

Unidentified artist, detail, Calle Tacón 12, c.1762-1768, fresco or semi-fresco [?], mural painting

Aponte and the Possibilities of Art Linda Rodríguez

The loss of Aponte's "Book of Paintings" felt like a weight. I so wished we could see his work of art. Its absence seemed to limit what we could know of him as an artist. How did he use color? What was his approach to composing each of his pages? Did figures overlap for some kind of textural effect? Aponte tells us, though, exactly what kind of artist he was. On the first day of his testimony about the "Book of Paintings," a Spanish judicial official asked him if the book was indeed his work. Aponte's response reads almost like a declaration of his artistic intent. "Not being a painter, he bought different prints and paintings to take from them, or from used fans, that which fulfilled his idea."

Aponte introduced a completely innovative method of aesthetic creation that transformed fragments into a whole. He considered his audience to be, yes, the Spanish king, but also networks of enslaved and free people of color in Havana. For all who saw his book, Aponte's novel technique matched the revolutionary content of its pages in which he visualized black militia members like his grandfather Joaquín Aponte along with black princes and queens in faraway and historic lands like Ethiopia. In colonial Havana, Aponte placed a new vision of an African diaspora in the hands of those who held and viewed his book.

Aponte's actions as an artist suggest a need to invent, to move beyond known models of artistic practice and aesthetic form. That spirit has triumphed over loss as new imaginings of his "Book of Paintings" emerge in this exhibit, centuries later. Aponte's legacy reverberates in our contemporary world and asks us to imagine the possibilities of art in advancing freedom for all. Indeed, Aponte's legacy demands that we recognize artists as central to that goal.

Over the past few years, Aponte has felt like a constant companion to me, and I am grateful to him for his vision. It has moved me forward when I couldn't move on my own. I also thank Ada Ferrer for walking and imagining with me in Aponte's path, and also Édouard Duval-Carrié, Tasha Grantham, Laurent Dubois, and everyone at the Little Haiti Cultural Center for bringing this exhibit into existence.

The Book Is Here Laurent Dubois

The book is here, just as Aponte intended. He imagined, after all, that the book would not just recount a history but also help create a new one. And, in ways he probably couldn't have predicted – or could he? – it has, again and again, in the years since he produced it. His interrogators, his executioners, were afraid of the book. They wanted to bury the book and the project it represented. They used the book to condemn him. They used his art against him. They succeeded, in a way. He was executed, disappeared, and his art was disappeared too.

In the process, however, his executioners left behind the traces that allow us to revive Aponte, in our way. As historians of the Caribbean, seeking to tell a different story, we are sustained by the fact that we can turn such sources against themselves, seeking in a small way to undo their intent. That is what Ada Ferrer does in her book *Freedom's Mirror*, the magical work at the basis of this exhibit, which illuminates and brings Aponte's world back to life.

This was a world within a world, for Aponte understood that he was part of a subterranean history, untold, that telling that history – a history of the black world, a black history of the world – was to re-make that history, and the world. His book was pedagogy, exploration, pastiche, and interpretation. He knew that images could tell that history perhaps better than text, for an image is always an invitation, a portal of sorts – an invitation to travel, and to dream.

"What does this image mean?" his interrogators wanted to know. Did Aponte tell the truth? Did the interrogators understand the answer? And what can we, now, glean from what they wrote about what they heard? That is the question this exhibit begins to answer. Lines of text, traces of distant work, turn out to be seeds. Planted in the minds of the artists gathered here, they have created bursts, visions, layers of color, echoes, new pages in an old book, old pages of a new book. When we look at them, gathered together – like those who gathered together at Aponte's house, around the book – we see into the past, and into the future. We are invited to tell stories, to tell our own story as part of a bigger story, to make history. We are made ready – to travel, to dream.

The book is here, and it is a wonder.

A Lost Book and the Historian's Archive

I first encountered José Antonio Aponte not as an artist but as a revolutionary. The Aponte I first learned about from the seminal work of Cuban historian José Luciano Franco was the leader of the island's principal antislavery and anticolonial conspiracy during the Age of Revolution. But because Franco transcribed and published the trial testimony about Aponte's "Book of Paintings," he also allowed us to glimpse Aponte the artist.

I remember vividly my surprise on first reading Aponte's descriptions of his book. Image 6-7, which showed a black army defeating a white one, seemed potentially subversive and revolutionary in a slave society. But what of everything else in the book? What about the popes, saints, and kings; the Ethiopian Eunuchs and Greek philosophers and Roman goddesses; the heavenly constellations and lush landscapes? What, if anything, did they have to do with revolution?

