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New Directions in Nineteenth-Century Cuban History

Ferrer, Ada. *Cuba: An American History*. New York: Scribner, 2021. xii+560pp. 70 illus; Prados-Torreira, Teresa. *The Power of Their Will: Slaveholding Women in Nineteenth-Century Cuba*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2021. xii+144pp. 9 illus; Sanjurjo, Jesús. *In the Blood of Our Brothers: Abolitionism and the End of the Slave Trade in Spain's Atlantic Empire, 1800-1870*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2021. x+196pp; Varella, Claudia, and Manuel Barcia. *Wage-Earning Slaves: Coartación in Nineteenth-Century Cuba*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2020. xvi+217pp. 10 illus.

Despite the importance of pioneering works by Manuel Moreno Fraginals and Rebecca Scott, dating to the late 1970s and 1980s, respectively, and the influential studies that followed, historians of slavery and abolitionism tend to neglect Spain and Spanish Cuba. Likewise, the long history of Spanish imperialism too often remains apart from transnational scholarship that foregrounds narratives of British and French colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A spate of new books seeks to redress these shortcomings, highlighting the importance of Cuba and its historically slave-based economy that survived while much of Europe and the Americas began to industrialize and rely on wage labor. Concomitantly, Cuba became, in the words of Claudia Varella and Manuel Barcia, "a titan of agriculture, benefitting from the…colossal number of African slaves exploited to generate as much wealth as possible from sugar" (4). Echoes of this history continue to reverberate on the island today, despite liberation movements and nationalist leaders who disavowed colonial legacies and attempted to forge different paths.

According to Emily Berquist, eighteenth-century British reformers admired Spanish policies of *coartación*, or self-purchase, and the ideal of the gradual emancipation of enslaved people.[1] At times, even in the nineteenth century, Spain could be presented as just another one of the "civilized nations" with a duty to "rescue Africa."[2] Spanish reformer Isidoro Antillón, who feared a repeat of the uprising in French Saint-Domingue, advocated banning the slave trade as early as 1802. Other advocates called for an end to the trade during the Cortes of Cádiz in wide-ranging debates between 1811 and 1812. When King

[1] Emily Berquist, "Early Anti-Slavery Sentiment in the Spanish Atlantic World, 1765–1817," *Slavery and Abolition* 31, no. 2 (2010): 184.

[2] *An Inquiry into the Right and Duty of Compelling Spain to Relinquish her Slave Trade in Northern Africa* (London, 1816), 48-49. The author also compared the Spanish ministers who supported the slave trade to those who continued to apologize for the Inquisition.

Ferdinand VII returned to power and nullified constitutional rule in 1814, he decreed the gradual end to the slave trade following the Congress of Vienna, because it ran "contrary to the interests of humanity."[3] Jesús Sanjurjo's *In the Blood of Our Brothers* assesses the diplomacy that shaped such decisions throughout the nineteenth century, arguing that military exigencies rather than humanitarian concerns or adherence to the antislavery movement drove the king to act. Sanjurjo's intervention centers on documents culled largely from archives in Britain. His analysis underscores the strength of the Spanish state as officials placated and manipulated the British government and the activists who pressured Spain to change course regarding the growing slave trade, especially to Cuba.

Having the ear of Spain's liberal expatriates in London during and after the War of Independence, William Wilberforce did not have to rely solely on moral arguments to push the cause of the global abolition of the slave trade. He had help from the African Institution, a British abolitionist lobby that translated and published documents allowing for the spread of ideas well beyond Britain. In addition, one of largest petitions in British history demanded the end of the slave trade in France, Spain, and Portugal, demonstrating a growing concern for the issue that transcended national borders. This call to arms buttressed abolitionism as the Napoleonic Wars came to a close, and the Treaty of 1817 decreed the end of the slave trade. But at the same time, anti-British sentiment emerged in Cuba and Spain as mixed courts, composed of judges from multiple countries, including Britain, adjudicated violations of the treaty provisions. The court in Havana condemned a total of forty-eight Spanish slave vessels between 1824 and 1854, although the illegal trade continued unabated.

