco*, written by Anselmo Suárez y Romero, a creole member of the Del Monte circle.⁶⁹ In the novel, the *mulata* Dorotea defiantly chooses the black slave Francisco over her white suitors. Luis explains: “Suárez y Romero has challenged the values of Western society; money, racial betterment, and even freedom from slavery are not as important as love and black identity.... [F]or Suárez y Romero black and white do not have a natural referent and are arbitrary terminologies” (*Literary Bondage* 46). This statement applies equally to Plácido’s work, with one important caveat. The free mulatto’s writings addressing miscegenation between members of distinct racial castes and economic classes mirror his own *actions* in real life.

⁶⁸ In another poem, “Los ojos de mi morena,” dedicated to Fela, Plácido employs the *culteranista* motif of *carpe diem*. As he does in his blossom poems, Plácido chooses a more decorous term of endearment – *morena* – to describe the beauty of the *mulata* slave (*Poesías completas* 247).

⁶⁹ Contemporary readers can only speculate as to whether the novel – written in 1838 but not published as a complete text until 1880 – may have influenced the poet, or vice versa.

Another blossom poem, “La flor del café,” and several other short works broach the question of *mestizaje* and slavery with a more playful tone.⁷⁰ In “La flor del café,” printed in 1840, the lyrical voice tries to court a beautiful *mulata* who ultimately rejects him (Bar-Lewaw 175). She distrusts poets who use their lofty verse to trick girls into love affairs, only to abandon them afterward and break their hearts.

Although coffee cultivation was introduced to Cuba in 1748, production exploded at the turn of the nineteenth century under the same historical impetus as sugarcane: the Haitian Revolution. Coffee soon became one of Cuba’s main cash crops after French colonists resettled on the island, establishing small plantations of about forty slaves each (Knight, *Slave Society* 67). The Spanish Crown promoted cultivation with a 1792 decree suspending *alcabala* and *diezmo* taxes on the crop for ten years, and then removing other restrictions on land use in 1815 (Luis, “*Cuban Counterpoint*” 9). Between 1800 and 1825, coffee production actually outpaced sugar before beginning its precipitous decline (9). Luis notes that Cuba’s industrial revolution, heralded in with the introduction of the steam engine in 1820, mainly benefited sugar production, boosting the profits of slaveowners (9). Although there were 2,000 coffee plantations on the island in 1827, planters competed fiercely with sugar plantation owners over land and political influence until sugar eventually became the dominant agricultural commodity by the fourth decade of the 1800s.

During coffee’s heyday, travel adventurers and some Cuban liberals argued that coffee cultivation was less exploitative of human capital than sugarcane, in some cases contrasting the “humane” slavery of the former to the “brutal” conditions of the latter.

⁷⁰ This poem is a *letrilla* with octosyllabic verses that generally follow an ABABA assonant rhyme pattern. The poem occasionally breaks the pattern with varied and consonant rhyme.

They constructed images of the coffee plantation that bordered on agrarian utopianism, in which each worked according to his station and lived in relative harmony with others in a natural setting.⁷¹ For example, in *Cecilia Valdés*, Villaverde dramatizes the ideological conflict between the two crops through the relationship between Leonardo, representing the sugarocracy's brutal exploitation of plantation slaves, and Isabel, a coffee grower who works alongside her slaves and treats them with respect. Even the historian Franklin Knight argues that coffee plantation work "was not a very arduous job, and one in which females could be as adept as males" (*Slave Society* 67).

Many liberals' exaltation of coffee over sugar was based on fundamental differences in cultivation and economy. In addition to the issues elaborated by Ortiz, most sugar slavers were also absentee landlords who assigned cruel overseers to keep toilers in check (Luis, "*Cuban Counterpoint*" 11-12). Meanwhile, coffee producers worked the land alongside their help and, according to Pérez de la Riva, were the first cash crop owners to hire free black wage-laborers (qtd. in Luis, "*Cuban Counterpoint*" 10). Luis suggests that the act of using free labor indirectly pitted coffee producers against slavery and its benefactors (10). Fernando Ortiz notes that urban coffee houses – like their counterparts in Europe – also became meeting places for opponents of Spanish absolutism (qtd. in Luis 10).

The idyllic scenery and the courtship theme of "La flor del café" seem to reinforce this discourse. Nevertheless, the coffee flower not only symbolizes the beauty of the young *mulata*, but also her condition on the plantation. Like the flower, she is an

⁷¹ William Henry Hurlbert wrote in his 1854 book, *Gan-Eden; or Picture of Cuba*: "Particularly beautiful are the estates to which a *cafetal* is attached. The coffee culture was introduced by the French refugees from Hayti, men of taste and refinement, who in laying out the grounds of their new homes, took thought for the beautiful as well as for the useful" (qtd. in Pérez, "*Slaves*" 57).

object of beauty tied to the land, not by choice, but by force. The white master has transformed the landscape into an agricultural factory in which human commodities are forced to cultivate export commodities to enrich their masters. The poetic voice's masculine gaze reduces the woman to an object of possession analogous to the manner in which the master dehumanizes all slaves as property. When the poetic voice claims that his love interest is "*Como la flor de café*," she responds first with words, and then with decisive action: "[ella] Suspiró con emoción. / Miróme, calló y se fué" (*Poesías completas* 259).

