

Moving away from the illusionary perspective in studies of the Black Brazilian man: in search of new tools for gender studies with Matthew Pettway

Matthew Pettway (University of South Alabama)

Interviewers

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PALIMPSESTO

1) Based on your academic research, we would like you to comment a little on the impossibilities of the flourishing of Black masculinity in Brazil.

MATTHEW PETTWAY

It is well known that Portugal and its Brazilian vassals – who became accomplices of the Crown after the independence of 1822 – trafficked 5.8 million Africans to the Western Hemisphere. But it is ignored that the vast majority of these Africans – two-thirds of these victims – were male. One of the most notable contributions in recent years is the neologism "non-man" coined by the African-American philosopher Tommy Curry. The concept of "non-man" serves to contemplate the fact that white patriarchy identified African males as the greatest threat to white supremacy and constructed them as irrational animals. The book *The Non-Man* was published in 2017 in English, but, due to lack of translation, it is still unknown in Brazilian academia. It should be possible to overcome these theoretical barriers to reach a Portuguese-speaking audience in Brazil, Portugal, and Angola, among other African countries. But I do not mean to imply in any way that the construction of "non-man" makes the flourishing of Black masculinity impossible, although that was the intention of the patriarchal landowner. Concrete examples abound in Brazilian ethnohistory that point to the creativity of African men in oppressive environments. Enslaved and formerly enslaved people built new cultural practices that created space for a non-hegemonic masculinity, that is, neither Eurocentric, nor Christian, nor imperialist. Daniel Santos demonstrated in his research that capoeira created spatiality for the "invention of new codes, symbolisms, postures, and masculine behaviors" on the part of Black men. And there are other spaces and practices, such as the quilombos, where

Zumbi remains the most praiseworthy figure in this history of resistance, and samba, which produced figures like Cartola and Donga, another no less important example. All this means that the white man cannot make Black masculinity impossible, unless Black men allow it to happen.

PALIMPSESTO

2) Following up on the previous question, how could we broaden the discussion about the vulnerability of Black men and, consequently, change the stereotypical narratives constructed so far?

MATTHEW PETTWAY

To broaden the discussion about the vulnerability of Black men, the reading public must stop exclusively associating the concept of gender with women. In academic circles, thinking about gender means contemplating female life in opposition to men, that is, man, regardless of his race or social class, is primarily the oppressor, and woman is the perpetual victim. I think there are ways to overcome this equivocal dichotomy and analyze the vulnerabilities of Black men and women in a way that produces empirical results. In other words, history must play a greater role in literary criticism to produce readings that do not invisibilize the historical context. First, a redefinition of patriarchy is needed based on theoretical works such as Errol Miller's "Gender, Power and Politics" and the subordinate male hypothesis coined by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto. Accepting both definitions, I insist that patriarchy is not the domination of all women by men; it is a kinship network in which men and women of the dominant group subjugate men and women of racially subordinate groups. In this network, older men exercise power (and influence) over women, young people, and boys. Patriarchy tries to use women as a resource for the procreation of the human species, and, in this way, she is necessary in every sense of the word. Sometimes, the subordinate woman can be integrated into the patriarchal system through heterosexual marriage. But the man from the racially subordinate group is considered a potential combatant who could act against the system. That is why the patriarchal system tries to remove the subordinate man from civil society and, in some radical cases, eradicate him completely through incarceration or military service, as happened in Argentina in the 19th century. At the same time, we need to study the works that have already been published by Brazilian social scientists, such as Rolf

“Malungo” De Souza and Henrique Restier, Black men with intimate knowledge of this society.

PALIMPSESTO

3) As the first Black Fulbright scholar from the University of South Alabama to research Afro-Brazilian culture outside your home country, what are the implications of this for innovation and the development of new ideas in Black cultural studies in both North America and Brazil?