In part a discursive analysis that plots changes over time, Sanjurjo's book highlights the role of Spaniards such as Agustín Argüelles and a growing emphasis on humanitarianism in the early nineteenth century. Yet the discourse of slavery remained a rhetorical device often far removed from the realities of plantation slavery, an issue not covered in depth by Sanjurjo. For instance, Britons could read about soldiers being "packed together like negroes in the hold of a slave-ship," a reference to the experience of men who had shipped out to Madras and Ceylon.[4] Charles Saenz has shown that Spaniards after 1808 consistently referenced their enslavement by the French and the vile Napoleon Bonaparte, while Spanish Americans pointed to their slavery at the hands of their despotic

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[3] *The Times*, January 10, 1816; *The Times*, January 6, 1818.

[4] Alexander Alexander, *The Life of Alexander Alexander*, ed. John Howell, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1830), 98; Matthew Brown, *Adventuring through Spanish Colonies: Simón Bolívar, Foreign Mercenaries and the Birth of New Nations* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 135.

motherland of Spain.[5] Other periodicals mentioned the plight of Christian slaves held on the Barbary coast in discussions of slavery rather than the transatlantic trade. Images from the *Trienio liberal* decried the restoration of Ferdinand VII as a return to slavery between 1814 and 1820. Although some European liberals in the early 1820s would look to the Iberian Peninsula and Spain in particular as a beacon of constitutional freedom in the struggle against the Old Regime, critics maintained that the very word Spain served as a metonym for slavery.

By the mid-1820s, anti-slave trade references began to dissipate, even in liberal Spanish circles. Sanjurjo emphasizes racist justifications of the slave trade in a chapter on the 1830s, although racism had infected these debates for decades. He writes that efforts to denigrate and dehumanize Africans largely had fallen out of favor by the early 1820s, claiming the few public figures who upheld harmful stereotypes were out of step with the times: "the stance of the Cuban deputy [Bernardo O'Gavan] was deeply retrograde, repeating arguments that had already been abandoned" (40). This myopic view fails to account for the fact that racist tropes grew in importance and did not recede in any meaningful way during periods of liberal rule. Advocates of abolition did not suddenly espouse antiracist viewpoints, and politicians on all sides, such as the Veracruzano cleric Pablo de La-Llave, shared the prejudices common to the age. Sanjurjo briefly references La-Llave but does not examine him in detail. One of the few remaining American deputies in the Cortes by 1822, La-Llave voiced the consummate logic of the age in denigrating Africans as "savages." He advanced the humanitarian cause of emancipation for these "children of nature" who had been captured and sold into bondage and urged deputies to take the matter beyond the simple binary of freedom and unfreedom. He asked his fellow legislators to consider that, after a confiscated slave ship had been sold, a portion of the proceeds be given to former slaves to pay for their journey back to Africa.[6] The fact that deputies came to see freedmen and women as a problem to be solved, rather than as a goal to achieve, symbolized the disconnect between the rhetoric of slavery and its casual use as a metaphor and the lived experience of slavery in the context of extreme violence and brutality. Thus Spain and Spaniards, presented in opposition to the myths of racial harmony propagated across Spanish America, served as foils to the spirit of liberty that had emerged across the Atlantic world. In addition, the numerous treaties signed between 1817 and 1835 did not compel Spain to actively stop the lucrative traffic in African slaves. Until representatives passed a strong legislative package to suppress the slave trade in 1866, the Spanish government balanced anti-slave trade rhetoric with concrete actions to protect and assuage slavers.

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[5] Charles Saenz, "Slaves to Tyrants: Social Ordering, Nationhood, and the Spanish Constitution of 1812," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* 37, no. 2 (2012).

[6] *Diario de las Sesiones de Cortes*, January 15, 1822.