This scene unmasks the picturesque superficiality of life in the coffee fields to reveal the conditions under which people of color suffered as slaves in the countryside. She may be enthralled to the plantation, but the young *trigueña* refuses to become the property of the poet as well. Plácido uses her voice to reject several white liberals' claims of a binary dichotomy between sugar and coffee producers. Even if her condition is less harsh than that of sugar plantation slaves, she nonetheless recognizes her position vis-à-vis men and vis-à-vis her overseers. Her autonomous act of rejecting the advances of the speaker underscores her will to break free from the control of others and her intellectual capacity to see through the manipulations of those who try to exercise power over her body. Both her judgment and her action threaten discourses that *naturalize* exploitative relations, including the discourse of well-intentioned liberals.

The poem also highlights the immense challenge facing free people of color and slaves who enter into romantic relationships with one another. The narrative voice violates social norms by pursuing a slave rather than a free woman. The *trigueña* recognizes this violation and chooses to avoid falling victim to a deeply unequal power

relation – all too commonplace under slavery – in which free men use slave women as sexual objects with virtual impunity. Her fierce independence runs counter to the conventional wisdom of Plácido’s epoch, since the slave elevates her individual identity and self-worth above the potential privileges of entering in a relationship with a free man.

In a third blossom poem, “La flor de la cera,” Plácido confronts racial miscegenation from another angle, drawing from another autobiographical source.⁷² The lyrical voice, Delio, describes a bucolic landscape covered with wax flowers, estuaries, and woods under the morning sun of a beautiful spring day. As he passes through the countryside, Delio sees his former love interest, Lesbia, in the distance. Unlike the *mulatas* of the other blossom poems, Lesbia wears long braids, suggesting she has fine hair, and her face is “blanco / ‘Como la flor de la cera’” (179). As he hears the echo of her voice, Delio nostalgically recalls when the lovers used to dance at the Pueblo-Nuevo parties. He wonders to himself whether Lesbia still has feelings for him. Suddenly, the poetic voice realizes that Lesbia has been wishing that he pass by. Talking to herself, she exclaims:

‘Ya estará Delio en el puente,
Y cuando pasar me vea
Dirá que voy tan preciosa
Como ‘la flor de la cera.’ (Poesías completas 179)

According to biographers, at the age of twenty, Plácido entered into his first romantic relationship with a woman whom he referred to in his poetry as “Lesbia.” She was a wealthy woman from Matanzas described by contemporaries as white, arrogant, and vain (Stimson conjectures that she may have been a light-skinned *mulata*, although he offers no evidence.) (Stimson 37-38; Hostos 17). Although Plácido wrote the sonnet,

⁷² “La flor de la cera” is a *romance* that, at times, breaks from the traditional pattern with varied rhyme.

“A mi amada,” expressing disillusionment over Lesbia’s scorned love, “La flor de la cera” addresses their short, tumultuous relationship as the manifestation of a larger situation beyond either lover’s control. Plácido creates a vivid scenic representation to reveal the psychological impact of social relations that denaturalize basic human interactions. Both lovers sublimate their passions into the safe haven of daydreams that can only *partially* fulfill their desire through nostalgic memories. Although Delio loves Lesbia, when he sees her in the distance he hides “entre las ramas / De jazmin y madre-selva” (179). Meanwhile, Lesbia can only express her love through fantasies of her lover’s arrival. Their actions fit within the psychoanalytic theory that regards daydreaming as a bridge linking past wish fulfillment to a future re-fulfillment.⁷³ Unfortunately for these lovers, the barriers placed by the outside world prevent the actualization of their fantasy.

Plácido returns to the subject of prohibited love in another poem, “A mi guajirilla.”⁷⁴ The poem closely follows the trope of *carpe diem* in Luis de Góngora’s sonnet “Mientras por competir con tu cabello” by urging the *guajira* to fulfill her passions while she is young and beautiful, because “esa frente... Será ya presa del sepulcro helado!” (*Poesías completas* 167). Plácido then overlays his imitation of the Spanish bard with the uniquely Cuban theme of interracial romance from the perspective of a nonwhite. On the island, the term *guajira* refers to a peasant woman, usually of European ancestry. To clear up any doubt in the reader’s mind, the poetic voice describes his *guajirilla*’s cheeks as lily white and pink (“mejillas de azucena y rosa”). While he does not mention “Lesbia,” the speaker and peasant girl were at one time involved in a

⁷³ See my analysis of “La sombra de Padilla” in Chapter III.

