

*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.

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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 lurching into similar spasms of white supremacist terror. This fact in itself strongly justifies the Afrocubanist impulse of Prof. Ferrer's historical project.

José Antonio Aponte & His World; writing, painting & making freedom in the African diaspora [aponteconference.wordpress.com](http://aponteconference.wordpress.com)  
Center for Latin American & Caribbean Studies [clacs.as.nyu.edu](http://clacs.as.nyu.edu)  
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Conference report by Victor Manfredi [people.bu.edu/manfredi](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi)  
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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](http://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 Afrocaribbean 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\\_ultima\\_cena](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_ultima_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 Afrocaribbean 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](http://lindarodriguez.org)

"Aponte in the archive; the case for hermeneutics"

Sibylle Fischer [spanish.as.nyu.edu/object/sibyllefischer.html](http://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 [desarrollo.sociologia.uburtado.cl/academicos/jorge-pavez-ojeda](http://desarrollo.sociologia.uburtado.cl/academicos/jorge-pavez-ojeda)

"A tale of two Apontes"

Stephan Palmié [anthropology.uchicago.edu/people/faculty\\_member/stephan\\_palmie](http://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.sc.edu/hist/matt-d-childs](http://artsandsciences.sc.edu/hist/matt-d-childs)

Comment: Jean-Frédéric Schaub [rbc.ehess.fr/index.php?1335](http://rbc.ehess.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 Afrocaribbean modernity & tradition* [www.worldcat.org/search?q=0822328283](http://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, then 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 slighting 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-idéologue 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/conspiracion-de-aponte-1812/oclc/123063327](http://www.worldcat.org/title/conspiracion-de-aponte-1812/oclc/123063327).

### Panel 2 — Books of rebellion, books of freedom

Chair: Greg Grandin [history.fas.nyu.edu/object/greggrandin](http://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](http://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?emplid=70eef9aeb02b97f06deea4974704e8c44421325e](http://www.brandeis.edu/facultyguide/person.html?emplid=70eef9aeb02b97f06deea4974704e8c44421325e)

"Circuitries of the incendiary imagination; making the case for insurrection in the Americas"

Michael Gómez [history.fas.nyu.edu/object/michaeltgomez](http://history.fas.nyu.edu/object/michaeltgomez)

Comment: Steven Hahn [www.history.upenn.edu/people/faculty/steven-hahn](http://www.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* [search.proquest.com/docview/1264392117/abstract](http://search.proquest.com/docview/1264392117/abstract) 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 [sea.as.nyu.edu/object/AwamAmkpa](http://sea.as.nyu.edu/object/AwamAmkpa)

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

Linda Rodriguez [lindarodriguez.org](http://lindarodriguez.org)

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

Agnes Lugo-Ortiz [rl.uchicago.edu/faculty/lugo-ortiz](http://rl.uchicago.edu/faculty/lugo-ortiz)

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

Carmen Ramos [americanart.si.edu/collections/latino](http://americanart.si.edu/collections/latino)

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

Tom Cummins [www.fas.harvard.edu/~las/cumminspage.htm](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~las/cumminspage.htm)

Comment: Edward Sullivan [arthistory.as.nyu.edu/object/EdwardSullivan.html](http://arthistory.as.nyu.edu/object/EdwardSullivan.html)

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* [es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Victor\\_Patricio\\_-\\_Corte\\_de\\_Cana,\\_1874.jpg](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Victor_Patricio_-_Corte_de_Cana,_1874.jpg) (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 [history.fas.nyu.edu/object/adaferrer](http://history.fas.nyu.edu/object/adaferrer)

“Aponte's Legacy in Cuban popular culture”

Ivor Miller [www.afrocubaweb.com/ivormiller/ivormiller.htm](http://www.afrocubaweb.com/ivormiller/ivormiller.htm)

“Politics of memory and the visual culture of rebellion”

Ana Lucía Araujo [www.coas.bowdoin.edu/history/faculty\\_Araujo.html](http://www.coas.bowdoin.edu/history/faculty_Araujo.html)

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

Sinclair Thomson [history.fas.nyu.edu/object/sinclairthomson](http://history.fas.nyu.edu/object/sinclairthomson)

Comment: Ana Dopico [complit.as.nyu.edu/object/anadopico.html](http://complit.as.nyu.edu/object/anadopico.html)

Pinch-hitting for Fernando Martínez Heredia [www.ecured.cu/index.php/Fernando\\_Martínez\\_Heredia](http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/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 *Abacúá* 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 American memory of European sadism, but also the total failure of torture to eradicate unauthorized ideas.

### Panel 5 — Concluding remarks/conversation

Jasmine Nichole Cobb [comm.soc.northwestern.edu/jcobb](http://comm.soc.northwestern.edu/jcobb)

David Sartorius [history.umd.edu/users/das](http://history.umd.edu/users/das)

Moderator: Edgardo Pérez Morales [clacs.as.nyu.edu/object/edgardoperezmorales.html](http://clacs.as.nyu.edu/object/edgardoperezmorales.html)

Aponte was no less revolutionary for being a legalistically ‘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).

[people.bu.edu/manfredi/AponteConferenceReport.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/AponteConferenceReport.pdf) is cross-posted at [www.afrocubaweb.com/aponte-conference-report.html](http://www.afrocubaweb.com/aponte-conference-report.html) ]