Aponte showed the book to his fellow conspirators as they organized their revolution. So we know that he and his companions drew connections between the images before them and the revolution they were plotting. But what were those connections? And where was the book?

To paraphrase C.L.R. James, what historians most want to see in order to understand a revolution—the diary of an obscure rebel leader or, in this case, a book of paintings that served as guide for an antislavery revolution—seems forever out of our reach. For years I held out the hope of finding Aponte's book. On a research trip to Spain in 2002, my then 7-year old daughter greeted me every afternoon with the question: did you find the book today? The answer was always no.

I learned to work around that absence, comparing the way Aponte described the book to inquisitioners to how he spoke about it with co-conspirators. For example, Aponte testified that lámina 37 was Rome, yet he told a companion that the picture showed Henri Christophe, King of Haiti, commanding people to execute what he ordered. Describing 8-9, Aponte mentioned the *San Lorenzo* without elaborating. But we know that the ship had spent time in revolutionary Haiti, once transported Haitian revolutionaries to Cuba, and even housed some of Aponte's own co-conspirators. Using other sources to help read Aponte's words about his pictures, I was able to glimpse not only Aponte's epic histories of Ethiopia, but other more subterranean histories that linked Havana and Haiti in 1812.

By the time I finished writing about Aponte in *Freedom's Mirror* in 2014, my daughter, by then a young woman, had stopped asking me if I'd found the book. Instead, she kept insisting that a group of artists needed to collectively reimagine Aponte's book. I am forever grateful to Edouard Duval-Carrié for setting that plot in motion, to Laurent Dubois for bringing us together, to Tasha Grantham for helping it materialize, and to Linda Rodríguez for co-conspiring. The artists of Visionary Aponte have offered me new and surprising insight into Aponte's vision and new ways to think about the "everything else" in the book as part of Aponte's artistic and political vision. I hope the show that has resulted from our collective effort honors Aponte's creativity and intellect, as well as his conviction that those things were—and remain—vital to making freedom real.

Ada Ferrer

Narratives of Freedom and Oppression: Bridging the Past

Histories of the Caribbean archipelago are always full of surprises. This may be due to the convoluted histories of a region where the first contact with Europe occurred during the "Age of Discovery." European explorers and subsequent waves of colonists occupied and displaced locals almost to the point of extinction, while documenting their own advances against indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, only the conquerors' voices remain, as that of the vanquished has all but disappeared. Certain accounts did try to document the vast upheavals that resulted in the wake of the "discovery." One such document is the long letter written to King Charles I of Spain by Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, denouncing the horrors that followed that first encounter. Titled "The Destruction of the Indies," it described in detail the horrors inflicted on the "docile and gentle Indians" (the Taínos) by vainglorious and greedy *conquistadores*. Falling on deaf ears, the document found its way to the enemies of the Catholic Church: Reformists and Protestants, who had the temerity to publish it in a widely distributed, illustrated pamphlet. It has taken centuries for Spain to recover from what is today considered a masterful piece of insidious propaganda, appropriately called "The Black Legend." What is of great interest to me is that the pamphlet in question was illustrated by an artist and engraver named Theodor DeBry, who, as far as we know, never set foot in the Americas. His fanciful and Europeanized visual description of the Taíno is much of what is left of these people; indeed, his depiction of the Taíno illustrates most histories of the Spanish Conquest.