MATTHEW PETTWAY

I feel honored to have been awarded the Fulbright scholarship to research the ethics of African and Afro-Brazilian men in the 18th century. I was quite surprised to learn that there had been no other Black Fulbright scholars at the University of South Alabama, because almost 27% of Alabama's population – the state where my father was born – is of African descent. First, I would like to see the publication of my new research in Portuguese on the resistance of Black men raped on 19th-century farms in Brazil. I submitted an unpublished article to an academic journal in Brazil last week so that my contributions may be known on Brazilian soil. I believe that the main contribution of this new research, both in Portuguese and English, would be to place the ethics of Afro-Brazilian masculinity as the preferred conceptual framework for thinking about the ontology of the Black Brazilian man. Furthermore, I plan to publish another work, with an English translation, based on the lectures I gave at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). If we can modify the theoretical tools we use to talk about Afro-descendant masculinity, both in Brazil and in the United States, we could build new critical paths. I have other projects in English in mind, but I don't want to talk openly about them yet.

PALIMPSESTO

4) Your first book, *Cuban Literature in the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Placido, and Afro-Latino Religion*, discusses the intersectional relationships of race, identity, and resistance in Cuba. We would like you to comment briefly on the importance of Cuban poetry for social, cultural, and political movements within the Latin American context.

MATTHEW PETTWAY

The poetry of Juan Francisco Manzano (1797-1853) and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (1809-1844) played a prominent role in the abolitionist struggle in 19th-century Cuba. Between 1821 and 1844, Afro-Cuban poets produced relatively few anti-slavery poems due to Spanish censorship of all printed matter in the colony. However, the following compositions deserve our attention. "The Absent Slave Woman" is a lyrical poem by Manzano in which the poet adopts a female voice of the enslaved woman to comment on sexual violence against African women. "The Poet's Vision Composed in a Sugar Mill" and "A Dream to My Second Brother" use dream, flight, the cemetery, and transfiguration as literary tropes with double meanings to allude to an Afro-Caribbean spiritual presence. On the other hand, Valdés – better known by his pseudonym, Plácido – was born free in 1809 and published more poems than any other 19th-century Cuban poet. In his lyrical compilation, there are relatively few revolutionary works: "Havana Liberty!", "The Oath", "The Little Devil", and "Our Lady of the Rosary" are some. Plácido's lyrical work adopted a much more militant tone than Manzano's, condemning the queen for despotism, making treacherous oaths, and alluding to the Afro-Caribbean spiritual world. Plácido became the greatest ideological threat to the Spanish Crown in the mid-19th century due to his subversive poetry. Taking all this into account, I believe Plácido achieved greater celebrity in Latin America than his freed contemporary, because his work attracted a posthumous readership in Mexico, Argentina, and even the United States.

PALIMPSESTO

5) Based on your research on Brazilian and Cuban literature, which contemporary literary characters would you highlight that do not perform the expected stereotypes of Black men?

MATTHEW PETTWAY

My main focus regarding contemporary Cuban narration is not fiction, it is testimonial literature. Taking this into consideration, I can point out the following Afro-Cuban male characters who do not fall into stereotypes. In *Reyita, sencillamente* – the story of a nonagenarian Black woman – we have the representation of her son Monín as an anti-dictatorship insurgent who confronted Fulgencio Batista's regime in favor of socialism, but tragically died at the hands of the North American empire in a terrorist

attack. In this narration, Monín is a courageous character, a Black heroic archetype somewhat similar to the first character in Cuban letters by Salvador Golomón, from the epic poem *Espejo de paciencia* (1608), an enslaved soldier who defends the island from French corsairs. I must suggest another work of testimony: *Biografía de un cimarrón*. *Biografía de un cimarrón* tells the story of Esteban Montejo, a Cuban quilombola who became an insurgent fighting for Cuban independence in the War of 1895. Written in the first person by the ethnographer Miguel Barnet, the book manages to overcome archetypes, recounting intimate details of his self-emancipation, his beliefs, his private life, and his Afro-Cuban spirituality. In addition to these textual examples, I want to highlight the Cuban film titled *Yuli*, which autobiographically narrates the life of Carlos Acosta, the first Afro-Cuban dancer who performed with the Royal Ballet in London. Although the story told in the film is not fiction, I think it is very important to think of Acosta as a Black male character for multiple reasons. The world of professional dance, and particularly ballet, is considered a delicate, gentle, and feminine art. However, the autobiographical film portrays Acosta as a boy who likes to dance Michael Jackson's pop music, but wants nothing to do with ballet, as it is considered something for homosexuals. His father, a Black proletarian man, insists that his son use his talent to be a great artist. The film uses the figure of Ogum, orisha of war, as the saint who is in the head of both father and son. In this way, the son learns to channel Ogum's warrior energy to become the best Cuban dancer in the world and forgive his father for abusing him in this way, achieving a balance in his conception of masculinity. I know much less about Brazilian literature in general. However, I think that *Eles* – Vagner Amaro's collection of short stories – offers male characters that deserve to be studied.

