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Exorcising the Storm: Revisiting the Origins of the Repression of La Escalera Conspiracy in Cuba, 1843-1844

MANUEL BARCIA

In November 1843, Leopoldo O'Donnell, a young Irish-blooded Spanish officer, was taking charge of the government of the most prized Spanish colonial overseas possession, Cuba. By the time he made the transatlantic journey, O'Donnell already had cemented a reputation as a heavy-handed, unkind man. Soon after taking his post in Havana, he inscribed his name in Cuba's national history as one of the cruelest men to hold the position throughout the approximately 400 years of colonial rule. Only the name of Valeriano Weyler, who was responsible for thousands of deaths during the wars of independence later in the nineteenth century, would rival O'Donnell in place and legacy.¹

Almost as soon as he took office, the newly appointed captain general allowed and fuelled a large number of trials against free black men and slaves across the western part of the island, charging them of conspiring against the colonial system. The "Year of La Escalera," or the "Year of the Lash" as 1844 came to be known in Cuba, has been the subject of scholarly discussion since the nineteenth century. Who were the ringleaders of the plot? Were there any foreign players involved? Was there an actual conspiracy, or was everything an invention of O'Donnell and his people? These are all questions that have puzzled historians for more than a century.

In 1987 Robert Paquette published what is so far the only comprehensive monograph on La Escalera. In this book he thoroughly discusses the black and mulatto underworld in the cities of Havana and

¹ Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau was sent to Cuba in 1896 to put down the revolution that would ultimately lead to the independence of the island in 1902. He quickly became a hated figure after setting up a considerable number of concentration camps where thousands of civilians died. Due to his inhuman policies he was dubbed by his contemporaries the "Butcher" of Cuba. John Lawrence Tone, *War and Genocide in Cuba, 1895-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), particularly Chapter 12: "Valeriano Weyler: The Butcher."

Matanzas and the social tensions that existed at the time between the authorities, planters, and slaves. Slavery, of course, was then the single most problematic issue, and Paquette succeeded in opening new avenues for the understanding of the ideas and behaviors of this event's protagonists.²

Unfortunately, very little has been published after Paquette's book detailing the events of 1843-1844. Almost simultaneously with the publication of Paquette's work, Rodolfo Sarracino, for example, discusses the role of the British consular personnel in Havana and their involvement in the plot, particularly the roles of David Turnbull, Joseph Crawford, and Francis Ross Cocking. Throughout the 1990s, however, the topic was almost forgotten. Those who did publish during this period tended to reproduce the official discourse or added little to what had been said before. Daniel Martínez García, for example, published an article on the Alcancía slave revolt of 1843 in which he repeated the already established assumption that the rebels of March 1843 had nationalistic, proto-independent aims.³ Gloria García, probably the scholar who has published most on this plot, has repeatedly supported this hypothesis as well. She has emphasized that the plotters who faced trial in 1844 had "an experience in the struggle and a clear conscience of their intentions and that as a consequence they were ready to have more ambitious objectives."⁴ Ultimately, the historiography concerning the "Year of the Lash" has been disappointingly meager over the past decades, and a major study of the events involving slaves, free blacks, planters, and the colonial authorities has still not been produced.⁵

² Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).

³ Daniel Martínez García, "La sublevación de la Alcancía: su rehabilitación histórica en el proceso conspirativo que concluye en La Escalera (1844)," *Rábida* 19 (2000):41-48.

⁴ Gloria García, "La Resistencia: la lucha de los negros contra el sistema esclavista, 1790-1845," in *El rumor de Haití en Cuba: temor, raza y rebeldía, 1789-1844*, ed. María Dolores González Ripoll, Consuelo Naranjo, Ada Ferrer, Gloria García, and Josef Opatrný (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2004), 319-20. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author's.