Economic arguments came to predominate in defense of both the slave trade and slavery, with the interests of Cuban planters and Spanish merchants placed above those of the enslaved laborers forced to produce sugar. When Britain abolished slavery between 1833 and 1838, pro-slavery arguments in Cuba began to dovetail with those advanced in the United States. Men such as José Antonio Saco proposed to whiten Cuba and limit political rights to "the white race," demonstrating a strong affinity for the U.S. model of exclusionary politics (Sanjurjo, 77). Saco opposed the slave trade, but not the institution of slavery, as an obstacle to white progress in Cuba. Today, he is publicly venerated in Cuba, especially for his resistance to annexation by the United States, while his racist policies are downplayed.

While citing the requisite literature, neither Sanjurjo nor Teresa Prados-Torreira, in *The Power of Their Will*, develop much of a historiographical component to their books. This limits the potential for scholars outside of Spanish and Cuban historical circles to engage with their works in comparative and transnational perspectives. Furthermore, the authors might have made additional references to slavery in Brazil or even in neighboring Puerto Rico. The discussions of the work of Sharony Green and Thavolia Glymph, among others, help Prados-Torreira frame her argument. However, she might have explained that her work also builds on Scott's arguments regarding historical agency in *Slave Emancipation in Cuba*. By examining slave-owning women and the paternalistic society in which they lived, Prados-Torreira provides women with agency and fills gaps in our understanding of colonial Cuban society.

The Power of Their Will is a social history of women and slavery in the heart of the Spanish Caribbean. It explores daily life from the perspectives of women and the enslaved in urban and rural Cuba. The title is a play on words, as women's wills are the subject of one of the chapters. Similar to historical work on early modern and nineteenth-century women, the book demonstrates how silences in the archives necessarily produce "fragmented" stories that may never provide for comprehensive explanations (Prados-Torreira, 6). This holds true for research into the lives of Black and biracial people as well. To corroborate the documentary record, Prados-Torreira incorporates travelers' accounts and literature by writers such as Anselmo Suárez y Romero. She highlights the hypocrisy of many Cuban intellectuals who "wrote about and proclaimed the evils of slavery, while owning slaves and living off the profits of their plantations" (36). Even antislavery advocates failed to fully expose the realities of late colonial slavery in Cuba, she notes.

Prados-Torreira describes the varied nature of the work done by enslaved people in urban environments. Wealthy Creole women typically came into contact with enslaved men through their roles as coachmen, an occupation much sought

after in cities. Carriage rides and leisure activities offered women the chance to put their status on display and gave them time to shop and socialize. For savvy middle-class and lower middle-class Cuban women, renting enslaved people rather than purchasing them provided income. Some slaveholders and renters pushed female slaves into prostitution, a longstanding practice in colonial Cuba. The government appeared to express some concern about the morality of these transactions and the "harm to the souls of these people" (29). But slavery was so common that even nuns and women of African descent were slave-owners in nineteenth-century Havana. Based on the evidence marshalled, the author claims that "it seems likely that behind every domestic slave bought and sold there was a mistress making the decision" (16). Prados-Torreira also explores the institution of the *síndico*, established to protect the interests of enslaved men and women in legal proceedings. In some cases, the *síndico*, or court-appointed attorney, could compel an owner to relinquish temporary control and send enslaved people to a *depósito* where they would await a decision by a judge on matters such as wage disputes. Varella and Barcia cover some of this ground as well.

Prados-Torreira identifies the worst abuses as taking place outside main cities. Punishments included the *bocabajo*, a brutal lashing administered to pregnant women lying on the ground. The women's stomachs would be fitted into a hole dug to protect the unborn child, who would be a valued slave upon birth. The abolitionist David Turnbull, a British consul, wrote that "the worst threat wealthy Havana men and women could make to terrorize their house slaves if they misbehaved was to send them to the country" (40). As many scholars have shown, the unrelenting labor on sugar plantations dehumanized enslaved people in a profound way. Therefore, white women, connected through the church to the Virgin Mary, attempted to create a softer image of slavery through religious guidance and merciful acts. Of course, these were performative, and women were among those who protested 1789 colonial regulations that slightly raised the extremely low bar on the treatment of slaves. Wealthier Creole women tended to visit their rural sugar plantations once or twice a year to celebrate important holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Through ritualized discourses, enslaved people would improvise songs that expressed gratitude to the master and mistress or gently encouraged them to ameliorate working conditions. In turn, women performed the role of care-giving mother and nurturer to the sick, supposedly guided by compassion instead of profit.