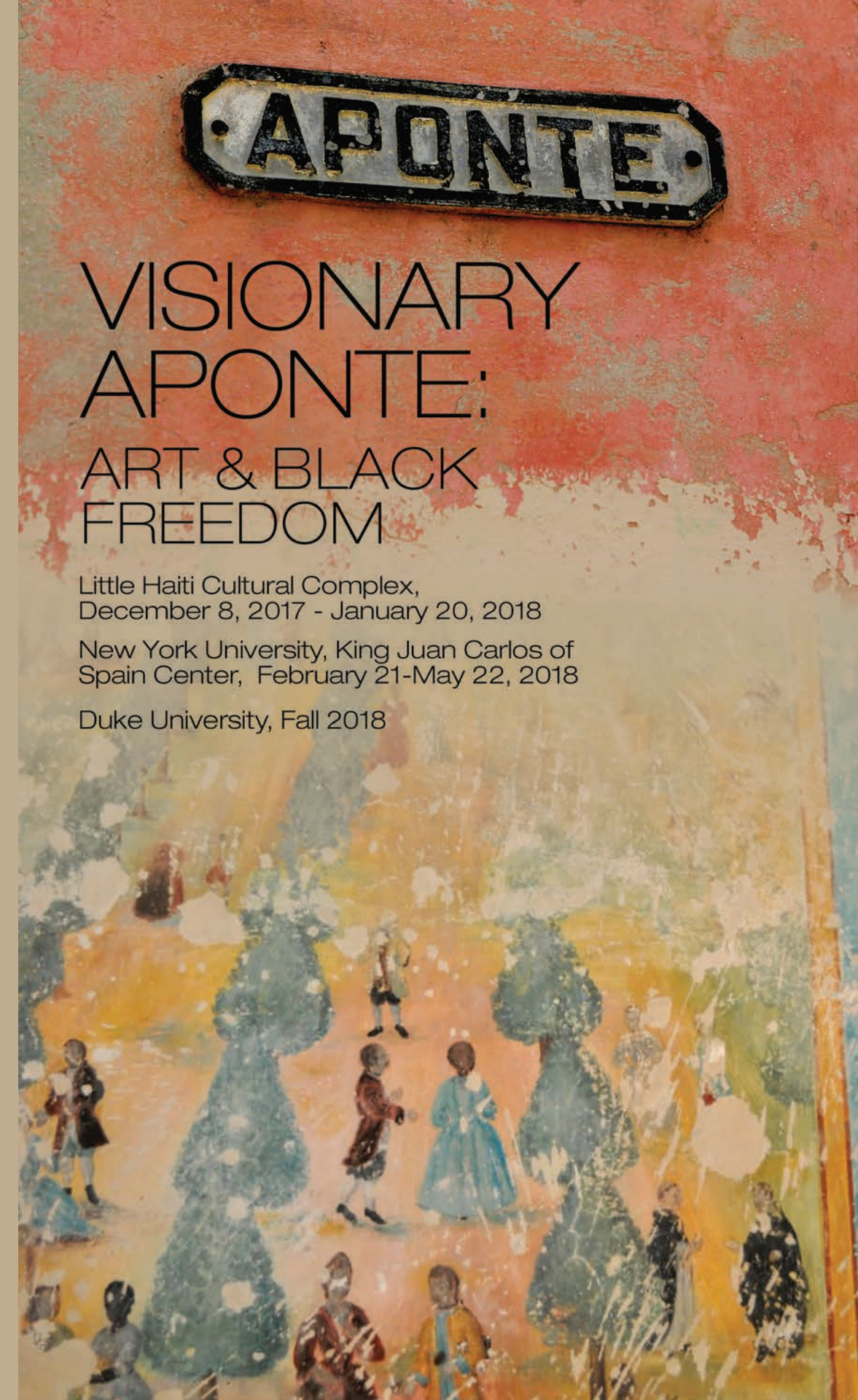
Another example where art was used in defense of the downtrodden is the fantastic document sent to King Felipe III by one of his American subjects, Inca nobleman Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala. This extensively illustrated document aimed to inform the Spanish monarch about the injustices of colonial rule inflicted on Andean people and enslaved Africans. Guaman Poma described in words and images the humiliations to which he and his people were subjected. King Felipe never received the document, hence no amelioration followed. As an artist, I have been interested in this particular document for the powerful visual language created by Guaman Poma to illustrate a world in transition and already subject to a hybrid vocabulary.

Though referenced in a novel I had read and reread by Cuban author Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World*, the name Aponte never truly piqued my interest until I read Ada Ferrer's historical account of reactions to the Haitian Revolution in neighboring Cuba. In a chapter devoted to potential Haitian influences on Cuban slave rebellions, José Antonio Aponte figures as a major protagonist. What became evident and surprising immediately is that Aponte, too, had created an illustrated book for the King of Spain.

Again, the document not only did not make it to his highness; this time it was lost, and all that was left of it were rather detailed descriptions of the contents of the "book of paintings," amassed and recorded during Aponte's trial and interrogation by the Spanish authorities in Havana. The descriptions of the works elaborated in the trial transcript reveal that this artist of African descent had created a new visual vocabulary that profoundly disturbed and confounded his European interrogators.

