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**Negotiating a Slave Regime: Free People of Color in Cuba, 1844-1868**

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**Negotiating a Slave Regime: Free People of Color in Cuba, 1844-1868**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

To my parents

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# Negotiating a Slave Regime: Free People of Color in Cuba, 1844-1868

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In my dissertation, I investigate how race, gender, and freedom intertwined in colonial Cuba's slave-based society. By examining government documents, newspapers, manuscript censuses, petitions, and personal accounts from archives in Cuba, Spain, and the United States, *Negotiating a Slave Regime* charts the strategies employed by free people of African descent (*libres de color*) to navigate nineteenth-century Cuba. In 1844, a series of slave uprisings, known collectively as the Conspiracy of La Escalera, ruptured the tenuous stability of the colony. Cuban officials accused *libres de color* of leading the revolt, in collaboration with Creoles, slaves, and British abolitionists, to overthrow slavery and Spanish rule on the island. The ensuing repression intensified Spain's efforts to limit the influence and demographic growth of *libres de color* by expelling them from the island, restricting their occupational opportunities, and curtailing their social activities. While Cuba's proscribed legal, racial, and gendered norms marginalized free men and women of color because of their racial ancestry and potential threat to the slave regime, this system simultaneously cast them as vital to providing for the needs of Spaniards and Creoles. Nevertheless, the tensions of this duality enabled *libres de color*

to maneuver effectively within colonial constraints. By 1868, the advent of the Ten Year's War, Cuba's first war for independence from Spain, the free population of color had achieved a remarkable demographic recovery. Fueled by the predominance of women, and legal and occupational perseverance, *libres de color* nurtured a new leadership and political consciousness. By narrating the re-emergence and development of free people of African descent in Cuba, my dissertation explores the themes of freedom and resistance. Moreover, I illuminate the dynamic nature of colonial social relations and the challenges to imperial ideology and control in nineteenth-century Cuba, the African Diaspora in Latin America, and the Atlantic World.



## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1    Free People of Color in a Slave Society:	
Vital Roles and a Threatening Presence .....	37
Chapter 2    Spectacle of Power:	
The Repression of the Conspiracy of La Escalera .....	70
Chapter 3    Labor and La Escalera.....	104
Chapter 4    Cubans of Color in Exile.....	140
Chapter 5    Redefining Service: The Militia of Color in Cuba.....	171
Conclusion .....	198
Bibliography .....	216
Vita .....	230

## INTRODUCTION

In 1846, José Moreno wrote to the Spanish Ministry of Justice on behalf of himself and twenty other free Cubans of African descent living in exile in Campeche, a port city on the Gulf Coast of Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Moreno's group, and hundreds like them, had fled Cuba in the wake of the 1844 Conspiracy of La Escalera, an alleged plot to abolish slavery and colonial rule on the island. The ensuing repression forced them to emigrate. After two years of living under difficult circumstances in a foreign land, the cadre of artisans, laborers, and their families felt compelled to request permission to return home. Their letter, which wound its way through the hands of the Spanish Consul in Mexico, the Captain General in Cuba, and the Ministries of Justice and Overseas Affairs in Spain, addressed the tragic circumstances of their departure and the impact of the repression on their lives. Moreover, Moreno's letter implored Spanish officials to facilitate the group's safe passage back to Havana.

...We were not among the people of color who planned the secret conspiracy, that was fortunately discovered, but we trembled at the [Military] commissions, for they never were about justice... and we can certify to the tears we shed over our desolate families, such that we ran with the current of emigration far from Cuba, a blessed land, sweet like sugar, a land consecrated by the work with which our fathers earned Christian freedom, and which they then gave to us.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the following terms to refer to the greater free African-descended population in nineteenth-century Cuba: of color, of African descent, *libres de color*. The terms free and *libres* are used interchangeably to indicate individuals or groups who are not legally slaves. During the nineteenth century, individuals were denoted in the records I examined for this study as *pardo*, *parda*, *mulata*, and mulatto refer to persons who physically appeared to have partial African ancestry, typically a mixture of African and European heritage. Similarly, the terms *moreno*, *morena*, and black refer to persons recorded as appearing to be of full African ancestry or dark in complexion. I may also use the term black in a broader sense, but only when referring to diasporas or political challenges. I use the terms white, Spanish, and Creole to refer the European-descended population, although I recognized that Creole or *criollo* was a term that generally indicated that individuals were born in the Americas, as opposed to Europe or Africa.