⁷⁴ The poem is composed of five-verse stanzas of four heptasyllabic verses followed by a dodecasyllabic verse, with a consonant rhyme pattern of ABABB.

romantic tryst, which the woman has since ended. The poetic voice laments her ungrateful attitude, urges her to put aside her objections to their relationship, and ends with a plea:

Deja, dulce tirana,
de serme desdeñosa;
Esos lábios de grana
Dame, guajira hermosa,
Y esas mejillas de azucena y rosa. (167)

“A mi guajirilla” is yet another example of an ambiguous text of unattainable love that reaches beyond the confines of metaphysical anguish to address the formidable barriers of racial *castas* in colonial Cuba.

If the love poem is read as a polysemic text, containing words with multiple semantic mappings, “tirana” is more than a simple figure of speech to describe a woman who rejects the advances of her suitor. The lover is a metonymy for a white society that uses its privileged position to *tyrannize* people of color. Through an inversion of gender roles, the *guajira* emasculates the poetic voice by using him as a sexual object, and then abandons him once she has fulfilled her carnal desire. She, like the white population in general, expresses disdain (“desdeñosa”) toward the pitiful creature who pleads for her affection.

Racial divisions within the Afro-Cuban community

Although Plácido mainly addresses tensions between whites and nonwhites, a few of his works confront another manifestation of racism in colonial Cuba – divisions between light- and dark-skinned people of color who belong to different *castas*. In the love poem “A mi trigueña,” the poetic voice urges his *mulata* love interest to be proud of

her beauty regardless of the gossip spread by other women.⁷⁵ Adopting her terminology, he warns the *trigueña* to avoid falling into the vice of denigrating others who possess “las mismas faltas,” stating: “No caigas en el pecado... De tenerte por mejor / Que otra persona cualquiera” (*Poesías completas* 116). While the poem does not explain the lover’s *faltas*, readers can assume that the *mulata* shares some of the physical features of darker-skinned Afro-Cubans, features that she derides as defects.

This reading seems even more plausible once we consider two other poems, “Si á todos, Arcino” and “Que se lo cuente á su abuela,” which explicitly condemn mulattos who try to deny their African heritage or disparage others based on skin color. The epigram “Si á todos, Arcino” points to the hypocrisy of a man who accuses others of being “de baja ralea” when he himself has physical features of African ancestry (267). The poetic voice reminds Arcino of the proverb about people who live in glass houses, indicating that he recognize his mixed heritage and treat darker-skinned compatriots with respect.

In the letrilla “Que se lo cuente a su abuela,” the poetic voice satirizes the pretensions of four different people by daring them to repeat their yarns to their grandmothers.⁷⁶ The final stanza is the most biting, as it addresses metaphorical matricide:

Siempre exclama Don Longino
 – “Soy de sangre noble y pura,”
 Con una pasión más dura
 Que cáscara de tocino,
 Y con su rostro centrino
 Que africana estirpe indica,
 Alucinado publica
 Ser de excelsa parentela!

⁷⁵ “A mi trigueña” is a *romance*.

⁷⁶ This *letrilla* of octasyllables follows a varied consonant rhyme scheme.

Que se lo cuente á su abuela. (261)

As Kutzinski notes, the mother or grandmother who “stains” European purity is a common trope in Cuban literature (86). This trope not only contributes to the national-forming discourse of *mestizaje*, but also reflects the island’s reality. Innumerable slaves and free servants bore their masters’ offspring after being raped or coerced into sexual relationships. Frequently, family members falsified the mother’s name on birth certificates to hide evidence of nonwhite lineage (Martínez-Alier 74). “Que se lo cuente á su abuela” mocks this practice by publicly urging a fictionalized mulatto to tell his Afro-Cuban grandmother about his supposedly pure bloodline. This is particularly noteworthy since the poet who could “pass for white” was raised by his black grandmother after his Spanish mother abandoned him.

The poem, along with “A mi trigueña” and “Si á todos, Arcino,” illuminates how the value system attached to institutionalized racial *castas* and slavery enters the psyche of all social strata. Plácido addresses a topic that few people of color discussed (at least in writing) and that white Cubans did not understand: the shame of blackness. He recognizes what Fanon calls the *epidermalization* of inferiority and urges other Afro-Cubans to accept who they are rather than elide part of their heritage. By extension, his poems directed toward other Cubans of color encourages them to assert self-representation.