Slaveholders who ran coffee plantations viewed their rural properties differently. These *cafetales*, within proximity to both Havana in the west and Santiago in the east, gave owners an opportunity to show off their lavish lifestyles and accumulated wealth much as a European noble would do. Many were French-speaking émigrés from Saint-Domingue who made them permanent

residences rather than serve as absentee landlords and landladies. The distance from major cities gave owners virtually free reign over their captive laborers. Yet one woman proudly insisted that her slaves loved her, while many travelers admired the coffee plantations and their well-fed, seemingly tranquil slaves.

On the other hand, Cuban abolitionist Aurelia del Castillo castigated the poisonous institution of slavery. She emphasized the deleterious effects of the relationship between enslaved and free women and girls, writing in 1878, "There is no woman in the civilized world who is born and develops under worse circumstances than the Cuban woman" (Prados-Torreira, 49). As foreigners observed, women jealously guarded the boundaries of racial hierarchy, at times even more so than the men who would transgress those same borders through sexual liaisons. And slave-owners maintained their prerogatives through acculturation and the constant threat of violence. Women played central roles in the process, from the baptizing and renaming of *bozales* (those recently arrived from Africa) to clothing, housing, and scheduling the entire labor force. Yet when revolts grew in frequency, whites would arm themselves at all times in public and in private. At night, they would lock up the quarters in which the enslaved population lived or wall them off from the rest of the plantation buildings.

Wills give us a window into the biting contradictions of slavery and the seemingly arbitrary wishes of slaveholders. Single women and widows held property rights under Spanish law, and women's wills freed slaves upon their deaths, gave others an option to buy their freedom through *coartación*, and bequeathed enslaved people to relatives and close friends. Through this process, rife with cruel ironies, families were broken up, as some gained liberty and others were transferred to a new owner. For example, one will freed a mother and a young child while keeping her other children in bondage.

Prados-Torreira reveals the limits of abolitionist sentiment during the Ten Years' War (1868-1878) by exposing the relationships between white rebels and slaves in the east. Even with a constitutionalist push to liberate all enslaved individuals, many Cubans in rebellious strongholds like Camagüey, including women, filed petition after petition to get the colonial government to return confiscated property—in many cases, the people they held in slavery. In practice, the insurgent slogan "free Cuba" meant freedom largely for whites. Varella and Barcia's *Wage-Earning Slaves*, as a quantitative social history, largely excludes the turmoil and violence of the Ten Years' War until the last chapter. This surprising omission obscures the fact that the conflict had profound ramifications for the institution of slavery; the 1878 peace agreement emancipated enslaved combatants, the majority of whom lived in the east, and set the stage for the abolition of slavery by 1886.

The concise nature of *The Power of Their Will* makes it an excellent choice for undergraduate or graduate-level seminars on Atlantic history, slavery, and women's studies. *Wage-Earning Slaves*, although tackling similar subject matter (both books even use the same image of an enslaved woman from 1871), may be more challenging for students. The authors narrow their focus by exploring approximately 650 documents on *coartación* held in Cuban archives, beginning with a detailed exposition on the limits of the notarial records. Mixing vignettes with a significant amount of quantitative analysis, the prose is hampered by an uneven writing style. Yet the authors provide a wealth of information on this distinctive process that had emerged out of customary Spanish law by the early nineteenth century. Like Prados-Torreira and Scott before her, Varella and Barcia reveal how enslaved people used available tools to pursue their own ends, a vivid reminder of the importance of giving agency to people too often marginalized in historical records.

