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Slavery, Sexuality, and the Politics of Masculinity in Late Nineteenth-Century Cuba
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To write about sexuality in a slave or post-slave society is a decidedly complex project. Yet it is also one that demands rigorous engagement, as sexuality was deeply implicated in the racial and gendered stratification of slave and post-slave societies. The coercive and more ambiguously consensual sexual relationships between white men and mulatta and black women on plantations and in the cities generated a vast and often contradictory web of sexual assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes. Sexuality and discourses about it often proved central to ensuring the perpetuation of slavery but also provided space for the articulation of alternative, dissident, and ambiguously “abolitionist” views.

In this paper, I will examine an 1878 pamphlet on *La mulata; estudio fisiológico, social y jurídico* by Eduardo Ezponda. I will argue that Ezponda’s theorization of the transgressions of white masculinity in slave and post-slave Cuba marks a distinctly late nineteenth-century intervention into a century long debate in “abolitionist” circles. This conversation turned around the culpability of white male sexuality in the slave system. It was particularly evident in the novelistic works of several canonical abolitionist figures, including Anselmo Suárez y Romero’s *Francisco, El Ingenio o las Delicias del Campo* (1840), Cirilo’s Villaverde’s *Cecilia Valdés* (written between 1839 and 1882), and Antonio Zambrana’s *El negro Francisco* (1861). Ezponda’s text manifests the traces of this novelistic—and perhaps disingenuous—critique of white male sexuality, but also displays a distinct confusion about the question of white male culpability for social/sexual degradation. This confusion is rooted in his ultimately conflicted interpretation of the mulatta, whom he claims as both the victim of white male desire and,

paradoxically, the essentially sexual seductress of white men.

The figure of the mulatta has figured centrally in scholarship about nineteenth- and twentieth-century Cuba. This historiographical focus parallels a veritable historical fetish of the mulatta as it developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Madeline Cámara and Vera Kutzinski have explored the politics of mulatta sexuality in the nineteenth century, particularly how the mulatta as a type was increasingly understood as an agent of contagion, carried out through miscegenation and broader cultural contact between women of color and white society.¹ As Luz Mena notes, the 1830s see the first extended treatments of the mulatta woman as a social/racial/gendered type constructed as lazy, vain, and, most importantly, sensual.²

By the late nineteenth century, the typical perspective on the mulatta, as inflected by consolidated “scientific” ideas about the bodily/racial origin of her character, had cohered. Ezponda’s pamphlet on *La mulata* is perhaps emblematic of this tradition.³ An examination of Ezponda’s text can demonstrate how discourses about the mulatta’s body, sexuality, and social position had, by 1878, been thoroughly confused and combined. For Ezponda, the mulatta woman retains the “lasciviousness” of the black woman, “refining

¹ Madeline Cámara Betancourt, “Between Myth and Stereotype: The Image of the Mulatta in Cuban Culture in Nineteenth Century, a Truncated Symbol of Nationality,” *Cuba, the Elusive Nation: Interpretations of National Identity*, Ed. Damián J. Fernández and Madeline Cámara Betancourt (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), 100-116.

Vera M. Kutzinski, *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993). Eileen Suárez Findlay provides a complementary analysis on the interaction of race and sexuality in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Puerto Rico.

Eileen J. Suárez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999).

² Mena.

³ Eduardo Ezponda, *La mulata; estudio fisiológico, social, y jurídico* (Madrid: Imprenta de Fortanet, 1878). All translations of Ezponda are my own.

it.”⁴ He describes her physical appearance (which, in the logic of scientific racism, also speaks her character) thus: “In the mulatta, muscular rigidity disappears. Everything in her is soft,...malleable,...delicate. She is a reed who shakes. She is a woman of silk.”⁵ Though her face is not beautiful according to classic Greco-Roman aesthetics, her body more than makes up for what her face lacks in its “voluptuous grace.”⁶ In a common trope, the mulatta’s body is linked to sensual movement and dance: “Her whole body dances, because the electricity of a moving pleasure makes her entire organism tremble; but she does not shake violently. She rocks with the easy languidness and softness that characterize delirium.”⁷

Ezponda’s language here and elsewhere always falls into sexual metaphors and imagery. For him, the mulatta is irredeemably sensual, and her charms “inflame the desires and drag the volition of men.”⁸ Despite his sympathies for the mulatta, Ezponda suggests that her essential “libidinousness” always prompts immorality and sin. There is thus a great deal of anxiety in his text about the sensuality of the mulatta and its moral consequences.

Ezponda’s text voices the consolidated mulatta “type,” understood to possess a pathological sexuality threatening Cuban society with moral contagion. The first section of Ezponda’s pamphlet insists on the mulatta’s sensuality as it obscures the volition of the white man who lusts for her. Yet Ezponda simultaneously and contradictorily bemoans the social status of the mulatta. As he expresses ambivalence about her seemingly

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Ibid., 15.

An 1881 volume of *Tipos y costumbres de la isla de Cuba: colección de artículos* makes this link quite explicit in its section on the “mulatta type,” which defines her by her relationship to the rumba.

