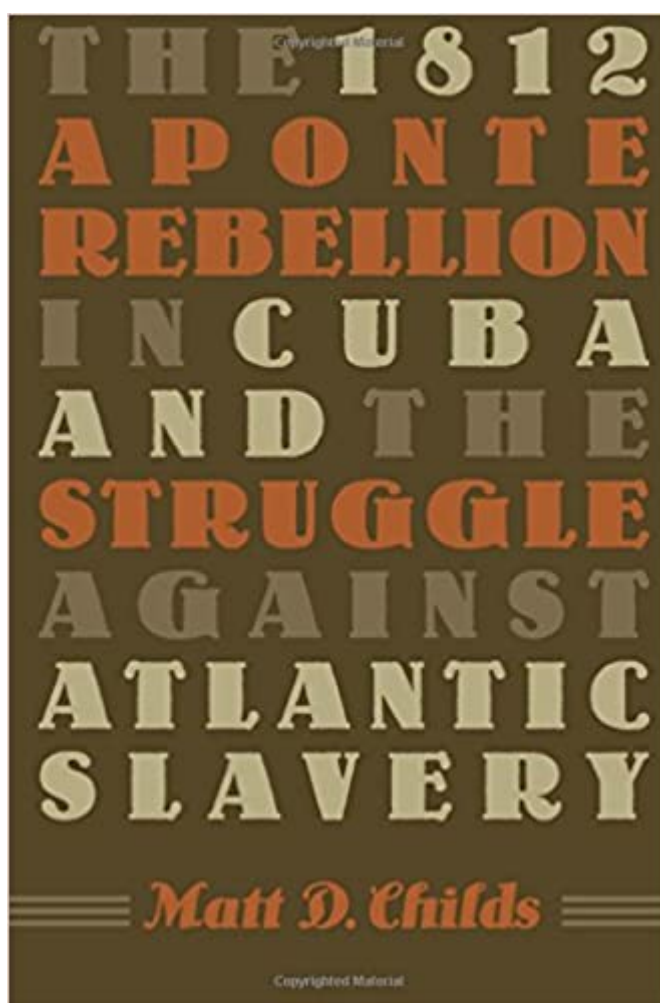


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The 1812 Aponte Rebellion In Cuba And The Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery (Envisioning Cuba)



Synopsis

In 1812 a series of revolts known collectively as the Aponte Rebellion erupted across the island of Cuba, comprising one of the largest and most important slave insurrections in Caribbean history. Matt Childs provides the first in-depth analysis of the rebellion, situating it in local, colonial, imperial, and Atlantic World contexts. Childs explains how slaves and free people of color responded to the nineteenth-century "sugar boom" in the Spanish colony by planning a rebellion against racial slavery and plantation agriculture. Striking alliances among free people of color and slaves, blacks and mulattoes, Africans and Creoles, and rural and urban populations, rebels were prompted to act by a widespread belief in rumors promising that emancipation was near. Taking further inspiration from the 1791 Haitian Revolution, rebels sought to destroy slavery in Cuba and perhaps even end Spanish rule. By comparing his findings to studies of slave insurrections in Brazil, Haiti, the British Caribbean, and the United States, Childs places the rebellion within the wider story of Atlantic World revolution and political change. The book also features a biographical table, constructed by Childs, of the more than 350 people investigated for their involvement in the rebellion, 34 of whom were executed.

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Customer Reviews

The first in-depth analysis of insurrections in Cuba in 1812.--Black Issues Book ReviewMatt Childs . . . provides a new interpretation of classic data, making his one of the most important works in Cuban Studies published in the last fifteen years.--The AmericasChilds should be praised for

redirecting the 'Aponte Rebellion' into the general literature of African diaspora studies.--Colonial Latin American Historical ReviewA careful and multi-layered account of the uprisings and the people who planned and carried them out. . . . Childs brilliantly renders this historical complexity.--The International History Review[Contains] important appendix of demographic data on the 381 individuals arrested for participation in the rebellion.--CHOICEA masterfully researched book. . . . Insights . . . about the structures and institutions that slaves and free people mobilized represent one of the book's greatest contributions.--H-Net ReviewsA welcome contribution to the debates about slave rebellion and also about the nature of the societies of both the slave-owning Caribbean islands and of the free people of colour. Its detail is always fascinating and telling, and its argument sound and much needed.--Journal of Latin American StudiesFramed in an engaging narrative . . . a welcome contribution to the study of African slavery in the New World.--Estudios Interdisciplinarios de America Latina y el CaribeA groundbreaking study that is impressively researched and captivatingly written.--Slavery and AbolitionAn impressive array of archival sources. . . . Provides an engaging model.--Hispanic American Historical ReviewA passionately written book that will prove to be a valuable contribution to slavery studies, as well as to the historiography of Cuba and the African diaspora.--The Journal of Interdisciplinary History

