H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew D. Childs. *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 320 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5772-4.

Reviewed by David Sartorius (University of Maryland)
Published on H-Atlantic (January, 2010)
Commissioned by Jordana Dym

Reframing Rebellions

In her study of the 1823 slave rebellion in Demerara, Emilia Viotti da Costa explained that crises such as slave revolts "bring to light the conflicts that in daily life are buried beneath the rules and routines of social protocol" and make public, "for a moment at least, the slaves' secret life."[1] And so historians writing about slave revolts have taken advantage of the documentation generated when the actions of slaves became too significant to ignore. Taken together, the many fine-grained studies have revealed slaves to be active participants in pivotal events whose effects were felt on all sides of the Atlantic. Yet at the same time, other historians of slavery have developed sophisticated approaches to making the slaves' secret life not so secret: studies of daily life abound to the extent that revolts have become a less rare and privileged vantage point from which to view the actions of slaves. Merely identifying the presence of slaves in historical documents and events no longer packs the intellectual punch that it used to.[2] When asserting the agency of slaves has become a point of departure more than an analytical yield in its own right, what can we hope to learn from slave revolts once we move beyond a recuperative project grounded in a politics of visibility?

By carefully relating the *longue* and *courte durée* of the development of Cuban slave society, Matthew Childs offers provocative answers to this question in his analysis of the series of rebellions in 1812 linked to José Antonio Aponte, a captain in Havana's free black militia. The Aponte Rebellion presents Childs with an opportunity to explore the political imaginaries of Cuban slaves and free people of African descent in an era indelibly marked by the Haitian Revolution. As a case study, the Aponte Rebellion presents several disadvantages from the outset. The coherence of the event itself–that is, the extent to which the various slave rebellions across the island were related to each other or to Aponte–has never been clarified, and the most immediate source, a book of drawings by Aponte cited and described by investigating authorities, is nowhere to be found. The violence that bolstered the slave system, Childs notes, provides "every reason to believe judicial officials employed torture as a coercive technique in the questioning of the rebels" (p. 7), thus compromising the trial testimony as a source of unmediated slave "voices."

These limitations might lead a historian along the well-worn path of arranging possibly related episodes into a single event in which slaves were the lead actors. Childs takes a different approach. Instead of viewing the trial testimony as irretrievably biased, he relocates the question of agency to the production of documents, arguing that "slaves and free people realized that they played an active role in creating the trial record" and understands the sources to be as strategically shaped by the suspects as they were by the interrogating authorities (p. 8). As for the missing book of drawings and the relationship between the uprisings, Childs undertakes an exhaustive review of Cuba's regional and local archives to look for concrete connections and, along the way, to decenter Aponte's book as the single most important source. Rich documentation from and about Holguín, Bayamo, Puerto Príncipe (known today as Camagüey), and Havana give the most thorough information to date about how the rebellions unfolded in 1812. If Childs concludes that it remains unclear ("and perhaps unknowable with any degree of certainty," p. 188) whether the revolts and conspiracies represented a coordinated movement or separate rebellions, it is not because he cut any corners in searching. This is a masterfully researched book. And perhaps more revealing than whether or not the rebellions were coordinated is the insight that they could have been: planning across a five-hundred-mile stretch of the island was entirely possible, Childs claims, because of the long-distance communication networks and mobility of slaves and free people of color that defied authori-

ties' attempts to control travel and information (p. 149). Insights like these about the structures and institutions that slaves and free people mobilized represent one of the book's greatest contributions.

In a similar vein, Childs's descriptions of the militias for free people of color and the *cabildos de nación* (the fraternal societies often organized around African ethnic affiliations) offer more than a portrait of daily life for Cuba's African-descended population. Sanctioned by the Spanish government, these organizations enabled the various rebellions, as *cabildo* houses provided meeting spaces and "Aponte and others decided to turn their military training in the service of Spanish colonialism into a weapon to destroy it" (p. 187). They also furnished some of the raw materials for the rebels to fashion political ideologies. Rumors of British, Spanish, Haitian, and Kongolese monarchs emancipating slaves took root in the royalism cultivated within militias and *cabildo*s and appeared in trial testimonies as prominent justifications for violence after freedom was denied. The rules and routines of social protocol, as Viotti da Costa called them, led to unexpected outcomes: paternalistic ideologies failed slave owners and colonial authorities when "the ideology of a benevolent king interceding on behalf of loyal subjects" inspired what Childs calls "rebellious royalism" (pp. 171, 169).

The significance of the Haitian Revolution, and the Age of Revolutions more broadly, may seem understated here, but Childs acknowledges their role in ways that confound the distinction Eugene Genovese made between traditional-restorationist slave rebellions and the bourgeois-democratic ideologies that, he claimed, radicalized slave resistance. Childs's careful delineation of the specific migrations from Hispaniola in the years leading up to the Aponte Rebellion adds to the exciting recent scholarship that seeks to understand the circulation of the "bourgeois-democratic" ideas that scholars such as Genovese associate with the Haitian Revolution. Many of the slaves and free people who rebelled in 1812 sought dramatic social transformation, but the radical example of the Haitian Revolution was not necessarily their only or most significant inspiration. They might have perceived a figure like Henri Christophe through royalist political idioms that could be considered as "traditional" as the institutions they used to organize the rebellions. And those institutions were themselves transformed in the early nineteenth century by a growing slave population that served to strengthen African ethnic ties in *cabildo*s and weaken the privileges of militia service. Both daily life and slave revolts become dynamic forces in Childs's analysis of the Aponte Rebellion, and together they bring to light an underexplored aspect of the history of slaves and free people of color: "their own ideology of liberation suited to their own circumstances" (p. 171).[3]Notes

[1]. Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York:Oxford University Press, 1994), xiii-xiv.

[2]. A similar question has been posed by Walter Johnson in his article "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 113-125.

[3].This project is similar to the one proposed by Laurent Dubois in "An Enslaved Enlightenment: Re-Thinking the Intellectual History of the French Enlightenment," *Social History* 31, no. 1 (February 2006): 1-14.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: David Sartorius. Review of Childs, Matthew D., *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery.* H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24533

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.