Race and class in “El pescador de San Juan”

So far, this chapter has examined intimate poems told in the first person by a poetic voice who addresses racial miscegenation. Now I will turn to a group of romances

that confront race and class from the more distant gaze of an observer who witnesses the interactions of others. Although each of the five romances in “El pescador de San Juan” is distinct, with protagonists ranging from fishermen and young women to animals and ocean waves, a common thread runs throughout: each poem, set on the oceanfront, presents an anecdotal story with a moral. A close examination of the first and final romances reveals the sophistication with which Plácido dissects dominant discourse in order to propose a different social order.⁷⁷

The first romance, set along the San Juan River that divides Matanzas City, addresses personal relations between people of distinct racial *castas* and social classes. In the poem, a fisherman counsels his “trigueña” sweetheart, Amira, to avoid the belittling remarks and rumor-mongering of white women. Although they pretend to be superior to women of color, he says they are actually envious of Amira’s beauty:

Si alguna blanca desdeña
Con jénio murmurador
Tu virtud, que tiene es seña
Envidia de la trigueña
Que celebra el pescador. (*Poesías de Plácido* 231)

He notes that they may have husbands who are “Mas rico y mas elegante” than the fisherman, but material wealth has not brought them happiness because no one can purchase true love. Although the fisherman is also mulatto – he compares his own complexion to “el oro de Zempoala” – wealthy white men are also jealous because he is with the Amira. Through its elevation of poor over wealthy and nonwhite over white, the poem insinuates that the humble fisherman and his lover are physically, psychologically, and morally superior. White women cannot reach Amira’s natural beauty and, in turn,

⁷⁷ The second romance addresses envy in general, while the third and fourth focus on class prejudice and the pauperization of poets. The complete collection can be found in *Poesías de Plácido* 231-239.

they and their husbands suffer from neurotic jealousy because they cannot accept their *aesthetic* inferiority. In an attempt to compensate for this psychological weakness, they expose their moral bankruptcy, displacing their frustrations through money-seeking and projection of racial and class bias.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, love gives the speaker and Amira the power to withstand the cruel treatment of their inferiors.

The fifth romance of “El pescador de San Juan” addresses race and class through the perspective to two anthropomorphic ocean waves and the voice of a fisherman-poet. The poem opens with a conversation between two humble waves approaching the mouth of the San Juan River. One chooses to abandon her *compañera* to mingle with powerful waves capable of toppling boats. The scene alludes to lower class Cubans who try to escape their situation by attempting to integrate themselves into the elite. The wave fails in her endeavor, crashing down from the weight of her sorrows. The humble wave continues on her course until she gently washes against the waist of a young woman. The narrative voice then announces himself as both a fisherman and a poet who has witnessed the pretensions of many “waves” result in failure. He continues, presenting a detailed explanation of the fable’s moral, which synthesizes the cumulative lessons of the romances comprising “El pescador de San Juan:”

Creí que el mundo era el mar,
Y hombres las olas. Aquellas
Que de la calma se apartan
Desdeñando la pobreza,
Y con las grandes se juntan
Por ostentar preeminencias,
Son trasuntos de los vanos
Amantes de la opulencia,
Que mueren sin alcanzarla

⁷⁸ Psychological projection is a defense mechanism that reduces anxiety by allowing the individual to attribute one’s unacknowledged or unwanted thoughts and emotions within oneself onto another person. This often takes the form of prejudice and jealousy. For more information, see Anna Freud.

.....
 Y éstas que caminan mansas
 Y no ambicionan ni anhelan
 Más bienes que aquel estado
 Que les dio naturaleza
 Son los pacíficos hijos

 Que ni murmuran ni envidian
 Ni de los suyos se alejan,
 Ni distinguen por colores,
 Ni casan por conveniencia,
 Ni se envanecen, ni tienen
 El trabajar por afrenta,
 Y sólo aprecian acciones,
 Y viven de lo que pescan. (239)

This citation also captures beautifully the intersection of themes that Plácido addresses in his blossom poems and other works ostensibly dedicated to former beloveds. Although a type of “meek shall inherit the earth” sentimentalism marks the romance, Plácido explicitly takes aim at both the white elites who profit from the colonial order and those of denigrated social classes and racial castes who try to imitate them. The psychological scourges of superiority, disdain, and envy are not metaphysical manifestations of the human condition, but rather the byproducts of an oppressive system. The reader can only find psychic fulfillment through emulating the *manso*, who judges others based on their deeds and their humility rather than skin color.

“El pescador de San Juan” may be viewed as a moralizing work proposing the reactionary notion that readers can change their value system on a personal level and live in harmony with others once they recognize their individual faults. The *mansos*, who turn the other cheek rather than engage their oppressors, seem to be the heroes of the work. However, once readers take into consideration Plácido’s real life and his various poems

of protest, the final two verses of the romance, which focus on “acciones,” suggest a more subversive reading.

The first romance defies Eurocentric notions of beauty and mocks the pretensions of white elites. The second, third, and fourth address class divisions by contrasting the cruelty of elite characters to the solidarity of the destitute.⁷⁹ By the fifth romance, the speaker advocates a colorblind society (“Ni distinguen por colores”) that rewards hard work over social rank. In the blossom poems and other romantic works, Plácido fictionalizes his relations with women across the spectrum – white, *mulata*, and black, free and enslaved – calling into question the arbitrary nature of a system that benefits from class and caste divisions. The mere suggestion that a different society is possible, especially from the pen of a person of color, was considered an act of sedition in the nineteenth century.