...Freely, and with legal permission, we came to this foreign land, and have been here for two long years, during that time we have honorably sought to support ourselves with meager resources ... we reverently request that you lift the prohibition, opposing the orders of the Captain General in Cuba. ...the investigations determined that we are innocent; we have in no way been involved in the conspiracy.<sup>2</sup>

The group's request highlighted several reasons for the government to end their exile.

They appealed to the authorities' sense of justice, proclaiming that they had nothing to do with the conspiracy and had left Cuba legally as innocent victims of the repression.

Furthermore, the letter underscored the families' diligence and humility as they scraped to support themselves in exile. Finally, they gave deference to Spanish power and asked officials in the metropolis to override colonial Cuban authority in the matter.

The petition led by Moreno represented one of the numerous strategies free people of color (*libres de color*) employed to negotiate the tensions over race, freedom, and empire in Cuba and the Atlantic World in the aftermath of the Conspiracy of La Escalera. From the start of the 1844 repression until the beginning of the Ten Years' War (1868-1878), Cuba's first war for independence, *libres de color* challenged the coercive policies and restrictive legislation designed to control them within and outside of Cuban borders. The overall focus of my study is to explore the impact of the repression on free people of color and their response to over two decades of social, occupational, legal, and political restrictions and reforms.

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<sup>2</sup> José Moreno to Ministro de Gracia y Justicia, Campeche, Mexico, 26 June 1846, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba, Real Órdenes y Cédulas (hereafter ANC-ROC), Legajo 159, Exp. 106.

A series of rebellions in 1843 provided the impetus for the repression that prompted Moreno's exile and his subsequent petition. In early November of 1843, slaves revolted in western Cuba's rich sugar district in Sabanilla, Matanzas. Starting with the *Triumvirato* sugar plantation, the group continued to the neighboring *Ácana* plantation, where slaves had rebelled a few months prior. Burning property in their path and dragging hesitant bondsmen with them, insurgent slaves left six whites dead and numerous wounded. By the time the rebels arrived at the nearby *Concepción* plantation early the next morning, the local magistrate had been alerted and ordered mounted troops to subdue the uprising. Instead, arriving slaves drove off the forces and, joined by thirty *Concepción* slaves, set fire to the grounds.<sup>3</sup> Two more sites, *San Lorenzo* and *San Miguel*, suffered damage as slaves continued their rebellion for another day. An armed confrontation with a cavalry regimen and civilians finally stopped the revolt.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the struggle, fifty slaves lay dead and seventy-seven were taken prisoner. Others, who had escaped into the neighboring hills, were ordered to be found and decapitated.<sup>5</sup> The matter, however, did not end with the capture of the rebel slaves. Local sugar planter, Esteban Santa Cruz de Oviedo, uncovered information linking the slaves to a broader plan of revolt. In response, Antonio García Oña, governor of the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 209, 210; Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario de Estado and Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 8 November 1843, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain, AGI Digital Collection, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Ultramar, (hereafter AGI-AHNU), Legajo 8, Exp. 21, folio 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, Captain General of Cuba to Secretario de Estado and Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 8 November 1843, AGI-AHNU, Legajo 8, Exp. 21, folio 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, Captain General of Cuba to Secretario de Estado and Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 8 November 1843, AGI-AHNU, Legajo 8, Exp. 21, folio 1-2.

Matanzas province, gained approval from Cuba's Captain-General, Leopoldo O'Donnell, to send troops into the region, quell further revolt, and determine the origins of the plot.<sup>6</sup>

By the start of 1844, Cuban authorities accused free people of African descent of leading a conspiracy to overthrow slavery and Spanish rule on the island with an alliance of slaves, Cuban whites, and British abolitionists. The ensuing repression had disastrous social, economic, and cultural consequences for Cuba's free population of color. Furthermore, the authorities' reaction earned infamy as an unprecedented wave of violence in colonial Cuban history. Given its force, how did the free sector of color respond when the colonial state adopted a conscious policy of limiting their influence and demographic growth in the wake of the repression? My study addresses this overarching question by highlighting the multiple approaches *libres de color* used within the shifting dynamics of race, rebellion, labor, migration, and militia service.