⁵ Other partial studies on La Escalera produced over the past decades are those of María del Carmen Barcia and Manuel Barcia, "La Conspiración de la Escalera: el precio de una traición," *Catauro* 2:3 (2001):199-204; Manuel Barcia, "Entre amenazas y quejas: un acercamiento al papel jugado por los diplomáticos ingleses durante la Conspiración de la Escalera, 1844," *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 10:1 (2001):1-26; Gloria García, *Conspiraciones y revueltas: la actividad política de los*

When O'Donnell arrived in Havana in October 1843, he inherited a hazardous political situation from his predecessor Jerónimo Valdés. African slaves and free blacks and mulattos were becoming a growing threat to the political stability of the colony. Foreign interests were also looming large over the island. The challenging interference of the British consuls in the internal affairs of the colony and the potentially menacing neighboring Republic of Haiti were sources of permanent worry and apprehension for Cuban authorities, merchants, and planters. O'Donnell did not take long to succumb to the anxieties that pervaded all sectors of Cuban society at that time.

Between 1841 and 1843, during the government of Jerónimo Valdés, several slave revolts took place, mostly in the western part of the island.⁶ Aware of the danger, Valdés decided to solve the problem by issuing a new slave code that was created to improve the living conditions of the slaves, supposedly minimizing their rebellious attitude. For that reason, early in 1842 Valdés sent a questionnaire to some of the richest and most important members of the Cuban *sucarcocracy*.⁷

Valdés asked them about the best manner of feeding the slaves, about their accommodation facilities, and about the slaves' real possibilities of growing their crops and buying their freedom. He also asked them about the most efficient way to monitor the large numbers of slaves living in the sugar and coffee plantations that occupied vast lands between the base of the El Rosario mountain range in Pinar del Río to the areas surrounding the villages of Trinidad, Sancti Spiritus,

negros en Cuba, 1790-1845 (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2003); Jonathan Curry-Machado, "Catalysts in the Crucible: Kidnapped Caribbeans, Free Black British Subjects and Migrant British Machinists in the Failed Cuban Revolution of 1843," in *Blacks, Coloureds and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, ed. Nancy Priscilla Naro (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2003); and Daisy Cué Fernández, *Plácido: el poeta conspirador* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2007).

⁶ Manuel Barcia, "Revolts among Enslaved Africans in Nineteenth-Century Cuba: A New Look to an Old Problem," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 39:2 (2005):173-200.

⁷ The questionnaire was sent to the following planters: Jacinto González Larrinaga, Marqués de Arcos, Joaquín Muñoz Izaguirre, Rafael O'Farrill, Sebastián de Lasa, Joaquín Gómez, José Manuel Carrillo, Ignacio Herrera, Conde de la Fernandina, Domingo Aldama, Wenceslao de Villaurrutia, Juan Montalvo, and Patricio de la Guardia. Questionnaire sent to planters, Archivo Nacional de Cuba (hereinafter cited as ANC), Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 941, exp. 33186.

and Sagua la Grande in the central region of the island.⁸ Every one of the planters consulted by Valdés replied within weeks of receiving the questionnaire. Most of them were quick to stress as much as possible that there was no need for a new black code and that Valdés was not only wasting his time, but also putting the security of the island in grave danger, since they thought that any legislation that would address the living conditions of the slaves could be interpreted by them as a relaxation of the Cuban slave system.

Some of the planters like Sebastián de Lasa and the Count of Fernandina warned Valdés against taking any steps towards the improvement of their servants' living conditions. They were convinced that the slaves would perceive any new measure as a symptom of the government's weakness, hence bringing about lethal consequences for them all.⁹ Lasa, for example, warned the captain general that once the slaves understood that the government was taking measures to regulate their lives, the "consequences would be of incalculable, fatal transcendence."¹⁰ The Count of Fernandina's words echoed Lasa's: "I am convinced that any news of government measures taken to alleviate the [slaves'] conditions cannot but have as a result the most fatal consequences."¹¹

Others like Domingo Aldama and Wenceslao de Villaurrutia did not hesitate in blaming the fair treatment given to slaves as the main reason for slave rebellions.¹² Villaurrutia, for example, reminded the captain general of the uprising of 1825 in Guamacaro to make his point. He stressed how in that case the revolt had been a result of the fair treatment given to the slaves by Mr. Fouquier who "lived among his slaves as a kind father and not as a master, and who, instead of forcing

⁸ For an analysis of this questionnaire, see Manuel Barcia Paz, *Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations, 1808-1848* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), Chap. 5.