By situating this first-ever study of the Cuban slave revolts of 1812 within the larger context of the Spanish empire, Childs reveals the Aponte rebels to be realists who acted upon news of abolitionist activities and black resistance elsewhere in the Atlantic world. A truly outstanding work that combines prodigious research with passion and imagination.--Douglas R. Egerton, author of Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802This is a masterful book, rigorously researched and powerfully written. Lively and dynamic in its treatment of a fascinating event, it will be useful for scholars and students of Cuba, the Caribbean, the African Diaspora, and comparative slavery.--Ada Ferrer, New York University

Matt D. Childs sets the Aponte Rebellion within the overlapping contexts of Cuban, Caribbean, Latin American, and Atlantic history. Writing about the impact of the Seven Years' War and British occupation, Childs states, "Although British control of Cuba lasted less than a year, perhaps as many as 4,000 African slaves arrived on the island in that period, comprising an amazing 8 to 10 percent of all slaves imported over the previous 250 years. This demographic shift led to increased conflicts between the Spanish Creole population and the African population. Even more significant than the 7 Years' War were

fears about the Haitian Revolution. Childs writes, "The most obvious defense against slaves emulating the example of the Haitian Revolution involved preventing the transmission of any news about the successful revolt, though rumors and stories still reached Cuba from French refugees. Finally, conflicts amongst groups in Africa resulted in the sale of captured enemies into slavery, many of whom later played a role in the 1739 Stono Revolt in South Carolina, the Haitian Revolution, and the 1835 Malafrevolt in Brazil." According to Childs, "Following the Seven Years' War, the European colonial powers began to centralize their power by tightening the relations between the metropolis and colonies. Spain was no exception. Unlike the new regulations throughout the Spanish Empire that turned public opinion against the Spanish authorities, Cuba emerged ever more firmly linked to Madrid. The Bourbon Reforms linked Cuban Creoles with Spanish officials and distanced both from those of African descent. As power was concentrated among the Spanish and Creole population, they were able to quash the first stirrings of rebellion amongst African slaves. Even under the Bourbon Reforms, Cuban slaves found increased difficulty in defending their extremely limited rights. The option to purchase one's freedom was primarily available to slaves in urban areas, who had the opportunity to earn some of their own money. The freedom supposedly offered to those who fought in the 7 Years' War was denied if they delayed claiming it. Finally, Cuban slaveholders justified their ownership and treatment of slaves based on the historical connectedness of Caribbean nations to the slave trade. Childs writes, "The slave trade represented the great unifying force of the Caribbean and the early precursor to the modern transnational corporation. In such a system, slavery was just a way of life. The cabildos de nación were social organizations that reflected the voluntary grouping by common ethnic identity of the numerous African nations forcibly imported to Cuba. In Cuban society, these associations functioned as representative bodies for African nations by providing political and administrative services. Slave-owners tolerated these organizations as they felt the cabildos would provide slaves and free people of color with a limited sense of autonomy, [so] they would not rise in rebellion. Additionally, Childs writes, "For a colony rigidly divided between white European masters and black African slaves, cabildos stood in contrast to the racial slave-free paradigm that defined the circles of inclusion and exclusion for most of Cuban society. Though the cabildos were based on ethnicities, they also recognized the disparity between a white-dominated society and the place of free and enslaved Africans. Childs writes, "The Aponte Rebellion revealed the flexibility and innovative nature of African identity in Cuba.

Africans in Cuba could define themselves by simultaneously emphasizing both their Old World ethnicity and New World racial identity. Finally, the cabildos de nacidos played a crucial role in organizing the insurrection in Puerto Príncipe since they could take advantage of religious holidays for the planning and execution of the rebellion. In answer to a call from anthropologist Sidney Mintz, Childs seeks to move away from broad structural and ideological explanations toward a more detailed understanding of the historical specificity and context of a revolt as a way of comprehending the immediate concerns, aspirations, and agency of the rebels. Childs certainly provides plenty of examples of individual rebels' motivations, as he begins each chapter with an account of the arrest, interrogation, and execution of a different member of Aponte's cohort, but even these individual motivations exist within the larger cultural framework of Cuban slavery and fears of slave revolts following the Haitian Revolution. The roles of cabildos de nacidos in creating a space for free and enslaved Africans and descendants of Africans to maintain elements of their own culture and create a unique Creole culture were the most impressive examples of individual agency, especially as it was these groups that aided in fomenting several rebellions, but the broader picture still focuses on trends common throughout the Atlantic World, with Cuba sharing similarities at times to Brazil or Jamaica depending on the incident. The most gruesome state-sponsored episodes of violence were the executions of Aponte and the other rebels, at times using the garrote, and displaying the heads of the condemned. This demonstrates the fears of the Spanish and Cuban Creole populations following the Haitian Revolution that they employed such punishments and desecrations to send a message to other would-be rebels. Childs' crucial question refers to the involvement of José Antonio Aponte. Childs cautions that resting the blame with Aponte may represent an oversimplification, as the need to discover the leaders and administer swift punishments, and the exigencies created by the transition in colonial administrations, all made finding the authors of the movement an immediate necessity. Despite this, those who referenced Aponte in their own confessions were surely signing their own death warrants. While Aponte may have taken responsibility in his last confession, the final statement remains absent from the extant documentation. Childs suggests that all of Cuba functioned as an integrated political unit, so while Aponte may not have directly led other uprisings and conspiracies, none of these events occurred in a vacuum and they surely shared a great deal in the way of ideology and methods.

Very informative and accurate about slavery in the New World .

The Haitian Revolution remains a watershed in Atlantic world history. The real or imagined specter of black slaves and nonwhites slaying their masters devastated the white psyche. More than simply fear, the idea of a "terrified consciousness" nearly consumed entire classes of owners on all sides of the Atlantic. In contrast, for free and slave alike, Haiti inspired and emboldened men and women to act. But the image of Haiti was never static. In places like nearby Cuba, as Matt Childs demonstrates, the Black Republic had multiple meanings. For Childs, Associate Professor of History at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Haiti's impact is evident in the so-called Aponte Rebellion in Cuba (1812). A somewhat chaotic and seemingly disjointed series of plantation revolts, only later did they appear as parts to a greater whole. Taking literal and symbolic meaning from the Haitian Revolution, leaders like Jose Antonio Aponte used words and images to convey both the significance and possibility of black freedom in Cuba. Socially and politically adept at surviving the all-encompassing plantation hierarchy, free and slave used those skills (what one might broadly call an "Atlantic consciousness") to overcome obstacles in geographical distance, language, class, and race (ethnicity). Despite what Crown officials believed, after the collapse of black militia importance in Cuban society, free and slave nonwhites organized a rather remarkable series of revolts aimed at destroying slavery. A revised, pared-down version of Childs's dissertation, 'The 1812 Aponte Rebellion and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery' weaves together several strands of historical methodology. In linking the Aponte Rebellion to events in Haiti, Childs rightly sets Cuba within the greater Atlantic, Trans-Caribbean, and Latin American contexts. Additionally, showing the rather lengthy and complicated relationship to slave revolts in the American South, Childs's account adds to a growing and important body of work that highlights the transnational, multiethnic composition of the slave and free-colored mentalities under chattel slavery. More importantly, following the example of recent trends in African Diaspora historiography, the author carefully places Africa itself at the root of the complicated and flexible ethnicity in early nineteenth-century Cuba. In order to reconstruct the rebellion and its aftermath, Childs scoured archives on some four continents. Though not unproblematic, the author relies heavily on the extensive interviews with accused participants and trial testimony of those concerned. Some critics have previously dismissed similar proceedings out of hand. Philip D. Morgan, for one, recently devoted a lengthy diatribe to giving such sources any considerable weight. "It is chilling," he writes, "to read how the court intimidated slave witnesses, silenced the majority who claimed innocence, and then produced a so-called official report of its proceedings, which, at best, airbrushed the truth and, at worst, blatantly lied about what had transpired. Most depressing and humbling is the realization that so many historians have simply

taken the court's propaganda and/or lies at face value and built whole books on questionable, coerced testimony." Childs admits that the surviving evidence is fragmentary and limited by government haste and participant coercion. Nevertheless, the author clearly supports his arguments and rarely overextends his claims. One minor quibble hampers the work's later chapter. A rather lackluster and ultimately inconclusive section on the issue of one or multiple revolts that comprised the Aponte Rebellion warrants a caveat to this otherwise fantastic work. Promising to end the historiographical sparring over the issue, Childs instead cannot conclusively argue for or against either idea. Aponte's own book of symbols, drawings, and stories has yet to be uncovered by historians. In all likelihood, authorities destroyed it lest it fall into the wrong hands for a second time. As something akin to the "Bible of Revolution," Aponte's crucial text could provide historians with a remarkable window into the transnational and culturally hybrid elements of the African Diaspora in the early nineteenth-century Caribbean. Filled with poignant symbols of the Afro-Atlantic world and its factual and fabled heroes, the work perfectly illustrates the Diaspora itself. Taken from their lands and kin, Africans adapted and constructed identities from a variety of influences. Distinguished by their multiple, overlapping social contexts, Africans in the Atlantic world remained at once connected to and divorced from their native land. Clearly written, impressively synthesized, stellar archival work, Childs's work is highly recommended.

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