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# No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans

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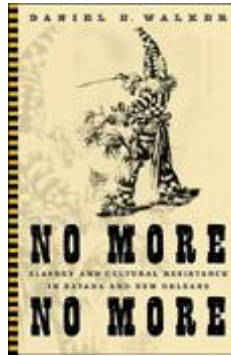
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## Book Review



### H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-South, <http://www.h-net.org/~south> (June 2005).

Daniel E. Walker. *No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. xiv + 188 pp. Figures, notes, index. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8166-4327-X.

Reviewed for H-South by Justin Nystrom, Department of History, Georgia Southern University.

### *Celebrations of Resistance*

In the thirty years that have passed since the appearance of Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, historians of North American slavery have contributed enormously to our understanding of the "world that the slaves made." [1] This has happened, in part, because the profession has embraced the methodological tools of other disciplines in its quest to resolve questions left unanswered by traditional textual sources. Anthropology, linguistics, art, musicology, and sociology are but a few of the fields that have helped to recreate the lives of a people who otherwise left behind a limited paper trail.

Daniel Walker's *No More, No More* is an example of the innovative techniques recent historians have used to find the authentic voice of the enslaved. Indeed, the greatest strength of this book lies in the author's multidisciplinary approach. By his own estimation, Walker had set out to ask "fresh questions of traditional sources while simultaneously engaging a new corpus of primary data" (p. x). Yet, with a few notable exceptions, research for this book might have been conducted through the good graces of a helpful interlibrary loan department. To say that this book is derivative, however, would be grossly unfair. Instead, through his skillful synthesis of published primary and secondary works from a profoundly diverse set of disciplines, Walker yields a fresh argument about the importance of cultural expression to those oppressed by the slave power.

Walker compares Havana's annual *El Día de Reyes* festival with the weekly slave celebrations of New Orleans's Congo Square to demonstrate how urban slaves used cultural expression as a means of resistance. Celebrated on January 6, the Catholic holy

day of epiphany, *El Día de Reyes*, or "Day of the Kings," nominally honored the traditional festival of the twelfth day after Christmas. On this occasion, free people of color joined with the enslaved in a raucous theatrical procession through the streets of Havana. On Sundays in antebellum New Orleans, Congo Square (today the site of Armstrong Park) served as a gathering place for enslaved Orleanians. Here they spent their customary day of leisure engaged in traditional drumming, song, and dance.

At first glance, Havana and New Orleans make a natural pairing for a comparative study of urban slavery in the Caribbean world. Both served as the locus for vast slave-based plantation economies and both had international reputations as slave trading centers. At the start of the nineteenth century, Toussaint L'Ouverture's revolution had further linked the two cities -- not only in fear, but because they were the two major destinations for the slaveholding refugees of St. Domingue.

In several important aspects, however, the relationship between Havana and New Orleans during the timeframe of Walker's study is one of departure. While Cuba remained within the decrepit Spanish empire, Louisiana moved by degrees into the orbit of Anglo America. This drift away from the Latin world not only brought important legal and cultural changes, but as the nineteenth century elapsed, it also dramatically altered the demographic composition of Louisiana's slave population. As a major center for slave trading in the Mississippi Valley, New Orleans became the chief gateway through which slaves from worn-out eastern plantations moved to the profitable lands of the antebellum southwest. Although some African slaves reached America's shores after the international trade became illegal in 1808, the increase in New Orleans's slave population came primarily through birthrate. The slave population in Cuba, by contrast, suffered a shockingly high mortality rate. Furthermore, African slaves continued to reach Cuban shores in large numbers throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

A tale of two cities growing apart would not ordinarily hamper a comparative study such as this. Unfortunately, Walker makes many assumptions based upon the uniformity of the cultural identity and folk traditions among the two cities' slave populations. As a result, the strong conclusions that Walker yields about the persistence of African culture in Havana seem far less applicable to New Orleans, particularly as the nineteenth century reaches its midpoint. The fact that there is only a comparatively small amount of primary data on Congo Square also gives Walker's comparative framework a lopsided appearance. As a result, while this is a strong study of slave culture in Havana, this book is far less so of New Orleans.

Walker establishes five main themes for evaluating the scope, and more importantly, the meaning of the cultural resistance on display during *El Día de Reyes* and in Congo Square. First, he takes the reader on a tour of the multitudinous forms of slave cultural expression, tracing both meaning and cultural context to their African roots. Second, Walker explores how the enslaved utilized these sites of celebration as a "counterstatement" to the oppressive use of public space by the slave power. Third, the author examines how *El Día de Reyes* and Congo Square defied slavery's unremitting attack upon the fabric of black family life. Fourth, he shows how the slaves of Havana and New Orleans used the language

of African cultural expression to counteract the deleterious effects of slavery upon both black masculinity and sexual agency. Last, Walker sets out to demonstrate the various ways in which cultural expression helped forge unity among the enslaved and free blacks, in spite of the strong cultural, social, and legal barriers to such an outcome.