In his discussion of the poet’s relationship with wealthy creole liberals who advocated egalitarian theories, Jorge Castellanos notes: “la distancia entre teoría y práctica era enorme para muchos de estos señores, quienes le admiraban su talento, pero requerían de él que lo ejercitase ante ellos como histrión a sueldo, siempre ‘dándose su lugar’” (46). Bearing in mind this unequal relation (addressed in the second chapter), the subversive nature of “El pescador de San Juan” and Plácido’s other pro-miscegenation poems becomes more noteworthy. The author flaunted social norms regarding race and class in his individual life and generalized his rebelliousness through writing narrative poetry with characters that followed his example. Although these works are didactic, they

⁷⁹ In the third romance, the poetic voice meets an emaciated beggar in the city plaza. He learns that the man used to be a poet, but wealthy patrons paid him so little for his talent that he gave up the profession for begging. In the fourth romance, a ship captain mocks a poor fisher’s shabby boat. The frigate capsizes during a storm, drowning many. The fisherman saves as many men as he can out of compassion for others in spite of their previous ridicule.

avoid the trap of devolving into political propaganda like the writings of some liberals of his day. Yet, Plácido's characters, who do marry *teoría y práctica*, provide a scathing critique of whites who write about injustice while projecting the very prejudices that naturalize the prevailing social order.

“Play fool to catch wise”

Plácido's popular fable, “El hombre y el canario,” addresses similar themes of unequal relations and hypocrisy, while justifying the author's poetry of occasion. The fable takes the form of a dialogue between a man and a caged canary in a land of “irracionales,” where humans and animals can communicate (*Poesías completas* 237).⁸⁰ True to the fable genre, the author uses anthropomorphic animals to provide a moral to the reader. In this case, the man – “un hombre ocioso” – represents a white liberal and the canary alludes to Plácido (237). The man asks from a position of authority why the bird refuses to sing about freedom. He rhetorically questions whether the bird truly wants to free himself from the cage that allows him to see pastoral beauty but prohibits him from flying in the wild. The canary answers with several interrelated morals that enrage his interlocutor, who eventually storms away from the scene.

The caged animal explains that he must sing the tunes that please his oppressors, even if such fawning causes him pain:

Lo que se me enseña canto,
Porque con mis trinos bellos,
Aunque vierta oculto llanto,
Hago lo que mandan ellos
Para no padecer tanto.

⁸⁰ The poems consists of five-verse stanzas with octosyllabic verses following a varied consonant rhyme pattern.

Sé que no puedo quebrar
Estas varillas de alambre;
Me dan vida por cantar,
Y si persisto en callar
Me harán perecer de hambre. (237)

Through the bird's voice, Plácido suggests to creoles that neither he nor any other person of color has the ability to separate himself from the circumstances he faces. He lives within a much larger socioeconomic order that denies free will to all Afro-Cubans, including those who are "free" under colonial law. The mulatto poet silently suffers the psychological torment of feeling pressured to applaud the people who treat nonwhites as subhuman. The complaint reaches beyond race to include economic divisions since, as the canary explains, the poet will go hungry if he stops singing the praises of his enemies. This inescapable condition is what Plácido's liberal colleagues do not grasp.⁸¹

The canary finds solace in fooling colonists, and explains the cunning deception behind his pragmatic approach:

Yo engaño al que me esclaviza,
Por conservar mi existencia.
Morir por preocupación
Y sin defensa, es locura,
Suicidarse sin razón:
Vivir y hallar la ocasión
De libertarse, es cordura. (237)

Instead of attempting to justify his poetry of occasion, Plácido brazenly announces, through the canary's voice, that he plays fool to catch wise because an open assault on the enslaver would be foolhardy.⁸² Rather than commit suicide in the name of taking a principled stand against oppression, he patiently waits for the right moment to strike. From a political and military standpoint, the fable offers a valuable lesson in

⁸¹ For a more thorough examination of Plácido's metacritical poetry addressing his panegyrics, see my analysis in Chapter III.

⁸² "Play fool to catch wise" is a proverb among Jamaican slaves (qtd. in Patterson 338).

distinguishing between tactics (writing encomiums to conceal real motives) and strategy (“hallar la ocasión de libertarse”). The bird claims that anyone can rebel without considering the relationship of forces, but success is predicated on taking a longer view of history and preparing for the right moment. Although Plácido’s assassination in 1844 was most likely part of O’Donnell’s attempt to decimate the black middle class, “El hombre y el canario” reveals a seditious quality to the poet’s writings and suggests that his pragmatism fit within a broader plan for liberation. Slavers would have been aware of Plácido’s rebellious verse and may have accused him of orchestrating the Ladder Conspiracy as both a punishment and a preemptive move to eliminate a potential threat.