Over the next twenty-four years, free women and men of African descent expressed their resistance to the repression using formal petitions, secret gatherings, and clandestine travel, and circumventing restrictive laws. By the onset of the Ten Years' War in 1868, Cuba's free population of color, both those on the island and those returning from exile, had reemerged. In the midst of a colonial society with persistent preoccupations over slavery, labor, and empire, the population increases and educational gains of free people of color offered evidence of their adaptability and resiliency.

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<sup>6</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, Cuba Captain General to Secretario del Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 1 December 1843, AGI-AHNU, Leg. 8, Exp. 14, No. 2, folios 1-2; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 209, 210, 214-215.

Whenever they could, *libres de color* reasserted their collective identity and rebuilt their economic base, strengthening their presence and influence in colonial Cuba.

In spite of the powerful and shattering events of 1844 and 1868, the impact of the repression on the free population of color has received virtually no scholarly attention. Yet, in the years that followed the Conspiracy of La Escalera, Cuba underwent, at the very least, major shifts in population and labor dynamics. Furthermore, the actions and alleged activities of free individuals and families of color in exile forced the colonial government to extend the repression outside its borders. Accordingly, the interim years must be addressed in order to fully understand the scope and magnitude of the continuity and discord that transformed Cuba in the mid nineteenth century. In this dissertation, I unveil the spaces within which free people of color maneuvered the complex interplay and constraints of race and freedom in nineteenth-century colonial Cuba, the Caribbean, and the Atlantic World.

I contend that *libres de color* held a simultaneously essential yet threatening position in the colonial regime. Prohibitions that excluded free people of color from most professions enabled them to fill other fundamental occupational and service roles in the slave regime. Yet their ability to unite with slaves and Creoles (European descendents born in the Americas) against slavery and the Spanish empire made *libres de color* a threat to the stability of Cuba. The tensions of this duality enabled them to forge an autonomous space to maneuver within urban slavery, before and after the repression. The events of 1844, however, supplanted the free population of color's vital status, leaving their former influence deflated and fragmented, although not extinguished. In its

place, colonial officials recast the specter of rebellion, raising it to unexpected international proportions.

Within the broader project of charting how free people of color responded to the repression, I examine how the events of 1844 shifted this sector's social, economic, and political viability in terms of gender dynamics. For example, the increase of free *pardas* and *morenas* as midwives prior to 1844 prompted restrictive legislation and harsh newspaper commentaries. Yet, it was not until after the repression that the medical establishment gained enough force to change the racial composition of midwifery on the island. Similarly, prior to 1844, the lack of able-bodied white men stimulated the recruitment of free men of color into the *pardo* and *moreno* militia units. In the wake of La Escalera, colonial authorities implemented its most sweeping piece of legislation targeting *libres de color*. They dismantled the longstanding militia of color across the island. When the units were reestablished and reformed a decade later, hundreds of draftees and their parents responded in protest. By analyzing the tensions that engulfed the free men and women of African descent in Cuba's slave society, I demonstrate how they struggled to shape their own images, interpretations, and social system within the shifting and intertwining political, social, racial and gendered boundaries of nineteenth-century Cuba.

### ***Free People of Color in the Caribbean Region***

The “bounded lives” of free people of color were duplicated, in various configurations, throughout the Americas.<sup>7</sup> Numerous studies of free people of color have illuminated the challenges they faced, broadening our comparative perspective of the worlds they inhabited. The slave islands of the Caribbean represented one of the hemisphere’s most politically and culturally diverse regions. Whether flying Spanish, French, Dutch, Danish, English, or United States flags, the populations of all of these territories included a free sector of color. And in each of these places, free persons of African descent encountered limits to their liberty based on hierarchical traditions and attitudes, discriminatory legal codes, and fears of political upheaval from European and Creole authorities and inhabitants.