The author has devoted a substantial amount of ink in this work to the meaning of festivals in African culture as well as the specialized visual language associated with such celebration. He then describes the persistence and transformation of various dances, songs, and rituals as they appear in the slave societies of the New World. Walker argues that the masking, songs, and dance found among the slaves of Havana and New Orleans reflected a syncretism of African traditions. Early nineteenth-century slave populations of these two cities, then, were not dominated by the cultural traditions of the most dominant African ethnicity. Rather, a nascent pan-African identity developed that recognized the commonality of all slaves, both in terms of shared spiritual values and how those values related to their new reality in North America. According to Walker, these shared values formed the core around which slaves might forge solidarity and express resistance.

The second chapter is perhaps the most problematic portion of Walker's work. In it, he engages in a broadly theoretical dialogue about public space and its use in slave society. The majority of this section consists of a lengthy discussion of the many ways in which the slave power used public space as a means of social control. Havana's notorious Depi<sup>3</sup>sito Central jail and the slave market under the rotunda of New Orleans's St. Louis Hotel serve as two of the many examples he includes as institutions used by the master class to establish limitations, both physical and metaphorical, upon the aspirations of the enslaved. Walker then asserts that slaves used *El Día de Reyes* and Congo Square to carve out their own public space as a "counterstatement" to the slaveholding class. Although the master class may not have realized it, these festivals defiantly represented open protest in the minds of the enslaved participants. While this is a convincing argument, Walker has not included a dialogue, either in the text or footnotes, on the main authorities on the theory of public space. Furthermore, the sources he has used are at times of an uneven quality. While he presents an excellent body of primary data on Havana's penal system, discussions of antebellum New Orleans rely largely on picturesque tomes such as Henry Castellanos's *New Orleans as It Was*.<sup>[2]</sup> Walker's inclusion of WPA slave narratives from rural Louisiana also seem oddly out of place in his discussion of public space in an urban setting.

Walker explores how African-descended people used *El Día de Reyes* and Congo Square to counter the slaveholding class's assault on family unity in a chapter titled "Regulating Domesticity: The Fight for the Family." Male-to-female sex ratio imbalances, the break-up of families through sale, a systematic demonizing of the black male, and white male sexual predation all undermined the ability of the enslaved to maintain regular family cohesion. Particularly through his discussion of *El Día de Reyes*, Walker argues that participants used the festival to put forth a positive alternative image to the prevailing negative stereotypes of the black family. People of African descent combined Catholic imagery of the Holy Family with traditional West African icons such as the maternal figures of Yemaya and Oshun as well as dolls representing the infant Anaquille. Certainly this thesis has a convincing quality about it, but it does seem to dismiss the possibility that some

people of African descent took their Catholicism seriously, and sought to honor the Holy Family within the context of African tradition. Indeed, a brief discussion of syncretism, particularly between Catholicism and non-European modes of worship might have strengthened rather than undermined Walker's argument.

The role that these two festivals played in a greater conceptualization of "blackness" is the subject of *No More, No More's* fourth chapter. Again, Walker begins the chapter with a thorough discussion of the secondary works regarding the creation of black identity and racial stereotypes. Then the author contends that although African-descended people knew that the celebrations of *El Día de Reyes* and Congo Square reinforced white racist images of supposed black primitiveness, they nevertheless participated because of the cultural affirmation and spiritual strength found in the festivals.

Lastly, Walker makes the claim that *El Día de Reyes* and Congo Square served as a crucible for pan-African identity. Once again, the author seems far better equipped to substantiate this claim for Havana than New Orleans. Much of this has to do with the fact that comparisons between the two cities break down in dramatic fashion when one looks at the effects of pigmentation and class upon self-identification. Havana, possessing something approaching the "one drop" rule long before the dawn of the Jim Crow South, had far greater potential for unity among nonwhites. Thus, in the celebration of *El Día de Reyes*, one found a spectrum of color among its participants. In contrast, among the handful of written accounts that describe Congo Square, few free, light-skinned Afro-Creoles appear. Indeed, as Walker freely admits, this class often consciously distanced itself from all things African. In the absence of true black unity, then, he suggests that Congo Square forged unity of a different kind -- one of diverse African ethnicities among the enslaved. At such a point, he seems to stretch his theoretical framework past its useful elasticity. Seemingly, by making the sample small enough, one might find unity in any situation.

Despite some shortcomings, *No More, No More* should appeal to a wide audience. Those interested in urban slavery, the African Diaspora, antebellum New Orleans and Havana, slave culture, racial identity, black Catholicism, and the expression of cultural resistance in a general sense will find this book worthwhile. Unfortunately, the comparative nature of this work has served to detract rather than add to its substance. Had Walker focused his energy solely on *El Día de Reyes*, his conclusions would be of a uniformly high quality. In particular, the author's multidisciplinary approach provides new and interesting glimpses of slave life in the nineteenth century. For this reason alone, scholars contemplating such methodology in their own work will find this book worth their time.

## Notes

[1]. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World that the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

[2]. Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was* (New Orleans: The L. Graham Co. Ltd., 1905).

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