Cultural politics

Oxford University Press' redaction of Calvet's chapter about the Summer Institute of Linguistics

As Sondheim said in 1962, "A funny thing happened on the way to the forum". This time around, in 1998, the forum in question was that slice of public scholarship privately owned by Oxford University Press, and the funny thing was funny—peculiar but not a-laugh-a-minute like the Broadway show. Oxford and its venerable Syndics covertly censored its English "translation" by M. Petheram of L.-J. Calvet's 1987 book La Guerre des langues & les politiques linguistiques (Payot, Paris, 1987, ISBN 222814200X). Bad enough that the kick-handed translator (or his monolingual editor) rendered the title as "Language Wars & Linguistic Politics [sic]" (ISBN 0198700210/0198235984) in disregard of the gender distinction in French between politics and policy. Far worse for any user of the Oxford edition, Chapter 14 ("Politique linguistique et impérialisme; l'Institut Linguistique d'Été", pp. 205-14) got disappeared in toto (as the lawyers say), without the intellectual honesty to note the fact of removal, not to mention its cause. S.I.L. obviously prefers to run below the radar. The above link gives the original French text which was so sneakily zapped, as well as the table of contents of the censored OUP edition. (In this case at least, the Rumsfeldian dictum fails, and "absence of evidence" IS indeed "evidence of absence".) I stumbled on this conspiratorial caper while updating the references for my squib Bailey--bridge to oil doom: Kay Williamson reveals S.I.L.'s official role in the maladministration of the post-Biafran Niger Delta.

UPDATE: Prof. Calvet confirms by email (1 July 2007) that the surreptitious removal of his Chapter 14 from the English "translation" of his 1987 book was an act of "self-censorship" ("auto-censure") on the part of Oxford University Press under pressure from "a host of lawyers" (though precisely whose lawyers, it's still necessary to pin down for sake of the public record — OUP whistleblowers please take note).

UPDATE 2: English translation (6 pp. 8.5 x 11 inches) of the surreptitiously disappeared chapter, prepared and posted here at the suggestion of Prof. Calvet, who fortunately retains translation rights (email, 2 July 2007).

UPDATE 3: Petheram is untraceable, while the OUP editorial office pleads inability to access paper-based archives documenting the affair (email from John Davey, 2 September 2007).

UPDATE 4: SIL/WBT is not the only authoritarian cult that knows how to leverage British libel law, nor is OUP the only British publisher to cower:

"This is hardly the first book to cast an unflattering light on the scientologists. But 'Going Clear' will garner attention if only because of the reputation of its author, who, the New York Times says, is "known for his thoroughness" as a reporter. He has, the paper reports, received numerous threatening letters from lawyers for the Church while the UK publisher of the book, Transworld, recently pulled out and scrapped its printing without explanation. It will be published by Knopf in the US with a first run of 150,000 copies." source

Conference report: José Antonio Aponte & His World; writing, painting & making freedom in the African diaspora

Center for Latin American & Caribbean Studies, King Juan Carlos I Center, New York University, 8-9 May 2015.
Cross-posted with fotos at Afrocuba Web.

Update 19 June 2015: Prof. Grandin, who chaired a session of the NYU Aponte conference six weeks ago, notes in a left-liberal Manhattan magazine a possibly "cunning" historical coincidence: that the premeditated massacre in Emmanuel AME Church of Charleston SC on 17 June 2015 occurred on the precise anniversary of Denmark Vesey's insurrection, planned in 1822 in the same building, which was then razed down by the slavocracy in revenge. The Vesey insurgency was itself a close and possibly conscious homologue to the Cuban events a decade before (as observed by Prof. Gómez and other Apontistas discussing anticolonial politics in the Salón Real Juan Carlos I). Grandin could well have added that Cuban social reality today is—for whichever reasons that critical comparison may reveal—far from baring into similar spells of white supremacist terror. This fact in itself strongly justifies the Afrocubanist impulse of Prof. Ferrer's historical project.
As followup to Ada Ferrer’s 2014 monograph, Freedom’s Mirror; Cuba & Haiti in the Age of Revolution www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/history/latin-american-history/freedoms-mirror-cuba-and-haiti-age-revolution, NYU convened a workshop on the forced-labor economy of European colonies in the Americas as reflected in the biography of José Antonio Aponte. Aponte was a visionary ‘free artisan of color’ executed by Spain in revenge for the Afro Cuban insurgency of 1812. The 1812 episode — itself an aftershock of the Haitian revolution of 1804 — inspired Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s mordant 1976 docudrama La última cena en wikipedia.org/wiki/La_última_cena, but oddly enough this famous film received no mention throughout the conference despite many points of contact. Odder still, the talks were convened in an opulent hall endowed by the same Castillian throne whose genocidal enterprise was in fact our Topic A. These two jarring notes can serve as emblems for the predicament of academics trying to project wellmeaning arguments outside the modern university’s gilded, tenured but Weberian bureaucratic ‘iron cage’. The conference partly mitigated this dilemma by its own location in the heart of New York’s echt-bobo barrio, admitting participation by Afro Caribbean cultural activists. Thanks to this well organized symposium, the daunting gap between elite postmodernology and popular consciousness is incrementally smaller today. Beyond my selective memories of the various contributions summarised below, the full video record may soon be streamable online, book-length proceedings are forthcoming, and related resources can be accessed via the authors’ professional websites.