⁹ Sebastián de Lasa to Valdés, Havana, 5 March 1842, and The Count of Fernandina to Valdés, Havana, 12 March 1842, ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 941, exp. 33186.

¹⁰ Sebastián de Lasa to Valdés, Havana, 5 March 1842, ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 940, exp. 33150.

¹¹ The Count of Fernandina to Valdés, Havana, 12 March 1842, ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 940, exp. 33150. José María de Herrera, count of Fernandina, was one of the richest planters in Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century.

¹² Domingo Aldama to Valdés, Ingenio "Santa Rosa," Sabanilla del Encomendador, 18 March 1842; and Wenceslao de Villaurrutia to Valdés, Havana, 25 March 1842, ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 941, exp. 33186.

his slaves to work, used to persuade them to do their work."¹³ Both Aldama and Villaurrutia cried for more surveillance of the slaves and for more rigorous punishments for those who rebelled against their owners.

Despite the opposition of most of the planters consulted, Valdés went ahead with his projected Black Code and soon after published it in 1842. The code raised many different reactions among the population of the colony. In it, several improvements were legislated regarding the life of the slaves. In many aspects, the *Black Code of 1842* challenged the already precarious *status quo* and, not surprisingly, some planters interpreted it in their own ways and defied it to its very roots. The code addressed key issues such as education, religious instruction, working hours, and clothing and food allowances that should be given to slaves. Some previously ignored issues were tackled as well, despite the opposition of the planters. Childcare in the estates, for instance, was carefully legislated for the first time. Strict rules were also established to control the sale of slaves and their manumission rights. Another unusual segment of the code was dedicated to the best ways to uncover and denounce the abuses committed by masters and overseers and to determine the legal punishments for those who mistreated the slaves under their orders.¹⁴

Far from stopping slave revolts, the *Black Code of 1842* seems to have fuelled them as never before. The year 1843 was certainly the most politically complicated year in the colony up until that moment. Between November 1842 and November 1843, there were at least eleven significant slave uprisings in the countryside surrounding the cities of Cárdenas, Matanzas, and Havana. Two of these revolts, the Lucumí uprising of Bemba in March and the rebellion of 5 November in La Guanábana, were arguably the two largest and most dangerous slave movements in the history of Cuba.¹⁵

¹³ Wenceslao de Villaurrutia to Valdés, Havana, 25 March 1842, ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 940, exp. 33158.

¹⁴ Rafael María de Labra, *Los códigos negros: estudio de legislación comparada* (Madrid: Aurelio J. Alaria, 1879); Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana: los negros esclavos: estudio sociológico y de derecho público* (Havana: Ciencias Sociales, 1975), 330-34; and Manuel Barcia Paz, *Con el látigo de la ira: legislación, represión y control en las plantaciones cubanas, 1790-1870* (Havana: Ciencias Sociales, 2000), 19-36. For a reproduction of this code, see Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 267-72.

¹⁵ Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 177-79, 209-10; Martínez García, "La sublevación de la Alcanía;" García, *Conspiraciones y revueltas*, 114-32; Israel Moliner, "Las sublevaciones de esclavos en Matanzas," *Islas* 85 (1986):28-31; and Barcia, "Revolts among Enslaved Africans," 173-200.

Ultimately, Valdés managed to encourage a hysterical feeling among masters and overseers, especially among those working on sugar and coffee plantations who started to see rebel slaves everywhere. One of these planters became notoriously famous due to his vigilant attitude toward the slaves; his name was Esteban Santa Cruz de Oviedo, and even today he is remembered as one of the most sordid and evil characters in the history of colonial Cuba. Throughout his life, Oviedo was known as a heartless slave owner who raped his female slaves and unmercifully punished the servants on his three plantations.¹⁶ Some years after Oviedo's death, Matanzas-born intellectual Francisco Ximeno wrote:

He was an ignorant man, with limited intellectual faculties, shy in his relations with thoughtful people, living in his estate in a total isolation, given to the joys of his harem of female servants and reputed for being cruel with his slaves.¹⁷

