

Libertad en cadenas: Sacrificio, aporías y perdón en las letras cubanas.
AÍDA BEAUPIED. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. xii + 233 pp. (Cloth US\$ 75.95)

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Despite the ferrous flavor of rusty and restrictive polemic in the title of Aída Beupied's book, all apprehension of a dogmatic analysis of the ideological importance of liberty in Cuban letters is quickly eroded. Although obviously irritated by Fidel Castro's "self-critical shortsightedness"¹ (p. 99) (in revenge for which she often ossifies the ex-president within a premature and somewhat distracting past tense), Beupied's epistemological sophistication preserves even her most pointed attacks on revolutionary Cuba's artistic asphyxiation from cardboard caricature or ideological impropriety. From the unabashedly intimate prologue, Beupied makes it clear that her analysis, like many of the discourses it traces, "simultaneously affirms and denies, or at least postpones into an uncertain future" any definitive statements about the human capacity for freedom (p. x). From this position of innervating ambiguity, she illuminates both the emancipation and the tyranny that the pursuit of liberty has inscribed within the national narrative since feverish *Cuba Libre* dreams evaporated in the de-colonial anti-climax of 1898.

For Beupied, this taut dialectic is most keenly expressed within what she calls Cuba's "integrationist myth," succinctly enunciated in José Martí's slogan "With all, and for the good of all!" (p. 85). To rally under this unifying flag, however, requires the sacrifice of idiosyncratic individuality to thus clear a "transcendental space for the national subject" (p. 7). Beginning with Martí, Beupied offers an iconoclastic re-reading of the "Apostle's" 1895 immolation, portraying his ultimate sacrifice not in a premature and prosaic death, but in a staunch and dutiful lingering in life despite the seductive allure of eternal repose (p. 72). She thus attempts what she describes as the near-impossible: an exorcism of Martí's stultifyingly superhuman legacy by counterpointing his decisiveness with his ambiguity, his heroism with his "maddened and desolate" flight from existential phantoms (p. 99). For her, this fragmented and self-reflexive subjectivity is notably absent in Cuba's other overbearing archetype, Fidel Castro, for whom even the most seem-

1. Translations in this review are my own.

ingly bitter self-criticism becomes self-affirming “mythification” (p. 100). Beupied could have gone on to explore Castro’s commandeering of Martí’s ideological legacy in *La historia me absolverá* (1953) and his fashioning of an integral and unambiguous hero pointing teleologically toward Cuba’s revolutionary conclusion.

In what is perhaps her most lucid chapter, Beupied leaves behind the superhuman to chart the *über*-human and antagonistic orbits of José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera around Cuba’s magnetic integrationist myth. Recognizing that both writers confront the potentially enervating awareness of the farcical theater of life, she juxtaposes their willingness to abdicate brittle individuality for the enveloping identification of *communitas* in order to overcome this awful epiphany.

For Beupied, Lezama fought the terror of intranscendence with a fecund bifocal faith. He gave great credence to the cumulative force of human community that inspires even the most extraordinary individuals to seek salvation through a collective, not isolated encounter with the divine; he believed in the redemptive power of intellectual and imaginative labor: “the creative gesture that does not relent, despite being pre-condemned to failure, is the liberated and liberating act *par excellence*” (p. 180). Beupied’s confessed empathy for this poetically pursued state of grace only enhances her landmark analysis of Lezamian faith in the transcendental *imago*.

In contrast, Beupied portrays Piñera taking small comfort in what he saw as the “modest freedom” offered by unfettered artistic creation (p. 155). Instead, Piñera sought to puncture the pathos of humankind’s inexorable fate with *choteo*, an insolent raspberry blown at bitter life and, more pointedly, at the Wagnerian drama of Castro’s revolutionary crusade (p. 120). Although acerbic humor is undoubtedly one of Piñera’s most effective literary weapons, a less pessimistic interpretation of his rebel yell is possible. Spurning the Revolution’s messianic creed, Piñera turns to Sisyphus for succor. Beupied acknowledges the potential importance of Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) in Piñera’s imaginative formation, but I would go further.² In Camus’s essay, the condemned king trudges down the mountain of his eternal torment with an unexpected smile on his face: “One must imagine Sisyphus happy,” says Camus (2000:111). Virgilio defended himself from despair with this same enigmatic contentment born neither of masochism nor of madness, but of the metaphysic connecting Piñera to Sisyphus to Beupied’s deconstructed José Martí. All smile through their agony not because of a leap of faith toward transcendence, but because of stoical equanimity before the frustrations of life, because, as Beupied claims for Martí, they are confident that their suffering has been sufficient to spare them the

2. Beupied cites Enrico Mario Santi’s claim that Camus’s essay was Piñera’s bible during his Buenos Aires exile (p. 137-38, n. 7).

“painful ill of living once again.”³ The Apostle’s ill-fated dash into battle and Piñera’s existential “compromise with the here and now” (p. 157) are therefore not lamentable acts of narcissistic suicide, but a Sisyphian and serendipitous disposition to death, an insistence on the freedom to die on one’s own terms and with all scores settled.

After two hundred pages of epistemological distance from the myth of liberty, Beupied makes of her conclusion an optimistic paean to freedom, “more as a wish than as an interpretation” (p. 201). The seemingly irreconcilable and perennially restless protagonists of the myth of an integrated and cathartically cleansed island come together, not at the exhausted end of a teleological odyssey nor in existential anomie, but in a placeless and timeless act of sublime (self)pardon. “Aché” says Beupied, meaning “with God’s grace,” and that surely is a myth to be saluted.

3. From Martí’s “Canto de Otoño,” cited in Beupied, p. 73.

REFERENCE

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From Henry Louis Gates’s *Signifying Monkey* to Richard Burton’s *Afro-Creole*, the question of the African heritage in the black diaspora as manifest in New World literary and cultural experiences and expressions has been a major focus of Black Studies. While these represent the cultural dimensions and connectedness of global black culture, works such as Cedric Robinson’s *The Black Radical Tradition* and Adeleke Adeeko’s *The Slave Rebellion* explore the unities of black ideologies and strategies of struggle. Babacar M’baye’s