Discrimination and negative images of free people of color abound. In his regional study of Vera Cruz, Mexico, Patrick Carroll highlighted how “whites relied on racism and ethnocentrism” to maintain political control.<sup>8</sup> Studies of the French Caribbean by Laurent Dubois and Venezuela, in the circum-Caribbean, by Winthrop Wright noted how colonial administrators acted to restrict the economic, social, and civil rights of free population of color.<sup>9</sup> Colonial descriptions fanned negative perceptions of free persons of color. In Neville Hall’s study of the Danish West Indies, authorities

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<sup>7</sup> Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Patrick J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 86.

<sup>9</sup> Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 74.



referred to free people of African descent as ‘the plague of the colonies.’<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Jay Kinsbruner’s work on racial prejudice in Puerto Rico included commentary by officials declaring there to be ‘nothing more ignominious than being a black or descended from them.’<sup>11</sup> The patterns helped suppress and erode the upward mobility and civil liberties of free blacks and mulattoes.

The numerical size of free people of color in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century contributed significantly to raising colonizer’s concerns. For example, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the freedmen, as they were called in the British territories, ranged from a low of 2.6 percent of the total population in Barbados to a high of 14.1 percent in Grenada.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, their counterparts in the Spanish Caribbean averaged from 16.9 percent in Cuba to 43.6 percent in Puerto Rico.<sup>13</sup> In the French territories, *gens de couleur* outnumbered whites in large percentages. Their sector comprised 75 percent

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<sup>10</sup> Neville A.T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 159.

<sup>11</sup> Neville A.T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 159; Jay Kinsbruner, *Not of Pure Blood: The Free People of Color and Racial Prejudice in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Figures are for Barbados in 1801, with free people of color representing 2.6 percent or 2,139 out of a total population of 82,292, David W. Cohen and Jack P. Greene, “Introduction,” in David W. Cohen and Jack P. Greene, eds., *Neither Slave Nor Free: The Freedman of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World*, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 218; For Grenada, figures are from 1830, with free people of color comprising 14.1 percent or 4,003 out of a total population of 28,615, Edward C. Cox, *Free Coloreds in the Slave Societies of St. Kitts and Grenada, 1743-1833* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Libres de color* in Cuba represented the following proportions: 1817 – 20.6 or 114,058 out of a total population of 553,033; 1827 – 15.1 percent or 106,494 out of a total population of 704,487; 1841 – 15.2 percent or 152,838 out of 704,487 island inhabitants, Kenneth F. Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba, 1774-1899* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 1976), 84-86, 88-90. Percentages for Puerto Rico are as follows: 1802 - 43.8, 1812 – 43.6, 1835 43, Cohen and Greene, “Introduction,” 4; Kinsbruner, *Not of Pure Blood*, 31.

more than whites in Saint-Domingue, 50 percent more in Martinique, 40 percent more in Guiana, and 20 percent more Guadeloupe.<sup>14</sup> In Spanish New Orleans *libres de color* totaled 19 percent of the total population.<sup>15</sup> As an antebellum territory, the city's free African-descended sector ranged from 14 percent to 18 percent of inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the free black and mulatto proportions in the population, European preoccupations over enforcing political security and racial hierarchy supported racism, discrimination, and negative perceptions of free sector of African descent.

Extensive literature on the nineteenth-century British Caribbean has demonstrated that the presence of free blacks and mulattoes guided the intensity of civil and social persecution. Edward Cox's study of St. Kitts and Grenada highlighted how colonial rulers denied freedmen equal rights because doing so would "would irreparably damage the racial basis on which society rested."<sup>17</sup> In particular, because of freedmen's large portion of the overall free population, at a high of 65.2 percent in St. Kitts and 84.1 percent in Grenada, colonial whites feared that free people of color might make violent demands for equality.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Whittington B. Johnson's work on the Bahamas, which explored its "nonviolent transformation" from slavery, illuminated free people of

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<sup>14</sup> Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> In Spanish New Orleans in 1805, free people of color comprised 19 percent of a total population of 8,222, Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places* 18.

<sup>16</sup> As a territory of the United States, free people of color in New Orleans comprised the following figures: 1806 – 14 percent of 2,312 out of 17,001 inhabitants, 1820 – 18 percent or 7,161 out of 41,844 inhabitants, Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 248.