The challenge today is to find a way to tap through the descriptions into this man's vision, to see if we can recreate or interpret, more than a century later, Aponte's visions of a black world where dignity, freedom and intellectual complexity were a given, and where they served to challenge the abject conditions to which they were subjected. *Visionary Aponte* invited a group of contemporary artists to consult this particular story and see if they, as artists, could translate the spirit of Aponte's "black world view" into visual proclamations that can be interpreted today!

Edouard Duval Carrié



VISIONARY APONTE: ART & BLACK FREEDOM

Little Haiti Cultural Complex, December 8, 2017 - January 20, 2018
New York University, King Juan Carlos of Spain Center, February 21-May 22, 2018
Duke University, Fall 2018

VISIONARY APONTE: ART & BLACK FREEDOM

CURATED BY EDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ, TOSHA GRANTHAM, ADA FERRER, LINDA RODRÍGUEZ, LAURENT DUBOIS, MARIE VICKLES

The *Visionary Aponte* historical team thanks Jorge Pavez, whose transcription of Aponte's trial testimony about the "Book of Paintings" helped pave the way, Chris Yong-Garcia and Toshi Sakai for their design work, Pilar Garrett for research assistance, Eric Anderson for improving *Digital Aponte*, Esther Allen for her translation wisdom, Amílcar Ortiz Cárdenas for the cover image, and the institutions named below for their generous support.

Little Haiti Cultural Complex

The mission of the City of Miami's Little Haiti Cultural Complex is to present and preserve Afro-Caribbean cultures, train the next generation of leaders, and leverage arts and culture as tools for transformation and community building. The LHCC broke ground in 2006, as a result of the efforts and vision of the late City of Miami Commissioner Arthur E. Teele, Jr. Since then it has become a key engine of economic growth and community building in Little Haiti and nearby neighborhoods. Over 100,000 people per year visit or take part in programs at the LHCC.

We recognize Mireille Chancy Gonzalez, HCAA Chair, for her deep commitment to the *Visionary Aponte* project.



Visionary Aponte: Art and Black Freedom takes as its point of departure an extraordinary—and now lost—historical artifact: a so-called “Book of Paintings.” Its creator was José Antonio Aponte, a free black carpenter, artist, and former soldier who was also the leader of an ambitious antislavery conspiracy in Cuba in 1812. During his trial, Aponte was forced to provide testimony describing each of the pictures in his book. They portrayed a wide array of subject matter, from Biblical scenes to landscapes to episodes in the history of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Using those descriptions, fifteen contemporary artists have reimagined Aponte’s book for our present, inviting us to think about the role of art and history in making social change.

**Little Haiti Cultural Complex Art Gallery
Art Basel Miami**
December 8, 2017 - January 20, 2018
212-260 NE 59th Terrace, Miami, FL 33137
(305) 960-2969
www.littlehaiticulturalcenter.com

**King Juan Carlos of Spain Center
New York University**
February 21-May 22, 2018
53 Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012
(212) 998-3650
www.kjcc.org

**Art Center
Duke University**
September 15 - December 15, 2018
Duke University Art Center
(919) 684-8111
www.duke.edu

Aponte street sign in Havana, 2016. Photo courtesy Amílcar Ortiz Cárdenas. Unidentified artist, detail, Calle Tacón 12. c.1762-1768, fresco or semi-fresco[?], mural painting.

José Antonio Aponte was a free black carpenter, soldier, and artist in Havana.



José Nicolas de Escalera, Uniform of the Batallón de Morenos de la Habana, 1763, drawing. Courtesy of the Archivo General de Indias (Fondo Mapas y Planos, 25).

In 1812, he was accused of masterminding a major conspiracy and rebellion against slavery in Cuba, then one of the most profitable sugar plantation economies in the world. As the island’s Spanish authorities investigated Aponte, they found hidden in his house an unusual work of art, made by Aponte himself.

Authorities called it a “Book of Paintings,” though the term is somewhat misleading. It featured 63 images that combined painting and drawing with collaged cutouts taken from decorative fans, engravings, and books. His intricate compositions portrayed Biblical stories and lush landscapes; black men as emperors, warriors, and librarians; scenes from Egypt and Ethiopia, Rome and Spain, Havana and the heavens.

Though Aponte testified that he made the book for the King of Spain as a gift, in the run-up to the rebellion he used the book for a very different purpose. He showed his co-conspirators the book’s battle scenes to illustrate how they should organize their own rebellion in Havana, and he pointed out pictures of powerful black men and of himself as would-be king to show them that other worlds were possible.

Aponte was arrested and forced during the trial to describe the pictures in his “Book of Paintings.”