Simultaneously with the promulgation of the Black Code, on the evening of 3 August 1842, Oviedo summoned the captain of the jurisdiction of Sabanilla del Encomendador to his *ingenio*, the "Santísima Trinidad," to convey some urgent news. Apparently, Oviedo had uncovered a slave plot organized by his own slaves. Captain Rafael Mariscal del Hoyo, aware of the continuous slave unrest in the area, rushed to the estate to meet with Oviedo. Nevertheless, and despite his own fears, Mariscal del Hoyo refuted Oviedo's claims of a slave conspiracy in Trinidad. The next morning he wrote a short letter to the

¹⁶ During one of these excesses Oviedo killed a slave who was courting one of his concubines. According to an anonymous letter received by the captain of the jurisdiction of San Nicolás, he gave the slave 560 lashes during three consecutive days. On the last day, he decided to brand him with a burning iron as well. Enrique, the slave, died soon after, and Oviedo was prosecuted. As a result, he spent some time in jail. During the trial, his slave Rufina accused him of separating her from her husband for over nine years because he was jealous. When she escaped to meet her husband, Oviedo chained her to a wall for seven days, where she was continuously whipped. Expediente promovido por comunicación del Fiscal de S.M. sobre un castigo dado al ciudadano Enrique en la finca de D. Esteban Oviedo (Potrero Carmen en la jurisdicción de Guines, partido de San Nicolás), ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 954, exp. 33752.

¹⁷ Francisco Ximeno to Vidal Morales, Matanzas, 23 July 1882, Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba (hereinafter cited as BNC), Colección de Manuscritos-Morales, vol. 22, no. 3.

governor of Matanzas, Antonio García Oña, relaying the story and dismissing Oviedo's opinion for being excessively overzealous.¹⁸

Unfortunately for thousands of people in Cuba, Oviedo's insistence was not ignored when he went to the governor of Matanzas with a similar story little more than a year later. This time, his permanent vigilance over the slaves in the *ingenio* "Santísima Trinidad" and the circumstantial evidence provided by one of his slaves led him to uncover a widespread plot to eliminate the colonial slave regime in Cuba.

Many works have addressed whether this conspiracy really existed. Perhaps there is no way to confirm Oviedo's claims. Throughout this work, new information about the criminal proceedings that followed the uncovering of the plot will be used to shed light upon the moment and the way in which Oviedo spotted and denounced the supposed conspiracy. Was La Escalera, as generations of scholars have claimed, an elaborate invention of the colonial authorities? If not, how was it conceived and organized? Are the little explored sources located in Cuban archives sufficient to enlighten scholars on this issue? The latter question no doubt is one of the most controversial in the history of Cuba.

According to Francisco Ximeno, doubts about the real existence of the conspiracy appeared right after the death of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, also known as Plácido, a famous mulatto poet who was accused of being the ringleader of the plot. Some forty-two years after La Escalera, Ximeno recalled that "the belief in the conspiracy was widespread in Matanzas" and that "the majority of the inhabitants of the city gave more or less credit to the details of the prosecutions, which very few actually knew about."¹⁹ However, soon after, Ximeno wrote that "after Plácido's execution the public opinion changed totally."²⁰ One of O'Donnell's successors in command of the island, Captain General José de la Concha, was the first to question the veracity of the entire process in a letter sent to the Ministry of Government in late 1850:

¹⁸ Captain Rafael Mariscal del Hoyo to the governor of Matanzas, Antonio García Oña, Sabanilla del Encomendador, 3 August 1842, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Matanzas (hereinafter cited as AHPM), Gobierno Provincial, leg. 23, exp. 37.

¹⁹ Ximeno to Manuel Sanguily, Matanzas, April 1886, BNC, Colección de Manuscritos-Morales, vol. 22, no. 10.

²⁰ Ximeno to Manuel Sanguily, Matanzas, April 1886, BNC, Colección de Manuscritos-Morales, vol. 22, no. 10.