<sup>17</sup> Cox, *Free Coloreds in the Slave Societies of St. Kitts and Grenada*, 92.

color as “forceful and articulate allies of colonial governors” during efforts to end and slavery and expand civil rights.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, this did not negate authorities’ concerns over violent upheaval in the rest of the Caribbean.

Despite the small proportion of freedmen in areas such as Barbados and Jamaica, concerns surrounding their potential for insubordination prevailed. Free people of color in Barbados, even at their numerical height, never comprised more than six percent of the island’s inhabitants.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Jerome Handler’s examination of these “unappropriated people” maintained that Barbados’ social and legal structure strove consciously to uphold white racist ideology and restrict freedmen’s efforts for advancement.”<sup>21</sup> In Jamaica, Mavis Campbell’s study demonstrated that British reaction to free men and women of color conformed to the dominant trends: widespread hostility and restrictive legislation in response to free black and mulatto demands for increased civil rights.<sup>22</sup>

Concerns over the free sector of color’s potential for disturbing the tenuous balance of slave societies prevailed in the Dutch and Danish Caribbean. Harmannus Hoetink’s work on the Dutch colonies of Surinam and Curaçao theorized that the

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<sup>18</sup> Freedmen averaged 59.2 percent of the average 4,188 total free population of St. Kitts and 77.7 percent of the average 4,016 in Grenada between 1812 and 1830, my calculations based on figures from Cox, *Free Coloreds in the Slave Societies of St. Kitts and Grenada*, 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Whittington B. Johnson, *Race Relations in the Bahamas, 1784-1834: The Nonviolent Transformation from a Slave to a Free Society* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Jerome S. Handler, *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the Slave Society of Barbados* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

negative attitudes of whites towards free people of African descent clustered around the dominant white group's desire for physical and economic security.<sup>23</sup> Neville Hall's account of the Danish territories St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix (present day United States Virgin Islands) explained that freed blacks and mulattos were perceived as "capable of the worst and most dangerous forms of social deviance" which could destroy "a fragile public order in the most destructive manner conceivable."<sup>24</sup> As the age of revolution took hold in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, authorities were convinced that free men of African descent would promote revolutionary ideas with violence.<sup>25</sup>

Preoccupations over revolt led by or in collaboration with free men of color reverberated throughout the Caribbean region. As Winthrop Wright asserted for Venezuela, this potential for united resistance among freedmen and slaves "raised the specter of race wars."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Carolyn Fick's study of the Haitian Revolution observed that the gens de *couleur* threatened the colony's political security, and challenged racial hegemony and the institution of slavery.<sup>27</sup> The successful slave revolt in Saint-Domingue shifted the impossible into reality, jolting slave societies throughout

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<sup>22</sup> Mavis C. Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in a Slave Society A Sociopolitical History of the Free Coloreds of Jamaica, 1800-1865* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976), 38.

<sup>23</sup> Harmannus Hoetink, *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1973), 38.

<sup>24</sup> Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Wright, *Café con*, 26.

the region. Initial reaction to it roused suspicions among authorities in Charleston, South Carolina who feared that free black and slave refugees from Saint-Domingue would spread ‘new ideas to our slaves’.<sup>28</sup> Officials in New Orleans responded by implementing laws to forbid free people of color from entering its port.<sup>29</sup> Of the approximately 27,000 people who fled during the Haitian Revolution, the bulk found temporary refuge in neighboring Cuba.<sup>30</sup> This fact, however, but this did not negate Cuban concerns over rebellion. Spaniards and Creoles in Cuba expressed concern that free people of color encouraged slaves to seek liberation that could result in an attempt to overthrow the white population.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the fear of “another Haiti” would plague Cuba throughout the nineteenth century.

### ***The Growth of Cuba’s Free Population of Color***

As noted previously, the Spanish Caribbean maintained a large free sector of color. The free population of color in Cuba emerged similarly to other slave societies in the Americas: sexual unions of European men and enslaved African and African-descended women and comparatively lenient Spanish legal codes. These components

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<sup>27</sup> Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 17, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard E. Powers, Jr., *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 28.