Additionally, the fable serves as a damning indictment against the pretension and hypocrisy of white liberals who took it upon themselves to tell people of color how they should act.⁸³ Inverting relations between white and black Cubans, the canary argues that creoles are complicit in their own oppression, permitting the Spanish Empire to rule over them. It tells the man that he should answer to God, not to a foreign power that tries to control his destiny, proclaiming: “Y de un hombre, á tu pesar, / Que no es á tí superior, / Te dejás esclavizar...!” (237).⁸⁴ Creoles may have enjoyed a privileged status in Cuba, but Spaniards continued to hold the levers of power. Although several white liberals advocated independence or abolition in their writings, very few were willing to risk their lives through open rebellion to attain their goals.

⁸³ In societies that operate under racial constructs, in which one group is privileged over another, racial paternalism – especially among “well-intentioned” whites – is a common phenomenon.

⁸⁴ Plácido makes the same argument in the much shorter fable “El pastor y el mico.” In the poem, a monkey praises several carnivorous animals – crocodiles, leopards, tigers, and wild boars – that symbolize wealthy Spaniards. When the monkey ignores a donkey, the shepherd (i.e. a creole) asks why a beast of burden does not receive the same compliments, and then accuses the monkey of prostituting himself. The monkey, unphased, replies: “Pues acaso los hombres / No acostumbrais lo mismo?” (*Poesías completas* 233).

Using as a backdrop the reality facing nonwhites in Cuba and the hypocrisy of white liberals, the poem's canary takes the offensive. He insults the creole, calling him "ignorante" for demanding that a "pigmeo" be stronger than a giant is. He then educates the reader about the unequal nature of power relations between members of different racial castes, telling the man: "tú que me cautivas / Eres superior á mí" (237). Within Cuban society, creoles exercise power over their mulatto and black counterparts, even when they belong to the same circle of intellectuals. Furthermore, they face a separate set of consequences for subversive actions and do not live under the constant surveillance of the state.

Through broaching themes of racial inequality, Spanish colonialism, and hypocrisy, "El hombre y el canario" differentiates between the two distinct but interrelated issues of Cuban independence and racial equality.⁸⁵ Plácido uses the canary's voice to expose the different realities facing creoles and free blacks on the island and demonstrates the hypocrisy of those who enjoy a higher social status because of skin color and economic privilege. Speaking of slavery in figurative terms, the poem's protagonist takes a clear stand against oppression while urging discipline and patience. The canary's words imply that the struggles for independence and for racial equality – beginning with the abolition of slavery – cannot be artificially separated. While the bird faces additional obstacles, neither he nor the man in the fable can be free as long as they are denied free will. In this sense, the poem presages the titanic struggles in the second half of nineteenth century, in which the Ten Years' War (1868-78) and the Little War

⁸⁵ Buscaglia-Salgado explains this differentiation in *Undoing Empire: Race and Nation in the Mulatto Caribbean* 229-30. I agree with his analysis, although I find no evidence supporting Buscaglia-Salgado's claim that the fable elevates race over independence.

(1879-80) combined demands for national self-determination with abolition of slavery, intensifying pressure on colonial authorities to finally dismantle the slave system in 1886.

“El hombre y el canario” and “El pescador de San Juan” are the most overtly political poems discussed in this chapter, even though their central themes are submerged into fantasy and fable. Plácido employs a form of ventriloquism in which canaries debate slavery with men and ocean waves negotiate race and class dynamics. Through these fables, characters present incisive arguments against the island’s slaveocracy and the mores of the planter class. Plácido differentiates between tactics (writing encomiums) and strategy (rebellion) to lay bare the precarious situation of free people of color whose very existence endangers the prevailing social order. His clever use of linguistic signs of color transforms intimate love poems into social and political commentaries. Tropes of prohibited love highlight the distortion of human interaction under slavery and obliquely address the effect of contradictory economic relations on personal relationships. *Siboneísta* descriptions of the Cuban countryside ironically expose the naturalization of people as property artificially tied to the land. Lastly, satirical poems addressed to Plácido’s own class of petty-bourgeois Afro-Cubans, mocks those who try to climb the social ladder by denying their own heritage.