During the epoch of the honorable Lieutenant General Leopoldo O'Donnell, who governed firmly, a number of trials were carried out as a result of the comments made by a certain black slave woman denouncing the existence of a vast conspiracy among the people of color. The sentences of the Military Commission produced executions, confiscations, and the expulsion from the island of many individuals of the race of color; however, without ever finding among them any weapons, ammunitions, papers, or any other criminal proof that would demonstrate the conspiracy or that at least would make it seem possible....²¹

The only first-hand description found of how the events unfolded was given by the public prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala at the end of the trial against the plotters from the *ingenio* "La Andrea," another plantation located in the vicinity of "Santísima Trinidad." Prior to taking control of some of the seventy military trials that constituted La Escalera, Gala had been a soldier, a jurisdiction captain, and finally a prosecutor when, early in 1844, circumstances led the government to request his help in order to deal with the enormous bureaucratic monster that La Escalera eventually became.²²

In his statement, Gala reproduced the white paranoid discourse about the dangers of the slave system and called attention to the bravery and sagacity displayed by Oviedo and his aides in effectively discovering the plan that free black men and slaves throughout the western part of the island had developed. Gala's statement, written in February 1844, presented itself as a "veridical military report" of the reasons why Captain General O'Donnell initiated the criminal proceedings against the free black men and slaves allegedly involved in

²¹ Captain General José de la Concha to the Minister of Government, Havana, 21 December 1850, BNC, Colección de Manuscritos-Morales, vol. 22, no. 7.

²² Some other letters and documents produced during the first weeks of the process of La Escalera may also help to better understand what happened during this time. Some of these documents are used throughout this work to provide support to Apolinar de la Gala's statements. Particularly relevant is a letter written by Matanzas' Lieutenant Governor to O'Donnell on 8 January 1844, explaining in his own words how the conspiracy had been uncovered. García Oña to O'Donnell, Matanzas, 8 January 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 37, exp. 1.

the conspiracy.²³ According to Gala, a "happy coincidence" had saved the island from the dark designs of Spain's enemies. This "coincidence" was the information given to Oviedo by one of his slaves, a young African girl named Polonia Gangá.

This African-born girl has gone down in history as an obscure character, an evil ghost intentionally forgotten or misunderstood by Cuban and foreign scholars.²⁴ In fact, there are a few assumptions about aspects of her life that lack any foundation. For example, all those who have written about her have accepted the opinion that she was one of Oviedo's concubines, an assumption that might well have been simply gossip. While she certainly passed the information on to Oviedo, it must be noted that it was not Oviedo who freed her soon afterwards but rather the Military Commission. Whether she was Oviedo's concubine or not has little, if any, historical relevance. Polonia was a slave who knew very well what she was doing and what she was gaining with her "betrayal."²⁵ It is possible that she knew about Captain General Valdés' dispositions offering freedom to any slave who would denounce a conspiracy, and she might also have been aware of the accompanying five-hundred pesos reward.

There are no doubts about Oviedo's cruelties and about his treatment of his slaves, especially his female ones. Polonia might well have been tired and frightened. It is not unreasonable to think that denouncing her fellow slaves was the only way for her to be free and escape from her master. It should be noted, too, that when she denounced the conspiracy, neither she nor anyone else in the entire island could have predicted the carnage that would follow. Polonia could not possibly have imagined how many executions would take place, how many free men and slaves would die in prison as a result of torture and disease, and how grave the consequences of her actions would be. After all, never before had the island witnessed an event like this one. Not even during the repression against the 1812 Aponte

²³ Conclusive statement against the slaves involved in the attempt of conspiracy occurred in the sugar plantation "La Andrea," written by the prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala, Matanzas, March 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

²⁴ Polonia Gangá has been occasionally resurrected since José Luis Alfonso blamed her, in a letter to Domingo del Monte, as the person ultimately responsible for the horrors of La Escalera. José Luis Alfonso to Domingo del Monte, 22 December 1844, in Domingo del Monte, *Centón Epistolario*, ed. Sophie Andioc (Havana: Imágen Contemporánea, 2002), 5:183; and Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 214.

²⁵ However, it might not have been a betrayal after all, if one considers the possibility that perhaps she was not involved at all in the conspiracy itself.

