

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 15

Issue 3 *Volume 15, Issue 3 (Summer 2006)*

Article 1

6-1-2006

From the Guest Editor's Desk

Manuel Barcia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

Barcia, Manuel. "From the Guest Editor's Desk." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 15, 3 (2006): i.
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol15/iss3/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

From the Guest Editor's Desk:

Over the past decades, studies on the history of Cuban slavery have appeared with relative frequency. Scholars from within and outside the island have been able to read and discuss each other's work with an increasing regularity, thus allowing debates to flow and new issues to be raised. From the 1960s and 1970s, scholars such as Manuel Moreno Fraginals, José Luciano Franco, Franklin Knight, and Verena Stolcke began calling attention to a wide variety of slavery-related issues such as the economics of sugar production and cultural trends among Africans brought to Cuba. Other scholars such as Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Herbert Klein chose to focus on Cuban slavery and how it compares to neighboring territories like Saint Domingue and Virginia, adding a new dimension to the understanding of Cuban slavery within the broader historical processes that took place in the Greater Caribbean.

This trend continued during the 1980s. In 1986, the centenary of the abolition of slavery in Cuba constituted perhaps its pinnacle. Several seminars and conferences took place, and an important number of books were published that year. María del Carmen Barcia Zequiera, Eduardo Torres-Cuevas, and Rodolfo Sarracino, among many others, provided new interpretations on the Cuban slave system from within the island. Outside, mostly in the United States, some key texts appeared as well, notably those of Robert Paquette on the conspiracy of La Escalera and Rebecca Scott on the post-emancipation period in Cuba.

The 1990s saw a remarkable number of new books and articles published on the topic of slavery in Cuba. Academics from both sides of the Florida Straights also witnessed an unprecedented political opening that allowed them, for the first time, not only to exchange ideas and their work but also, more importantly, to spend more time together and to create new spaces for academic discussion. Since then, a considerable number of U.S. scholars have had the opportunity to visit the island and conduct research in Cuban archives and libraries. Some Cuban scholars were also given the chance to visit the United States and do the same there. The results were almost immediate. Thanks to these opportunities, many books and articles appeared and continue to be published on the topic. Indeed, all four articles featured

in this special issue of the *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* (CLAHR) are, to a certain extent, a result of these exchanges.

In the first article, José Guadalupe Ortega starts with an episode of piracy and slave traffic in the Caribbean Sea, quickly moves to discuss the Cuban slave trade and its protagonists, shedding light on issues previously poorly studied or disregarded in the existing scholarship. Ortega challenges the peninsular-creole dichotomy that has featured prominently up until today in studies related to the Cuban slave trade. He demonstrates that this dichotomy was not so evident by looking into the business relationships that existed among some of these men who had very dissimilar social backgrounds and careers as merchants. Ortega also looks at the previous mercantilist history of Cuba and how it became an obstacle to the development of the slave trade by the island-based merchants. Despite these difficulties, he points out that business thrived once the possibilities of trading directly with Africa presented themselves and important companies were created to carry out and support this trade.

In her study of nineteenth-century urban slaves, María del Carmen Barcia Zequeira shows how slaves and free blacks held all sorts of jobs across the island, including those for which particular skills were needed and which were not deemed important enough by whites. Before entering the main discussion, Barcia Zequeira reminds the reader that studies on the slave family in Cuba so far have been very limited in their scope. She does well in focusing on Africa before turning her attention to Cuba. In doing so, she is one of the first Cuban scholars to look at the African background of Cuban slaves in a serious manner, almost *detectivesque*, in order to gain a better understanding of the Cuban reality of those men and women and their descendents. She then goes on to analyze the family structures in various African cultures and how they interrelated with Western-Christian structures, resulting in a sort of hybrid configuration. Barcia Zequeira first discusses the *Siete Partidas* and then the *Leyes de Indias* in the process of portraying the evolution of family law within the Spanish territories in the New World.

One of the main features of Barcia Zequeira's article is the comparison that she makes between slave family laws in Cuba and laws issued in other territories such as Louisiana and Santo Domingo. She does so especially well for the second half of the eighteenth century, discussing a series of codes from a comparative perspective that shows the progression of the family laws that affected the slave population in Cuba.

It is worth noting as well that Barcia Zequeira takes issue with and refutes Manuel Moreno Fraginals' argument about the non-existence of the slave family on Cuban plantations. She demonstrates how slave owners saw in the creation of families a propitious way to stop slaves from revolting and settle down. Ultimately, it is this argument that prevails in Barcia Zequeira's article: that despite the rigors of the Cuban slave system, a solidly structured slave family did exist on the sugar and coffee plantations.

In the next article, departing from a likely case of suicide, Luz Mena illuminates nineteenth-century Cuban slave society and addresses the possible reasons that led domestic female slaves to take their own lives under specific circumstances. Mena compares the urban and rural living conditions of African slaves in Cuba, in particular for female slaves, resulting in a solid analysis of mid-nineteenth-century medical and racial discourses about the body of the African woman. In addition, she looks critically at the labor division within the slave-holding household of her protagonist, Isabel Carabalí. She contrasts the fate of domestic slaves and their relationship with those who were rental slaves. Rental slaves were more mobile and, as she aptly explains, had more chances of gaining their freedom in the long run. Mena also highlights the role of the relationship between domestic slaves and free blacks and how the latter may have had a significant influence in the way in which the former understood the world around them.

Finally, in Manuel Barcia's article on the origins of the conspiracy of La Escalera, the author sheds light on the days that led to the start of the 1843-1844 repression. He looks at the first documents that colonial authorities produced after the uncovering of the plot in an attempt to corroborate the existence of a real conspiracy, or, as Robert Paquette suggested years ago, a set of overlapping plots. Among these documents, the report of criminal prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala has constituted the main source of information due to its descriptive character and its specifics on the events that led to the repression of 1844.

The author also has relied on some of the responses that a number of Cuban planters gave to Captain General Jerónimo Valdés in 1842 when he consulted them about the best means of keeping the large numbers of slaves in the Cuban countryside in a peaceful state. Ultimately, the *reglamento*—the *Black Code of 1842*—that resulted from Valdés' questionnaire can provide some answers related to the uncovering of the conspiracy of La Escalera itself.

All four articles included in this thematic issue of CLAHR address different facets of slavery in Cuba and they are all interrelated. The contributors hope that the final combination will provide the reader with examples of the current historiography about slavery in Cuba and the possible avenues that are open for further studies.

Manuel Barcia
Guest Editor
University of Leeds