Panel 1 — Foundations: theory, text & history

Chair: Linda Rodriguez lindarodriguez.org

“Aponte in the archive; the case for hermeneutics”
Sibylle Fischer spanish.as.nyu.edu/object/sibyllefischer.html

“Reasons of history, talking books and Black sovereignty; archive and enlightenment in Aponte’s Book of Paintings”
Jorge Pavez Ojeda desarrollsociedad.unab.edu.cl/archivos/jorge-pavez-ojeda

“A tale of two Apontes”
Stephan Palmié anthropology.uchicago.edu/people/faculty_member/stephan_palmie

“Promising perspectives, possible pursuits and persistent problems; what we knew, what we know and what we still don’t know about the Aponte Rebellion and the Book of Paintings”
Matt Childs artsandsciences.tsu.hist/hist/matt-d-childs

Comment: Jean-Frédéric Schaub crho.ehes.fr/index.php?1335

The first session’s focus was the ambiguous portrait of Aponte reconstructible from official documents. The question was originally posed by the lead essay of Palmié’s 2002 collection Wizards & Scientists; explorations in Afrocuban modernity & tradition www.worldcat.org/search?q=0822328283 whose contrarian lucubrations suggested that it would be just as “misleading… to construe Aponte into a creole revolutionary” as it would be to “reduce [William] Blake to Jacobinism” (p. 150). The same warning was repeated, nuanced and defended in Palmié’s present talk, but countered in the following one by M. Childs — both discussions concentrating on readings of the record. Their vivid grudge-match of philosophical anthropology vs engaged history was however tempered by the opening pair of presentations wherein it was observed that the same problem arises quite systematically and generally in the relevant time period (Ojeda) and for the socio-literary imagination as a whole (Fischer). In other words, Aponte’s mystery is neither special to Aponte nor is it specially mysterious. Such considerations aside — and without sighting any tangential illumination derived from comparing St. Augustine to FaceBook™ among other insights — the first panel conveyed an indelible impression of Aponte as a bricoleur-ideologue of genius, whose emblematic thoughts were already criminalized at conception in a totalitarian empire informed by the Spanish Inquisition (Schaub). Aponte’s placement in the Cuban national pantheon was thus justly canonised in José Luciano Franco’s 2006 book La conspiración de Aponte, 1812 www.worldcat.org/title/conspiración-de-aponte-1812/oclc/123063327, but oddly enough this famous film received no mention throughout the conference despite many points of contact. Odder still, the talks were convened in an opulent hall endowed by the same Castillian throne whose genocidal enterprise was in fact our Topic A. These two jarring notes can serve as emblems for the predicament of academics trying to project wellmeaning arguments outside the modern university’s gilded, tenured but Weberian bureaucratic ‘iron cage’. The conference partly mitigated this dilemma by its own location in the heart of New York’s echt-bobo barrio, admitting participation by Afro Caribbean cultural activists. Thanks to this well organized symposium, the daunting gap between elite postmodernology and popular consciousness is incrementally smaller today. Beyond my selective memories of the various contributions summarised below, the full video record may soon be streamable online, book-length proceedings are forthcoming, and related resources can be accessed via the authors’ professional websites.