Conspiracy plotters, about which Polonia probably never heard a word, had the tortures, executions, and other related deaths taken such a high toll in human lives.²⁶

Polonia Gangá, as any other historical character, deserves to be studied in an objective light. Unfortunately, her recently discovered letter of freedom located in the Cuban National Archive in Havana does not offer any new qualitative information about Polonia and the reasons that might have driven her to denounce the plot.²⁷ She, like many other characters and topics related to the "Year of the Lash," is still waiting for a serious documented approach that will highlight further the beginnings of the repression against the conspirators of 1843-1844. These characters also might include the two other slaves involved in the uncovering of the conspiracy: Patricio, who was the first to confirm Polonia's allegations, and the "12-to-14 year-old slave" who ultimately led authorities to extend the investigations beyond the limits of Sabanilla del Encomendador.²⁸

It is also feasible that Polonia simply lied about the conspiracy. This possibility could cast an even deeper shadow over the entire proceedings. However, neither Gala, the prosecutor, nor any of the scholars who have studied the conspiracy contemplated this possibility. Gala accepted that she was telling the truth. Scholars who for more than a century denied the existence of the conspiracy surprisingly never questioned the veracity of Polonia's account. Gala's summary would later become the official script about how and when the conspiracy had been revealed and about who were the main protagonists behind this discovery.

Esteban Santa Cruz de Oviedo, as previously stated, was by this time well known in the Matanzas region for his alarmist attitude towards the slaves' unrest. It is worth noting here that Gala's conclusions were addressed not to the general public, but explicitly to the Spanish authorities and more specifically to the tribunal of the Military Commission. In fact, what Gala actually did was to offer a meticulous description of how the investigation had been conducted during the first moments following the uncovering of the conspiracy,

²⁶ On the 1812 conspiracy and revolt, see José Luciano Franco, *La conspiración de Aponte* (Havana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, 1963); and Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²⁷ Barcia and Barcia, "La Conspiración de la Escalera," 199-204.

²⁸ Conclusive statement by the prosecutor Apolonar de la Gala, Matanzas, 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

when many questions about its character and extension still remained unclear. Although Gala's words should not be taken for granted, there are no grounds to question his reasons—if any—for hiding the truth and lying to his superiors, especially considering that he would not gain anything with such behavior. In his own words, Gala did not attempt to offer "an eloquent historical compendium, adorned with metaphors." For him this was a job for "men of letters and politicians." Instead, Gala was trying to offer a "veridical military narration" of the events that occurred before, during, and after the "fortunate" uncovering of the plot.²⁹

To begin with, Gala invoked past slave uprisings, especially those that had occurred the previous year in the jurisdictions of Bemba in March and La Guanábana in November. He was aware of the effect that such a reminder would have upon the minds of the people he was addressing. Although he did not mention the *Black Code of 1842*, it was clear from his words that he ascribed some blame to it. Gala clearly chose his words very wisely. He resorted time and again to hinting about past disgraces while he shrewdly reminded his audience that the opportune uncovering of the plot helped to avoid the occurrence in Cuba of a revolution similar to the one that had taken place fifty years earlier in the French neighboring colony of Saint Domingue. Gala wanted to make sure that the association of both events was not lost on his audience:

Only in the history of the disgraced island of Santo Domingo is it possible to find a similar occurrence. Indeed, sirs, this is an example that we shall always keep in sight; fifty years have passed since the time when her commerce and agriculture were in the greatest prosperity, and her inhabitants, swimming in the opulence, considered themselves the happiest on the globe. All those joys were taken away from them instantaneously by the genius of evil, taking over that island in the same way that he wants to take over this one.³⁰

²⁹ Conclusive statement by the prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala, Matanzas, 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

³⁰ Conclusive statement by the prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala, Matanzas, 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

He then began to recount the story of how the "loyal Polonia" had told Oviedo about the existence of a slave plot that was about to explode. In order to find out more about the alleged plot, Oviedo decided to disguise himself among his slaves at night, wearing a field worker's outfit. He also joined the slaves during the working hours with the intention of eavesdropping on their conversations. In some instances he pretended to leave his estate when in reality he was hiding in the company of a white friend and a loyal slave, who served as interpreter, inside some pieces of furniture that he had placed in the slave quarters to help him in his spying endeavors. However, none of these measures gave the suspicious planter the expected results.³¹

Finally, one evening Oviedo hid under the bed of his slave Patricio and his wife. That night, according to Gala's statements to the Military Commission, Oviedo clearly overheard Patricio telling his wife about the things they were planning to do. The next morning he called Patricio and questioned him about what he had said the night before. After a few hours of interrogation, the slave finally confessed to the existence of a plot among the slaves of the "Santísima Trinidad" and some other estates in the vicinity.³²