<sup>29</sup> John E. Baur, “International Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution,” *The Americas* Vol. 26, no. 4 (April 1970), 400.

<sup>30</sup> Baur, “International Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution,” 405.

<sup>31</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 104-105.

facilitated manumission and fostered the growth of *libres de color*.<sup>32</sup> Between 1550 and 1650, Spain's conquest and colonization of the island decimated the indigenous population, giving rise to the importation of slaves. Spanish men dominated European migration to the island. Meanwhile, Spanish law prohibited unaccompanied white women from emigrating. Accordingly, the few Spanish women in Cuba were the wives, daughters and servants of government officials and military officers. The scarcity of European women and the decline of indigenous females resulted in frequent Spanish male liaisons with African slave women.<sup>33</sup> While few of these unions resulted in legal marriage, some of the fathers granted their illegitimate offspring liberty, creating a new free social sector: *libres de color*.

The island's free population of African descent increased rapidly throughout the first half of the nineteenth century through a variety of ways. Immigration, involuntary or voluntary, served as one stimulus. In 1763, at the end of the Seven Years' War between Spain, Britain and France, the Spanish Crown relinquished its Florida territory to Britain. The geopolitical exchange forced Spain to evacuate over three thousand people from the region. The Spanish government relocated the bulk of these refugees, eighty-four families, to a new settlement in the Matanzas countryside of Cuba, popularly called known as Ceiba Mocha. Among the evacuees were four free *pardo* and nine free *moreno* families.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See David W. Cohen and Jack P. Greene, editors, *Neither Slave Nor Free: The Freedman of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World*, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

<sup>33</sup> Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30, 34, 46-47.

Subsequent territorial shifts renewed migratory movements of *libres de color* to Cuba when the United States gained control over Florida (1821) and Louisiana (1803). British Florida lasted for twenty years, before being returned to Spanish control in 1783. The colony remained under Spanish rule until 1821, when it was sold the United States. Free individuals of color, such as *pardo* Juan Romero, recalled relocating to the island when St. Augustine, Florida “became the United States.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the transfer caused families, like Tomás and Agustina Álvarez and their young son to leave St. Augustine. They reestablished themselves in Havana, where the Álvarez’s son Tomás, became a tailor and served in Havana’s *pardo* militia.<sup>36</sup> *Libres de color* from Louisiana also resettled in Havana. For instance, Antonio Merlin, a *moreno libre* and a native of New Orleans, made his living as blacksmith in Cuba.<sup>37</sup> These circum-Caribbean relocations demonstrated the mobility and viability of free men and women of African descent in their adopted homeland.

Other immigrants arrived from the neighboring island of Hispañola. Seven thousand *affranchis* (free people of color), slaves and French refugees from the former French colony poured into Cuba between 1803 and 1808 seeking escape from the

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<sup>34</sup> Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999,) 59, 62, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Juan Romero to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 3 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Tomás Álvarez to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 30 April 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 31.

<sup>37</sup> Antonio Merlin to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 17 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 19.

violence and aftermath of the Haitian Revolution.<sup>38</sup> Free individuals of color from Santo Domingo, the Spanish portion of the island, also relocated to Cuba. Juan Saldana recalled leaving neighboring Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic) with his master, Juan Leonard, a Cuban Regiment officer, “when he was six or seven years old.” Upon Leonard’s death, Saldana gained his freedom. By the 1840s, Saldana had established a peaceful life in Havana with his “pregnant wife and infant daughter.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Pedro Calvo, a *moreno libre*, arrived in Cuba from Santo Domingo. By the 1840s, he had lived in Cuba for forty-six years, and “had conducted himself honorably” as a cook, father, and grandfather.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the Spanish American Wars of Independence, between 1810 and 1825, spurred the arrival of free people of color from Venezuela, Mexico, and other parts of the Americas into Cuba.<sup>41</sup> For instance, *moreno libre*, Juan Argüí left Vera Cruz, Mexico bound for Cuba to continue living “under the Spanish flag.”<sup>42</sup> Marcos Velásquez, had lived in Venezuela “until the uprising” in his country. He left out of “necessity, like many other faithful and loyal emigrants.”<sup>43</sup> In Cuba, he supported himself as a shoemaker and confectioner. