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Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo. *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. viii + 291 pp. $59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-3878-5.

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Black Cosmopolitanism takes as its subject what author Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo calls the "imagining, representation, enactment and articulation of Black community" in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world (p. 53). Historians should be forewarned: the book, as a piece of literary scholarship, approaches this task through careful exegesis of texts rather than an examination of social life or politics. Those uncomfortable with Derridean terms like "always already" may want to use caution. Still, Nwankwo's efforts to bring together well-known texts from different literary traditions--North American and Anglo-West Indian slave narratives, Cuban poetry, and abolitionist propaganda--should help historians of the Revolutionary Black Atlantic grapple with the tensions between racial and national consciousness in a comparative context.

Nwankwo's central preoccupation, addressed through close readings of the work of Cuban poets Plácido and Juan Francisco Marzano (both accused of participation in the 1844 Cuban slave conspiracy, *La Escalera*) and Black abolitionists Martin Delany (who incorporated the figure of Plácido into a novel), Frederick Douglass, and Mary Prince, is the way these figures shaped their texts around the tensions of transnational racial identity and desire for national belonging. Though she works through a familiar corpus, the book's originality comes in its ability to consider simultaneously works from the North American, Anglo-West Indian, and Hispanic traditions of writing by peoples of color.

Nwankwo actually begins with a close textual analysis of *La Sentencia*, the official Cuban government document condemning the island's 1844 antislavery conspirators to death, a story familiar to those who have read Robert Paquette's *Sugar is Made with Blood* (1988). In the government's eyes, the collaboration of free blacks (*morenos*), free mixed race people (*pardos*), and African slaves discovered in the conspiracy represented a particularly grave threat, as it potentially united all peoples of African descent across lines of status with the aim of "the extermination and extinction of all whites" (p. 36). At the same time, *La Sentencia* suggested that the impetus for this solidarity came from the relatively privileged free *pardo*

class (represented by the martyred Plácido), and spread to the brutish black masses. Finally, the Cuban government negated all sense of black agency when it concluded that the conspiracy ultimately emanated from British abolitionist and English Consul to Cuba, David Turnbull. Thus Nwankwo argues that the language of this document both constructs a conspiracy that united people of color across national, class, and racial lines even while it relegated them to "pawns in this European game" (p. 40).

At the same time, in exploring what she calls the "view from above" (p. 29), Nwankwo examines the counter-discourse about Plácido and his role in the conspiracy established by international abolitionists. In this case, of course, antislavery forces in the United States and Britain rendered the "Cuban of color into an international abolitionist symbol" (p. 43) and martyr, rather than a mere tool and instigator. Nevertheless, Nwankwo argues, in their persistent mis-identification of Plácido as a former slave and their repeated insistence on his identity as member of the "African race" (p. 44), the abolitionist discourse also rested "on a valuation of racial identity and social status and a devaluation of national identity" (p. 46). Thus both proslavery white Cubans and their abolitionist antagonists insisted on identifying Plácido in racial terms first, even if the former were responding to the specter of the Haitian Revolution while the latter were imbued with racial romanticism.

Having established this common racial essentialism as practiced "from above," Nwankwo proceeds to consider how peoples of African descent themselves cast the figure of Plácido in their narratives. For white abolitionists, Plácido represented a Cuban gentleman and poet, a "civilized" and dignified African, able to lead his race. But their black abolitionist counterparts in the United States, Nwankwo claims, saw in the poet and martyr a richer significance still: "the humanity of people of African descent" (p. 50). It does seem here, however, that perhaps this splits hairs to a fine degree--how does this, in fact, really differ from the view of white abolitionists? She focuses in particular on the portrayal of Plácido in Martin Delany's serialized abolitionist novel depicting a "pan-American version of the Haitian revolution" (p. 55), ***Blake; or the Huts of America***(1859-1862). In Delany's hands, the character of Plácido transcends his ambiguous racial identity to become "one who embraces a broad notion of Black community that crosses boundaries of color, class and nation" (p. 57).

In the second part of her book, Nwankwo shifts from examining the textual "construction of racial identity" (p. 80) around the protean figure of Plácido to addressing Plácido's own racial self-construction through his poetry. If both abolitionists and slaveowners insisted on the predominance of the poet's racial identity over his national one, Plácido himself did a far better job of expressing his national affinities as a Cuban patriot in conjunction with his cosmopolitan appeals to a pan-Atlantic black identity, Nwankwo argues. Her exegesis of his Romantic poetry about love, the Cuban landscape, and the desire for national liberation from Spanish colonialism suggests that "his identity ... was composed of both national and racial affinities" (p. 107). Of course, this should come as little surprise, for as Nwankwo herself remarks, in contrast to the United States, in Plácido's Cuba the battles for independence and abolition, for national and racial liberation, took place at the same time, as the work of Ada Ferrer and Rebecca Scott has shown.[1]

None of this seems especially original, and it is somewhat unclear how a renewed emphasis on Plácido's nationalism (embraced, in any case, by revolutionaries in both the ages of Martí and Castro) can help conceptualize the idea of "black cosmopolitanism." Still, when Nwankwo then moves to juxtapose this with Frederick Douglass's personal negotiation of racial and national identities, she breaks some new ground. As she notes, Pláci-

do and Douglass, as exemplars of very different literary traditions, are usually studied in very different academic spheres, and she brings them together creatively. As is well known, throughout a half-century of political engagement, Douglass demanded that the United States find a way to fully accept African Americans as citizens, and opposed any compromises that might hinder that goal, whether it be political disengagement of his fellow abolitionists, disunion, emigration, or segregation. Nwankwo, however, portrays Douglass's ceaseless affirmation of national identity as in profound tension with his efforts to identify with African Americans and their struggles elsewhere in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