That same day Oviedo rushed to Matanzas to inform Governor García Oña about the conspiracy. After that, one thing led to another and a series of orders were issued from Matanzas and Havana. Interrogations began soon after under the command of Captain José del Mazo and Lieutenant Colonel Francisco Hernández Morejón. In a few days, Mazo and Morejón, joined later by Gala, uncovered a plot that included the slaves of several estates in the jurisdiction of Sabanilla del Encomendador. The main leaders were quickly executed, and the plot was considered a "plan concerted in isolation by the slaves of seven sugar estates, which aimed to kill all the whites, to burn down estates and towns, and to become the owners of the island."³³

Up until this point, nothing irregular appeared in the process. In the past, many other slave plotters had been taken to court, accused of comparable crimes, and sentenced in a similar way. The conspirators' goals were very limited and resembled those of the many African-led

³¹ Conclusive statement by the prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala, Matanzas, 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

³² Conclusive statement by the prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala, Matanzas, 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

³³ Conclusive statement by the prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala, Matanzas, 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

conspiracies and revolts that had occurred in the western part of the island since the first quarter of the century.³⁴

According to Gala, after the executions took place and calm was restored, Oviedo returned to "Santísima Trinidad" where, instead of returning to his routine, he continued to interrogate his slaves. A few days later, a teenage slave confessed to the existence of another cell of the plot in the surrounding estates.³⁵ This confession triggered the real beginning of the "Year of the Lash." Oviedo, once again, informed Governor García Oña about the new developments, and García Oña wrote to O'Donnell asking for instructions. This time the response of the captain general was severe and fast. He sent the Military Commission prosecutors back to work and dispatched Oviedo, Hernández Morejón, and a third slave owner to spread the news among plantation owners, encouraging them to interrogate their own slaves. Gala himself was impressed with the speed with which these dispositions were carried out. In his own words, "each planter wanted to emulate the patriotism and selfishness of Esteban Oviedo."³⁶ By mid-January 1844, the repression was in full swing and only a massive butchery would eventually alleviate the fears among the authorities and the white population of the island.

Gala's report is probably the only surviving account of the moments that followed the uncovering of the conspiracy. The report is also the best document for understanding the attitudes of planters and authorities and to explain the reasons behind the reigning state of fear under which they were all living.

La Escalera has proven to be a constant problem for Cuban and foreign scholars. There is little basis to endorse the idea that everything was an invention of Oviedo, O'Donnell, and company. More than seventy bundles of documents with simultaneous consistent declarations implicating the same names over and over throughout the western part of the island serve as a testament that this was a real event. Rather than questioning whether there was a plot or not, it seems more appropriate to divert the attention towards the character and extension of the plot. Although it is possible that a well-organized conspiracy backed by the British was alive in the underground world of Havana,

³⁴ Barcia, "Revolts among Enslaved Africans," 173-79.

³⁵ Conclusive statement by the prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala, Matanzas, 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

³⁶ Conclusive statement by the prosecutor Apolinar de la Gala, Matanzas, 1844, ANC, Comisión Militar, leg. 38, exp. 1.

Matanzas, and some other cities and towns, it is more feasible to consider the idea that there was not just one plot but rather several.

Robert Paquette has raised this idea before. Relying on his outstanding research in archives and libraries outside of Cuba, Paquette has suggested that instead of a single conspiracy, what has been called La Escalera was more likely a set of entangled, overlapping plots.³⁷ This overlapping characteristic represented, no doubt, the worst nightmare for colonial authorities. Less than two months after the proceedings began, the omnipotent Military Commission was forced to ask for help. Seventy different criminal processes produced a frightening amount of revelations that linked free blacks and mulattos, slaves, the British, the Haitian army and navy, a Colombian general, and even some respected Cuban intellectuals such as Domingo del Monte, José de la Luz y Caballero, and Pedro José Guiteras.³⁸