PALIMPSESTO

6) Considering the scenario in Brazil and Latin America, how do you observe the dynamics between Black, white, and non-white men, given the vulnerability of Black men in patriarchal and racist society?

MATTHEW PETTWAY

Unfortunately, I don't think I have enough knowledge of Brazilian sociology to answer this question.

PALIMPSESTO

7) Why do studies on Black masculinity not encompass the issues that permeate Black and Latin American women? Given the context of oppression of the patriarchal system, how do you observe the role of Black women in this process?

MATTHEW PETTWAY

In my view, the objective of studies on Black Brazilian and American men is not to invisibilize Black women, but to create theoretical space for the re-reading of the racialized man. It is necessary to take into account that the slave trade represents a great rupture in the definitions of African subjectivity, thus altering the balance in relations between African men and African women. I do not mean that there was an idealistic social harmony between genders in pre-colonial African kingdoms, but that there was a complementarity between the masculine and feminine spheres in their cosmology and cultural practices. So, it seems that what exists in post-emancipation Brazil, as a Black community, is a residue of forgotten, but unhealed, traumas. As I said before, patriarchy tries to use women for procreation, while denying them power. Sometimes, the subordinate woman can be integrated into the patriarchal system through heterosexual marriage. But men from the racially subordinate group are considered potential combatants who could act against the system. Therefore, the patriarchal system tries to remove the subordinate man from civil society and, in some radical cases, eradicate him completely through incarceration or military service, as happens in contemporary Brazil. But more than anything else, it is a question of how Black women and Black men can build a complementarity based on mutual respect as members of the same diasporic community.

Matthew Pettway: He is an Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of South Alabama, where he collaborates with the Afro-American Studies Program. Pettway teaches Latin American and Afro-Latin American literature. In 2013, he was invited to the University of Kansas, where he was named Langston Hughes Visiting Professor. A year later, he was invited to be a visiting researcher at the University of Texas, where he explored the Latin American Studies Collections at the LILAS-Benson Library. In 2019, the Federal University of Ceará invited Dr. Pettway to teach a postgraduate class and offer a keynote lecture at the interdisciplinary studies conference. Dr. Pettway has published six peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. His first monograph, *Cuban Literature in*

the Age of Black Insurrection: Manzano, Plácido and Afro-Latino Religion, was published by the University Press of Mississippi. Pettway has been invited to give academic lectures about his book on four continents, visiting countries as diverse as Japan, Morocco, the United States, and Brazil. His greatest honor was the invitation to the State University of Rio de Janeiro as a Fulbright Scholar 2024-2025, where he launched a new project on the ethics of African masculinity in slave society.

Danielle da Silva Leal: She holds a degree in Literature – Portuguese/Literatures from UERJ, a specialization in Brazilian Literature from UERJ, and a master's degree in Brazilian Literature from UERJ. She is a doctoral candidate in Brazilian Literature at UERJ. Her research focuses on the literary production of Eliana Alves Cruz. She is a member of the research group "Narratives of Black Women as a field of investigation and a strategic universe for confronting institutional racism in the SUS" at Fiocruz.

Hanny Saraiva Ferreira: She holds a degree in Literature – English/Literatures from UERJ, a specialization in Publishing – Book Market from IUPERJ/UCAM, and a master's degree in Literature, Culture, and Contemporaneity from PUC-Rio. She is a member of the Laboratory of Interdisciplinary Studies and Research on the African Continent and Afro-Diasporas – LEPECAD/PUC-Rio, where she researches speculative and Afrofuturist fiction. Author of four fiction books, she is a member of the Asian & Brazilian Women Writers Collective.