Under the conditions in which he wrote, Plácido realized that publishing poems openly calling for abolition of slavery and racial discrimination would be suicidal. He attempted to demonstrate that such explicit writings were unnecessary by uttering his discourse *inter-dicta*. Nevertheless, colonial authorities had good reason to view the young man as a threat and no amount of nuance could spare him from eventual torture and execution. He was one of the most prominent Afro-Cubans in his day to

simultaneously flaunt social norms in his personal life and match it with writing advocating a radically different future for the birth of his nation.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Both during Plácido's life and after his execution, people spanning the spectrum of political ideologies have expressed apprehension toward his poetry. Several nineteenth-century nationalists accused him of ratifying colonial discourse by prostituting his talent to Spaniards and other benefactors of Cuban subjugation. Meanwhile, Spanish authorities imprisoned him multiple times for writing seditious poetry and eventually executed him as the purported "orchestrator" of the Ladder Conspiracy. More than one hundred years later, several literary critics argue that his works remain safely within the strictures of liberal nationalism advanced by creole elites, avoiding issues of slavery and other manifestations of racial oppression. Since his untimely death, the conflation of Plácido the martyr with Plácido the poet has further complicated scholarly research. His staunchest defenders, perhaps the most disquieted of all the readers, tend to cite the poems that fit their own positions while suppressing those that contradict them. Nonetheless, based on both biographical evidence and the poems available to us – with their ambiguities, complexities of meaning, and contradictory messages – Plácido's oeuvre defies singular categorization.

We readers bring our own preexisting – often-unconscious – set of expectations, belief systems, and biases to the works we study. Unfortunately, as William Luis explains, "contemporary critics do not see or understand that their reading of a text communicates, in many cases, more about their own personal and contemporary

ideology” because “few are willing to reconstruct history and situate narrative discourse within the context of the past” (*Literary Bondage* 64). A range of factors, including the historical moment in which we live, country of origin, socioeconomic status, race, and gender, influence how we interact with texts. Rather than ignore this reality, our challenge is to recognize both the advantages they provide for new insights and the limitations they place on our analysis.

Perhaps nobody understood the young mulatto’s precarious situation better than he did. Numerous poems elucidate a sense of feeling trapped by social forces beyond his control and a yearning to rebel against symbols of oppression. “La Estrella del Diablo” describes a man struggling to make a living while facing constant pressure to perform poems of occasion to white elites. Plácido feels forced to conceal his true feelings because:

“Esta es mi suerte en la vida,
Y otras mil cosas que callo;
Porque á relatar el todo
Ni en muchos pliegos acabo” (122)

This silencing calls attention to what cannot be stated openly; to the countless manifestations of racial and class divisions that convinced hundreds of thousands of blacks – free and enslaved – that they were born under “la estrella del Diablo.”

James Scott argues that racial subordination creates “patterns of consistent risk-averse use of language by the powerless—an attempt to venture as little as possible, to use stock formulas when available, and to avoid taking liberties with language that might give offense” (31). Plácido’s poetry of occasion is marked by the colonial discourse that provided an ideological justification for slavery and national oppression. “Al Marqués de Casa-Calvo: En el restablecimiento de su salud” – dedicated to the Spanish officer who

led expeditions to prop up the Crown's crumbling empire – provides a prototypical example of the encomiums Plácido wrote and performed for money. Nevertheless, even some of his encomiums contain silences, hesitations, and ambiguities that point to what W.E.B. DuBois calls a “double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes,” which “tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism” (127). Another work, “El lirio: a la memoria del Sr. Ángel Laborde,” ostensibly praises a colonial officer, yet silences his military career and exalts Cuba as a noble nation. Sonnets written to María Cristina and Isabel II simultaneously praise Plácido's “protectors” and reference revolutionary democrats, ideals of freedom, and assertions of Cuban nationhood.

These contradictions have frustrated traditional analyses for more than 150 years. As a free person of color living in a society bound by the double scourge of colonialism and slavery, the poet wrestled with the inferiority complex that afflicts colonial subjects who must perform under the racist gaze of dominant culture. Plácido privileged Europeanized culture in his imitation of Neoclassic and Romantic tropes and the location of many works on European soil. These same poems contain liberal ideals of national sovereignty, and at least “A Polonia” alludes to the Haitian Revolution as a force that can help liberate the Cuban people. “El bardo cautivo” draws on events and heroes in the Spanish imaginary only to invert their signification to propose a Cuban nationalism that valorizes the island's *African* heritage. Frequent displacements of time and location, daydreams, and exercises in wish fulfillment infuse the Europeanized tropes with a polysemy that could pass by the scrutinizing gaze of censors while proposing a radically different future for Plácido's homeland. References to pale despots, enslaved soldiers,

and Czarist imperialist intrigue, accompanied by repeated allusions to Cuba, suggest a discourse that combines independence from colonial rule with abolition of slavery, racial miscegenation, and equality.

Many readers hail Plácido's poems expressing liberal nationalism as his most politically acute.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, his writings addressing the interrelated social questions of race and class were even more subversive and prescient for his epoch. The young mulatto's blossom poems combine tropes of love and *carpe diem* with autobiographical characters that problematize liberal dichotomies between cruel sugar plantation slavery and less brutal tobacco and coffee production. Fela, Lesbia, and the slave in "La flor del café" underscore the dehumanizing toll of racial *castas* on intimate relationships and the uneven power relations between people of whiter and darker classifications. Rather than lament their condition, the poems suggest an open defiance of social norms as members of different castes – enslaved and free – enter in romances and at times, affirm their self-worth. The works balance a sense of Romantic helplessness with assertions of agency through linguistic signs of color that use intimacy as a pretext to confront social and political questions.