Criminal prosecutors and their secretaries were forced to travel long distances to conduct their investigations. From the base of the Sierra del Rosario to the vast plains of Sagua la Grande and the valleys around Trinidad, free men and slaves were jailed, interrogated, and brought to trial. Prosecutors were backed up by an immense number of soldiers who helped them arrest, transport, and torture the suspects. Prisoners endured even worse conditions. Many of them lost their lives during the proceedings. Tortures were so frequent that 1844 went down in the history of Cuba under the name of the "Year of the Lash." Prisoners were also forced to move continuously from one place to another because their involvement in two or more of the seventy trials meant that they often had to make statements before two or more of the prosecutors in charge.³⁹

La Escalera, if this name is to be accepted, refers to the actual set of possibly interconnected plots that preceded the repression and was made up of many different people chasing miscellaneous dreams. Drawing inspiration from Haiti, free blacks and mulattos, mainly urban, seemed to have envisioned a republican nation with equal rights for everybody. They also appeared to have relied on England's support. Their frequent clandestine meetings with British functionaries such as David Turnbull, Joseph Crawford, and Francis Ross Cocking appear to indicate something more than a simple friendship. Other free men,

³⁷ Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 233-66.

³⁸ The information related to the seventy trials that followed the events of December 1843 can be found in the Comisión Militar collection in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba.

³⁹ The movement of prisoners from one place to another is clearly reflected in the paperwork of the seventy trials; see ANC, Comisión Militar, legs. 31-81.

mainly those from the countryside, some of them born in Africa, were part of a more confusing scenario. They were connected to their comrades from Matanzas and Havana and knew about the British support and guessed that the Haitians would also help them once they rebelled. Their labor relations, mostly related to humble people of all races, led them to consider some important issues that no one else had brought up before. Several leaders among them wanted to become landlords. They wanted to kill the whites, perhaps with the exception of the English, the Americans, and the immigrants from the Canary Islands. They also wanted to keep the railroads working and therefore wanted to spare the lives of technicians and machinists, mostly English and Americans. Since they also needed field workers, some of them contemplated the idea of using the Canary Island immigrants—who were often living in worse conditions than the slaves—as laborers.⁴⁰

Plantation slaves, mostly born in Africa, were more attached to their origins.⁴¹ However, free men and their Creole comrades drove them to participate in the plot. Many of these African-born slaves had invaluable warfare experiences. Some had been "captains" in West Africa and knew very well how to use arms, including bows, arrows, spears, and fire weapons. Despite making up only 10.51 percent of the convicted prisoners of the conspiracy, these slaves made their mark during the preparations. Interrogated prisoners often mentioned their discussions about the importance of magic, costumes, drumming, and poisoning in order to achieve their aims. They frequently commented about the characteristics of the different ethnic groups and about their inclinations to go to war.⁴²

The organization of the plot, then, was extraordinary in the sense that, had the conspiracy turned into a rebellion, hundreds of people would have immediately joined it. On the other hand, it was also chaotic because not even the leaders were sure of what they were getting into, and certainly they did not know how strong the growing movement was throughout the western part of the island. Perhaps even this chaos was part of the plan. Perhaps the leaders wanted a dismembered movement with many heads that would be more difficult

⁴⁰ Depositions of the slaves Melitón and José Gangá, Archivo Histórico de la Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad, Fondo General, leg. 117, exp. 1.

⁴¹ The aims of the African-born slaves involved in the plot ranged from murdering all the whites and taking their women as brides, to gaining ownership of the land. See any of the seventy legajos on La Escalera at the ANC, Comisión Militar. The leadership role of the Creoles and free blacks can also be seen throughout these legajos.

⁴² See Barcia Paz, *Seeds of Insurrection*, 13-24.

to defeat. After all, how could anyone have imagined the extent of the repression that would follow the revelations of Polonia Gangá?

La Escalera is still awaiting new studies. There are many uncertainties that may be solved through the effective reading and analysis of the dusty bundles of documents buried in Cuban archives. Even the exceptional work of Robert Paquette—even more exceptional given that he was not able to access these documents—is missing the small, overlooked details that only the actual trial paperwork can provide. Unlike many other historical questions that prove to be impossible to answer, the mysteries of La Escalera remain in a corner of the old intramural Havana waiting for someone with enough curiosity and desire to unearth them and bring them back to light. La Escalera, as a topic of study, is far from finished.