Coartados, defined as those who had negotiated an agreement for gradual self-purchase, tended to have marketable skills and reside in urban areas, and the majority were women. Technically, the process began with a down payment of a minimum of fifty pesos to the owner. Varella and Barcia state that almost fifteen percent of Havana's female slaves were *coartados* in 1877, a higher percentage than previously estimated. They had a degree of mobility denied to those who worked on rural plantations. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, *coartados* acquired the right to be sold to a new owner as well. The price agreed upon would be fixed so that the payout amount could not be raised in the future, which would add to the burden of the slave slowly buying freedom. They acted individually rather than collectively, although at times an opaque legal system, the lack of formal deeds, and corruption presented significant obstacles to emancipation. Slaves had access to legal representation and to public mediation through the *síndicos*, officially sanctioned with a new legal code in 1842, that could wield their power against slave owners' interests. Evidence suggests that they often favored slaves, causing controversy among white elites. By 1864, with the practice growing, down payments on *coartación* could be deposited into a municipal savings bank, an innovation that offered efficiency and transparency as enslaved people purchased their own freedom.

The authors provide rich details and examples of men and women who struggled to liberate themselves from slavery. Andrea, whose owner resided in Cienfuegos, worked in Havana as a seamstress when she arrived with fifty pesos and asked the *síndico* to enter into *coartación* in 1865. She already had a designated buyer in Havana as well. Her owner protested the jurisdiction, but because she alleged earlier abuse and had the necessary funds, she was able to begin the process of self-purchase. This case demonstrates how such proceedings

benefited enslaved people, giving them legal standing to pursue freedom against their owners' wishes. At other times, however, slaves might lose claims if an owner died without leaving a written record of payments received toward self-purchase. Another abuse of the system occurred when the colonial authorities took possession of a slave, who had been placed in a *depósito* while they contested their status, and rented them out for the financial benefit of the state. And, as in the United States, emancipated slaves and free people of color always faced the danger of illegal re-enslavement. Varella and Barcia ultimately conclude that only a limited number of cases of *coartación* ended with self-purchase and freedom.

Ada Ferrer, an expert in nineteenth-century Caribbean history and Cuba's wars of liberation, has written the most accessible of the books under review, *Cuba: An American History*. Born in Havana, she begins with her personal experience of migration and a life forged in New York and New Jersey. She first returned to the island as an adult in 1990 and made it her life's work to tell the stories of Cuba's past, especially in relation to the United States. While the book covers more than five hundred years of history—charting tales of piracy, foreign invasion, and filibusters—chapters on slavery and the nineteenth century will be the focus for the purposes of this review essay.

Havana, as an entrepot between Central America and the Iberian Peninsula, and the layover for Spain's famed silver galleons, was built on New World riches. Like other circum-Caribbean ports, as early as the first decade of the seventeenth century, people of African descent composed over half of the city's population, and free people of color represented forty percent of Cuba's population by 1774. Enslaved laborers helped to construct the city's fortifications, often served in colonial militias, and worked on the plantations that would usher in greater prosperity by the late eighteenth century. Following the king of Spain's decision to expand the slave trade, the Haitian Revolution broke out, and planters such as Francisco Arango welcomed the resultant expansion of the island's slave-based economy. Cuba's Black population came to outnumber the white by 1820, and within a decade, Cubans were growing, harvesting, and refining more than half the sugar produced in the entire world. A significant percentage of all their major commodities ended up in U.S. marketplaces.

Ferrer carefully expounds on the underside of this economic growth. Cuban plantation owners often worked slaves to death, and brutalities characterized labor conditions in both the fields and the boiling houses. Similar to Prados-Torreira, she describes dehumanizing punishments and tortures such as Derby's dose, in which enslaved people were forced to consume the feces of other slaves. Cuban elites had sided with Spain during the wars of independence in Central and South America, as their fears of becoming another Haiti outweighed