The circles denote (clockwise from top right): Aponte’s workshop behind the Iglesia de Santo Cristo, the place where his head was exhibited, and the location of his last known home and workshop in the Guadalupe neighborhood. Map detail from Frédéric Mialhe, *Plano pintoresco de La Habana*, 1853, lithograph.

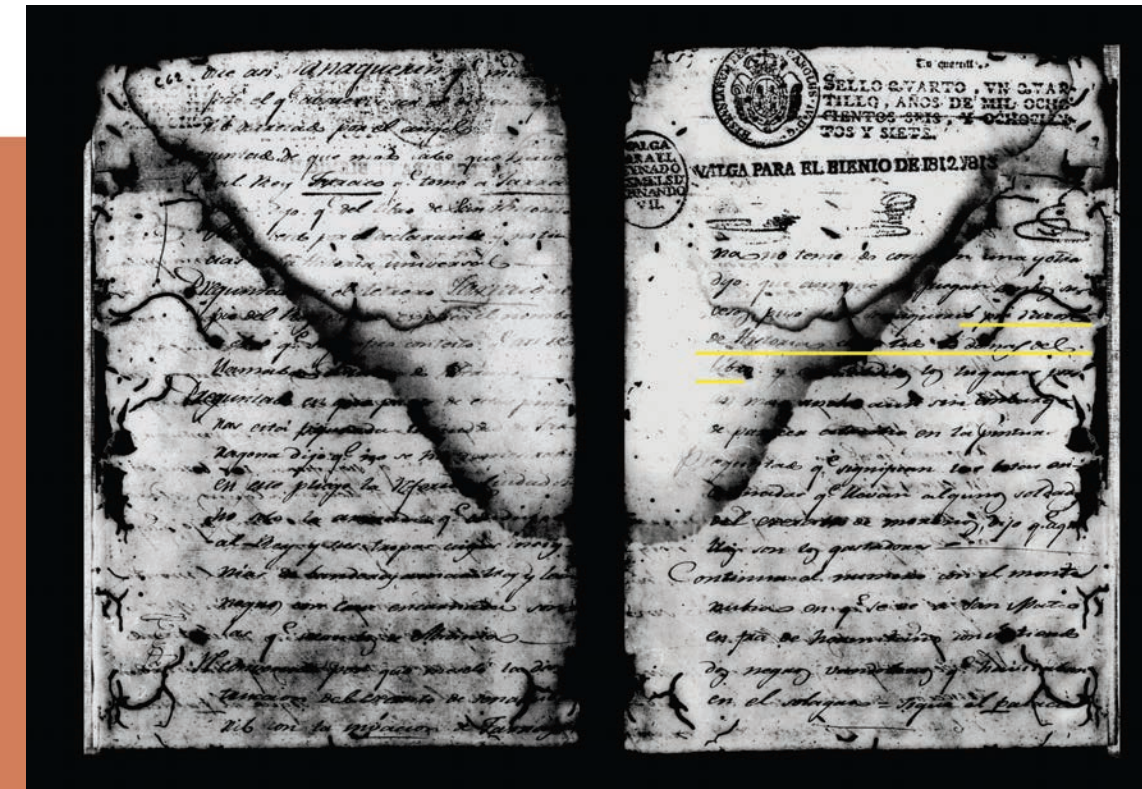


Unidentified artist, *Ejecución de Ramón Pintó en la Habana a las siete de la mañana el día de 22 de marzo de 1851*, c. 1851, engraving [?]. Courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional José Martí.

About some images, officials asked many questions, about others few or sometimes none. Aponte answered with varying degrees of detail depending on the interrogator’s questions and on his own calculations, unknown to us. Sometimes he played the part of teacher, instructing his interrogator on the history of the world. Other times he resisted providing information, testifying that he drew the things he drew “for reason of History” or simply to entertain himself.

Convinced of his guilt and the threat he posed to slavery, authorities hanged Aponte in public on April 9, 1812. His head was severed from his body, secured on a post, and placed in a cage about a block from his house, at an important crossroads in the city, where it would serve as warning to other potential rebels. Then, sometime after his execution, the book disappeared.

Aponte’s trial testimony, then, is the only known remnant of his “Book of Paintings.” The page below is reproduced from that testimony, housed in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Underlined here is Aponte’s answer to the interrogator’s question about why he drew what he did: “for reason of History like everything else in the book.”