Nwankwo sees hints of Douglass's ambivalence about transnational pan-African identity in his domestic relations with the problem of African-derived identity as well, in a manner that appears to parallel the tensions present in Plácido's relationships to the racial and the national in the Cuban context. For example, she points to his 1845 *Narrative* as a classic expression of bourgeois individualism, even while she recognizes Douglass's efforts to speak on behalf of a larger black collectivity. When it comes to an Atlantic black community beyond the United States, Nwankwo speculates, Douglass "chooses to leave out [of the *Narrative*] his knowledge of the international scene to advance his cause" of abolishing slavery (p. 130). In particular, she argues, even though Douglass's own escape from bondage occurred contemporaneously with West Indian emancipation, he fails to mention any connection in his 1845 text, perhaps (she speculates) because this would have raised anxieties among those in the United States not already committed to the abolitionist cause. It was not until the third installment of his autobiography, published in 1881, that Douglass explicitly identified African Americans with West Indian emancipation, Nwankwo claims. Whether or not this particular account of implicit silencing is convincing, her larger point is that the conventions of the slave narrative required the elevation of individual North American identity at the expense of a broader black Atlantic one--achieved, she says, by a "textual distancing from the other Black Americas" (p. 133).

Nwankwo also examines Douglass's international dilemma about racial and national identification during his two-year tenure as U.S. Consul in Haiti (1889-91) at a moment of intense annexationist agitation. Douglass, she claims, "found himself caught between the imperialist desires of his country and his desire to help maintain the independence" of countries with large numbers of his "racial kin" (p. 139). On the other hand, Nwankwo acknowledges that Douglass's apparent reticence to articulate transnational notions of black collectivity is confined to his autobiographical writings. By way of contrast, in a speech at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 cited by Nwankwo, Douglass unabashedly defended Haitian independence, and boldly reminded his audience that Haiti "has grandly served the cause of universal human liberty.... The freedom that has come to the colored race the world over is largely due to the brave stand taken by the black sons of Haiti ninety years ago." The Haitian revolutionaries, Douglass concluded, "were linked and interlinked with their race, and striking for their freedom they struck for the freedom of every black man in the world."[2] No less a black cosmopolitan than C. L. R. James could say little more forty-five years later. Unfortunately, Nwankwo does not merely conclude that it was the genre of autobiography that constrained Douglass's transnational identification with other blacks, as one might expect. Instead, she argues less convincingly that for Douglass "the connection to the nation ... overwhelms all other linkages" (p. 152). This seems to me an inadequate and limited reading of Douglass's Haiti speech, a piece of oratory given at the height of Jim Crow that remains one of the profoundest appreciations of the Haitian Revolution's contribution to the African Diaspora's collective struggle for liberty.

Although both "Plácido and Douglass would need to downplay their link to racial community in order to strengthen their case for national identity" (p. 84), Nwankwo concludes her book with accounts of two literary figures who, she argues, defined themselves as racial subjects rather than national ones, though in opposite ways. Mary Prince, a West Indian slave who traveled to England with her master, entered into the debate about abolition with her 1831 narrative, ***The History of Mary Prince***. In contrast to that of Douglass, Prince's abolitionist tract exhibited what Nwankwo calls "cosmopolitan consciousness" (p. 162). Her examples of this, however, drawn from Prince's "autoethnographic" discussions of West Indian slave life (p. 168), do not differ appreciably from Douglass's own evocations of slave or black community, and the sharp distinction she makes between the two narratives appears overdrawn. Furthermore, Nwankwo's insistence that Prince's subjectivity uniquely creates a "cosmopolitan slave cartography" by her constant shifting about in geographic space (p. 171) could just as easily be said of Douglass. Many of the passages she cites to demonstrate Prince's engagement with the Atlantic world have distinct parallels in Douglass's ***Narrative***.

The final pages of ***Black Cosmopolitans*** consider the autobiography of the Cuban slave poet, Juan Francisco Manzano, often mistaken in abolitionist texts for Plácido. Manzano, author of the only known Hispanic slave narrative, took great pains to distance himself from identification with ***los negros*** and portray himself as an exceptional individual able to rise above the circumstances of slavery and race. For Manzano, the recognition of his humanity entailed a flight from blackness, and he thus serves as an effective contrast to Mary Prince and a bookend for Nwankwo's narrative.

Reading this book reminded me of the long distance we have to go before writing a truly interdisciplinary history of the Black Atlantic. Though they share concerns--racial consciousness, national identity, and the transnational struggle for human liberty that shook so much of the Atlantic World in the age of revolution and emancipation--historians and literary scholars in this field still do not speak the same language, even while they are able to rely on one another's work. At its best, ***Black Cosmopolitanism*** suggests we have much to share with one another. But ultimately historians more inclined to look for larger patterns or connections may find Nwankwo's technique of deducing large symbolic meaning from small differentiations in texts not entirely satisfactory.

Notes

[1]. Ada Ferrer, ***Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868 ?" 1898*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Rebecca Scott, ***Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[2]. Frederick Douglass, "Haiti and the Haitian People: An Address Delivered in Chicago, Illinois on 2 January 1893," in ***The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews***, ed. John Blassingame, vol. 5 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

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