any desire for greater home rule. Because dozens of conspiracies and nascent uprisings had been suppressed in Cuba in the 1790s and early 1800s, court testimonies reveal that slaves not only knew what had taken place in the former French colony of Saint-Domingue but also admired and respected the Haitians who had become "masters of themselves" (Ferrer, 74). Participants in the most significant Cuban rebellion, led by the free Black carpenter José Antonio Aponte, called for the burning of plantations and attacks on Havana's fortresses in 1812 to end the institution of slavery. They failed to defeat the well-armed authorities, though, and many were executed, with Aponte's severed head displayed in a cage as a warning to all other would-be rebels. In Cuba today, both Arango, who later advocated whitening Cuba through large-scale European immigration, and Aponte are recognized in the public square as iconic historical figures. "But in Aponte's own era," Ferrer concludes, "it was not his vision that carried the day, but rather its antithesis: the vision of Francisco Arango, the sugar planter who saw the intensification of slavery as happiness itself" (77).

Cuba's global position on the sugar market made it an ideal acquisition for the new powers of the Americas—the United States and Mexico—as well as for Britain. Annexationists plotted all kinds of scenarios to seize the island and its resources. But in the aftermath of an 1823 Masonic plot to overthrow Spanish forces and proclaim the independence of Cubanacán, the Spanish king dispensed broad powers to the governor, with the decree remaining in effect for fifty years. Spanish colonialism became hardened and militarized, even as violence and uprisings continued, especially in Matanzas in 1825 and 1843. At the same time, the Monroe Doctrine barred European states from meddling in the Americas. With British interests deterred, at least in theory, and Mexico suffering through periods of instability, the United States became the most influential foreign actor in Cuban affairs. In some ways adding on to the narrative of Sanjurjo, Ferrer emphasizes the U.S. role in the Cuban economy. Many of the illegal slaving ventures originated in U.S. ports and operated with insurance purchased from New York firms. The U.S. consul in Havana helped to run the illicit commerce and bought a plantation with his earnings, while a U.S. senator had been involved personally in the transatlantic slave trade to Cuba and also owned plantations on the island. As Prados-Torreira also noted, foreigners represented a significant percentage of the large landholders in Cuba. Ferrer adds that Americans, with many holdings in the Matanzas region, contributed to the industrialization of the island by constructing a railroad to bring sugar directly to the ports in the area. In sum, the Monroe Doctrine codified and protected U.S. investments that maintained the slave system in Cuba.

Throughout the text, Ferrer examines Cubans who remained on the island as well as those who lived abroad, many of them exiled for their political views.

For example, the priest, philosophy professor, and deputy to the Cortes Félix Varela had to escape to the U.S. after King Ferdinand restored absolutism and clamped down on liberal advocates of self-rule. Ferrer notes the posthumous recognition Varela still receives in the New York City Catholic community, having lived there for over twenty-five years (but neglects to add that he is publicly venerated and commemorated in his homeland of Cuba as well). Within the pantheon of heroic men in the annals of popular Cuban history, however, no one can claim a status or legacy equivalent to that of José Martí. Like Varela, Martí lived a life of exile, traveling extensively before settling in New York City in 1880. His name and image are now omnipresent in Cuba and in cities from Miami to New York. He participated as an independence-activist and writer during the Ten Years' War, did hard labor as a political prisoner, and died in the early stages of the war in 1895, symbolizing a liberation movement that sought to create a pluralistic, multiracial democracy. With slavery definitively abolished in 1886, Martí wrote about a new threat to Cuba and to Latin America as a whole in his most famous work, "Our America." Without naming the United States specifically, he referred to a "formidable neighbor" that had become "our America's greatest danger" (142). He presciently conjured the defining issue that would bring the U.S. and Cuba together and push them apart over the course of the next century and beyond. The role of U.S. imperialism in twentieth-century Cuba falls outside the scope of this essay, however.

Taken together, these books reveal the complexities of Cuban society and an economic base sustained by politicians and diplomats from across the Atlantic world who aided and abetted the continuation of domestic and plantation slavery. In many ways, as Ferrer argues, the United States is fully imbricated within the narrative of modern Cuban history. Therefore, the entangled histories written by each of these scholars demonstrate that broad, transnational perspectives are needed to fully understand the dynamics at play in colonial and postcolonial Cuba and Latin America.

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