“Expediente sobre el declarante José Antonio Aponte el sentido de las pinturas que se hayen en el L. que se aprendió en su casa. Conspiración de José Antonio Aponte, 24 de marzo de 1812.” Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Asuntos Políticos, legajo 12, expediente 17. Courtesy of Archivo Nacional de Cuba.

A transcription of Aponte’s testimony about the book, prepared by Jorge Pavez, is available on the digital humanities website *Digital Aponte*. The site includes other important information about the book, Aponte, and Havana. Visit <http://aponte.hosting.nyu.edu>.

Aponte’s story did not end in 1812.



Commemoration in Havana on anniversary of Aponte’s execution, 2013. Photograph courtesy of Amílcar Ortiz Cárdenas.



Aponte Vive banner at *Misterios de Vodú* performance, 2017. Photograph courtesy of Caridad Diez

Well into the twentieth century, the phrase “más malo que Aponte” –more evil than Aponte—was widely used as an insult. At the same time, people in black and working-class Havana neighborhoods drew inspiration from Aponte and kept his memory alive over many generations. In the 1930s, a group of Spanish Civil War veterans petitioned for the street named after Aponte’s executioner—Someroelso—to be changed to Aponte. In the 1940s, a commemorative plaque was dedicated to him, though it was stolen in the 1990s. Today in Cuba, two Aponte Commissions develop antiracist cultural programming, and a monument to Aponte—a sculpture of Aponte breaking out of a cage—has been proposed.

Visionary Aponte is a living monument to Aponte—one that strives to envision, as Aponte himself did, black history and freedom beyond a single place and time and to consider the role of art and history in imagining and making social and political change.

VISIONARY APONTE: ART & BLACK FREEDOM

JOSÉ BEDIA	NINA ANGELA MERCER
LEONARDO BENZANT	CLARA MORERA
SANFORD BIGGERS	GLEXIS NOVOA
JUAN ROBERTO DIAGO	MARIELLE PLAISIR
ÉDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ	RENÉE STOUT
ALEXIS ESQUIVEL BERMÚDEZ	JEAN-MARCEL ST. JACQUES
TERESITA FERNÁNDEZ	ASSER ST. VAL
FABIOLA JEAN-LOUIS	

CURATED BY:

ADA FERRER is Julius Silver Professor of History and Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University. Her award-winning book, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898*, examines the participation of slaves and former slaves in Cuban independence. Her second book, *Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, won six book prizes, including the Frederick Douglass Prize from the Gilder Lehrman Center at Yale University. Chapter 7 of that book focuses on José Antonio Aponte.

ÉDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ is the Artistic Director of the Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance and the Borderless Caribbean Art Series, now in its ninth year. Duval-Carrie also curated the exhibition, *From Within and Without, The History of Haitian Photography* at NSU Fort Lauderdale.

TOSHA GRANTHAM is an independent curator based in Miami Beach, FL. She earned a BA in from Georgetown University and an MA in from Howard University. Grantham studied in the Department of Art History at the University of Maryland, College Park (ABD, 2012). She received support from the Latin American Studies Center for a residency in Brazil (2012), and research in Panama (2013). Grantham was Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at VMFA (2000–2006). She curated *Darkroom: Photography and New Media from South Africa since 1950* (VMFA and Birmingham Museum, 2010–2011). *Darkroom* received grants from the Horace Goldsmith Foundation (2004), the National Endowment for the Arts (2006) and the Andy Warhol Foundation (2006). As curator of Second Street Gallery (2013–2017), select solo exhibitions featured artists: Siemon Allen, José Bedia, Sonya Clark, Torkwase Dyson, Arturo Lindsay, Taliaferro Logan, Yeni Mao, Rashaun Rucker, Matt Shelton/Nikolai Mahesh Noel, Amy Sherald and John Trevino.

LINDA RODRIGUEZ is a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University. She is an art historian who focuses on colonial Cuba. In 2015, she co-organized the international symposium, *Jose Antonio and His World: Writing, Painting, and Making Freedom in the African Diaspora* at New York University. Currently, she is lead scholar for the digital humanities website Digital Aponte: <http://aponte.hosting.nyu.edu/>.

LAURENT DUBOIS is the Marcello Lotti Professor of Romance Studies and History and founder of the Forum for Scholars & Publics at Duke University. He is a specialist on the history and culture of the Atlantic world, with a focus on the Caribbean and particularly Haiti. Dubois received a BA from Princeton University in 1992, and earned his Ph.D. from University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 1998. Dubois has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship. His book, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* won the 2005 Frederick Douglass Prize.