Panel 2 — Books of rebellion, books of freedom

Chair: Greg Grandin history.fas.nyu.edu/object/greggrandin

“A Black kingdom of this world; secret histories of revolution in Havana”
Ada Ferrer history.fas.nyu.edu/object/adaferrer

“From the pen of a seditious subject; the notebooks of Luís Gonzaga in the ‘Tailor’s Conspiracy’ of Bahia, Brazil, 1798”
Greg Childs www.brandeis.edu/facultyguide/person.html?templateid=70e9f9ab602b977f06deed947704d8c8444231325

“Circuitries of the incendiary imagination; making the case for insurrection in the Americas”
Michael Gómez history.fas.nyu.edu/object/michaelgomez

Comment: Steven Hahn history.upenn.edu/people/faculty/steven-hahn

This conference being a consequence of Ferrer’s recent book (see above), her presentation on the day closely followed her book’s close exegesis (in chapter 7) of iconography in Aponte’s clandestine compilation as described in police testimony at his
execution trial. Similarly, G. Childs gave a précis of a chapter of his recent dissertation *Scenes of Sedition; publics, politics & freedom in late 18th century Bahia, Brazil* describing another, roughly contemporary example of literacy being construed by the slavocracy as intrinsic treason. Gómez further expanded G. Childs’ point to include romantically redemptive imagery: insurgent appeal was not confined to verbal elements. Drawing on all these examples, Hahn indicted Eurocentric historians for overstating the leadership of the planter bourgeoisie in the era’s decolonizing and anti-feudal movements while failing to notice more radical — and more realist — contributions by self-organized Afrodescendants.

**Panel 3 — Envisioning race; representation & history**

Chair: Awam Amkpa

“José Antonio Aponte and the artistic landscape in Colonial Havana”

Linda Rodriguez

“From redemption to abandonment; slave portraiture in the times of Aponte”

Agnes Lugo-Ortiz

“Between civilization and barbarism; Víctor Patricio de Landaluze’s paintings during the Ten Years’ War”

Carmen Ramos

“Saints, slaves and Madonnas; representation and reality in Nueva Granada”

Tom Cummins

Comment: Edward Sullivan

Day one closed with considerations of pictorial esthetics. Aponte articulated a “new visual language” (Rodriguez) so as to replace the trite neoclassicism favored by colonial settlers and to transform images of captive Africans into heroic portraits (Lugo-Ortiz). Anxious inversions of Aponte’s shift appeared in late 19th century anti-independista social landscapes such as *La Recogida de la caña de azúcar* (Ramos). Throughout Europe’s absolutist imperial domains — and here is where I missed acknowledgement of Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s metaphysical satire — the violent contradiction between genocidal trade and Catholic sanctimony spawned an imagistic codependency between piety and torture (Cummins). By registering this visual angst, art history can contribute to general sociohistorical analysis (Sullivan).

**Panel 4 — Historical memory & politics**

Chair: Ada Ferrer

“Aponte’s Legacy in Cuban popular culture”

Ivor Miller

“Politics of memory and the visual culture of rebellion”

Ana Lucía Araujo

“The memory and counter-memory of Indian sovereignty; Andean insurgency and colonial crackdown in the early 1780s”

Sinclair Thomson

Comment: Ana Dopico

Pinch-hitting for Fernando Martínez Heredia whose invited participation unfortunately did not materialise, Miller sampled firsthand observations of recopied notebooks and other historical graphics held in the continuous custody of *Abacuá* lodges in urban, western Cuba. These indigenous archives, rarely glimpsed by academic investigators, confirm Aponte’s inspiration for anticolonial ferment throughout the 19th century and for popular consciousness among autonomous (i.e. non-state) actors throughout the postcolonial era. They also point back to Westafrican pictographic and ritual precedents, whose effective transmission to the Americas is tentatively supported by Miller’s ongoing, transatlantic field research. As acknowledged in Dopico’s response, the existence of such rich information outside official hands disarms the scrupulous doubts so scrupulously expressed in Panel 1 about the confidence level of certain historical inferences. The session’s other two talks (Araujo, Thomson) ranged across the western hemisphere to illustrate how clerical and colonial crimes continue to resonate in varied visual and performance modes — demonstrating not just the obstinately indelible Américan memory of European sadism, but also the total failure of torture to eradicate unauthorized ideas.

**Panel 5 — Concluding remarks/conversation**

Jasmine Nichole Cobb

David Sartorius

Moderator: Edgardo Pérez Morales

Aponte was no less revolutionary for being a legally ‘free’ person at the time. His own claim of personal autonomy being “internal” was to that extent even more threatening — and yet at the same time more stubbornly “illegible” i.e. unthinkable — to a premodern, monotheistic social order operating with a stunted notion of human subjectivity (Cobb). No less elusive to conventional historiography, envisioned from above, has been the notion of collective and multi-generational authorship and political agency, of the kind that Aponte’s example so vividly demonstrates (Sartorius, Pérez Morales).