⁸ Ibid., 11.

predatory sexuality, he notes the instability of her marriages to mulatto men and the tendency of men of all races to seduce her and leave her pregnant and impoverished:

It is unusual that concubinage lasts for a long time. The most common thing is that, housed in a room of a tenement, eating and dressing miserably, abandoned by the young man who seduced her and submerged in the filthy mud of concupiscence, she is buried poor and young after having danced for an entire night, because up to the last instant our mulatta relishes her dance.⁹

This passage captures the contradictions at the heart of the late nineteenth-century approach to white male and black female sexuality. Even as Ezponda critiques the unconscionable practices of white (and mulatto) men who “desire, buy, possess, but do not love” the mulatta woman, he insists on her essential sensuality, embodied by her compulsive need to display her body in dance.¹⁰ At one moment, she is the “flower we tear from its stem, anxious to smell its aroma, and then [throw] to the ground stripped of its petals”; but soon thereafter, her love is the “orgy of the senses” which allows her to replace a lover within “twenty-four hours,” as she never truly involved her heart in her relationships.¹¹

The second part of Ezponda’s text seeks to understand how black and mulatta women became so sexually corrupt(ed). He questions why “they live and die without knowing human dignity...submerged in materialism...[and giving] free rein to ludic instincts.”¹² He places the blame firmly on white (male) society, which “stamps her” with

⁹ Ezponda, 19-20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

the “indelible and characteristic mark she bears.”¹³ Ezponda highlights the cyclical character these relations take on, as illegitimate mulatta daughters produce more illegitimate mulatta daughters through their relations with white men. The “perversion,” originating in white men, soon spreads to white women as well: “In all classes we see the unequivocal signs of immorality. The contagion diffuses itself and reigns in the highest social circles; in the middle and the inferior classes it is a truly lamentable epidemic.”¹⁴ Specifically, it leads to the pursuit of material gain in all marriages. Ezponda is quite attentive to the hypocrisy behind the sexual exploitation of the mulatta: “This same unhappy creature whom we insult and to whom it is not legal to unite ourselves with a priestly blessing in the temple, has her irresistible charms, moves our inclination and we elevate her towards us *outside the law*.”¹⁵ For Ezponda, the fact that those who defame her desire her in secret renders many Cuban men liars. He even argues for a connection between the white male sexual exploitation of the mulatta’s beauty and the general exploitation of her labor. He is critical of the white absentee paternalism that deprives mulatta daughters of a potentially positive moral influence.

Given the vast social corruption created by slavery and its concomitant legal and social apparatus, Ezponda argues that legalistic responses to the social crisis presented by the mulatta are not sufficient. Instead, the last section of the essay is a cry for moral uplift, for which he believes white (male) society ought to consider itself responsible. In this logic, mulattos and blacks, particularly women, require education and virtue to rise out of their social position. Ezponda seems to suggest that this is for the benefit of black and mulatto men and women but quickly turns to the dangers posed to white society if it

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

does not effect a change in its interactions with women of color. He goes to the heart of that most sacred of social institutions, the family:

That mulatta who rocks our children in the crib, who nourishes them with her milk, who accompanies them in their children's games, who takes them by the hand to school, . . . who tutors them at the nubile age, who is made confidante of men's intimate secrets and who caresses and fondles them, influences more or less essentially the *morality of our offspring*.¹⁶

There is an embedded angst about the contagion mulatta women represent to the innocent boys whom they nurse and then sleep with, with permanent consequences for their morality. Worse, this morally ambiguous figure is also entrusted with the protection of white female honor.

Yet, for Ezponda, this anxiety is inseparable from the deep sense of guilt and obligation which he feels elite white men owe to women of color. It thus becomes the white man's burden to "educate [women of color], instructing them in the duties related to God and humanity."¹⁷ Such education will, he presumes, "[free] her from vice, at the shadow of religion and morality, and free us [white society] from the poison with which contact with her inoculates us."¹⁸ It will prevent women of color from becoming prostitutes, and white families from being contaminated by illicit sexuality; it will liberate all from the "lethal cancer" represented by the mulatta.¹⁹

Thus, Ezponda's text presents a paradoxical combination of anxiety about the dangers of mulatta sexuality and condemnation of the role of white men in partaking of it.

¹⁶ Ibid., my italics.

¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹⁹ Ibid., 48.

It is a critique of predatory white male sexuality and a fairly forceful call for its amelioration, which nonetheless manifests an embedded uncertainty about causality—which came first, predatory mulatta sexuality or the white male exploitation of it? Yet, by resorting to a racial and gender-based paternalist discourse about “uplift,” Ezponda ultimately insists on the sexual victimization of women of color at the hands of white men (an attitude that largely obscures the complex socio-economic reasons for which women of color might seek out such relationships) and the need for white men to change their ways. Though Ezponda cannot quite move beyond his uneasiness about the inherent perils of mulatta sexuality, he is able to offer a concrete strategy for their “improvement,” only by attaching blame to the white men who have exploited the mulatta woman.

In the preceding section, I have examined Ezponda’s pamphlet to understand how the consolidation of the idea of the mulatta as an instrument of social/sexual contagion obscured the question of white male sexual volition. Writers like Ezponda attempted to reconcile their presumptions of mulatta victimization with a newly cohesive belief in the essentially predatory sexuality of the mulatta. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, mulattas had skillfully negotiated the treacherous waters of the gendered, racial, and sexual ideologies that attempted to circumscribe their possibilities and mobility. Acquiring property, participating in community and religious organizations, marrying white men as a means of bettering their social position, and taking up the pen were just a few of their activities that undermined the elite white male conception of the mulatta.

Indeed, a paper on the theorization of white male sexuality in white male elite discourse inevitably turns around the question of the non-white female body. In response, it seems appropriate to attempt to locate that body outside of white male elite discourse.

Such a project would allow us to understand subversive or even conformist modes of negotiation and self-fashioning taken up by non-white women in response to their social, economic, political, and sexual positioning in nineteenth-century Cuba. Indeed, to counter the inevitably ambivalent depictions offered up by men like Ezponda, we must turn to the ways in which such conceptions were constantly revised, challenged, and exploded by those women on whose behalf Ezponda and others presumed to speak.