Poems addressed to petty-bourgeois people of color highlight the effects of racial constructs on all social strata. Light-skinned mulattos try to erase ancestors who "stain" their families in "Que se lo cuente á su abuela" and "Si á todos, Arcino," rather than protest a system that arbitrarily uses physical characteristics and origin to institutionalize levels of racial oppression and justify slavery. Plácido satirizes nonwhites' attempts to climb the social ladder through denial of their past. The romances in "El pescador de San

⁸⁶ Many were included in this thesis, including "La muerte de Gesler," "A Polonia," "A Grecia," and "La sombra de Padilla." Others include "El eco de la gruta" and "¡Habaneros, libertad!"

Juan” invert dominant discourse by mocking envious white elites while honoring lower-class Afro-Cubans as morally, psychologically, and physically superior. The first and fifth romances critique both race and class, reaching beyond either the nationalist or the abolitionist definition of liberty, to suggest an alternative discourse. The logic of “El pescador de San Juan” is toward the dismantling of a colonial structure that profits from racial oppression (through slavery and *castas*) and economic exploitation. This theme is repeated in “El hombre y el canario,” a fable that also confronts the dangerous position facing Plácido and his strategy of promoting political independence *and* abolition through hidden and dissembling texts. In the poem, he acknowledges his condition of being “‘overlooked’ – in the double sense of the social surveillance and psychic disavowal,” but emphatically rejects one-dimensional representations of his identity (Bhabha 339).

In dozens of poems, from encomiums to sonnets crying for freedom, Plácido constructs polysemic texts speaking to multiple audiences, leaving no social group free from his social commentary. Once we place his works within their proper sociohistorical context, we not only recognize their multiple subversions of dominant discourse, but also their tremendous contradictions, as the young mulatto oscillates between actional and reactional poetry. In a society where colonialism and white supremacy conspire together to deny Afro-Cubans their individuality, Plácido writes within a liminal space that permits agency – what Fanon aptly terms *disalienation* (231-32).

A biographic anecdote helps illuminate these poetic assertions of agency. In 1836, when Plácido attempted to publish a collection of poems accompanied by a lithograph, his friends urged him to wear elegant clothing when he posed for the etching. He rejected their requests to look like a *letrado*, choosing instead to dress as he usually did when

working as a comb maker, with a low cut shirt, no hat, and no other accoutrements.⁸⁷

Plácido recognized the difference between his station and that of his creole counterparts in the Del Monte *tertulia*. Rather than attempt to elide his Otherness, he exploited it in life and in writing, drawing attention to the artificially constructed divisions under which he and other Afro-Cubans lived. In the process, he wrote several texts providing some of most sophisticated foresight regarding nation and race in his epoch.

Plácido's name has become an emblem for various movements in the 150 years since his execution, yet only recently have readers begun to recuperate the richness of his poetic creation and unravel its multiple messages. Ironically, the poet himself seemed to understand better than his critics did the liminality of his so-often misunderstood works. It is only fitting to end with "La Fama," in which Plácido predicts that future generations will recognize the nature of his cultural contribution:

Algunos moralistas
Quieren que aquel que haya
De escribir censurando
Costumbres degradadas,
 En burlador estilo,
 Con jocosas palabras,
 Para enseñar riendo,
Sus reprensiones haga.
.
 Hay épocas terribles,
 Costumbres depravadas
 En que los vicios medran
Con fuerza extraordinaria.
El mal, la risa entonces
A remediar no alcanza;
Pues la ambición es ciega,
Y es ciega la ignorancia.
 Entonces es preciso
 Con vigorosa alma
 Decir á los mortales
 Verdades muy amargas.

⁸⁷ This account is explained in detail in Stimson 33.

Ellos verán con odio
Al que con noble audacia,
Sin vacilar les eche
Sus defectos en cara;
Mas aunque le persigan
Cebando en él su rabia,
¿La vida qué le importa
Si nació de la nada?
Si injusto el mismo mundo
A la muerte le arrastra,
Él al sepulcro, alegre
Con su victoria baja;
Seguro que algun día,
Los nietos de esa raza,
Irán á regar flores
Sobre su tumba helada:
Y las doctas sentencias
Que proclamó, grabadas
De la gloria en el templo,
Publicará la Fama. (134)

Perhaps now, after so much time and political upheaval in his homeland and across the globe, can Plácido's works shed light on his personal identity and the conditions under which he and other Afro-Cubans acted in the decades leading to the tumultuous struggles that would eventually unite people across caste divisions to fight for the combined goals abolition and independence.

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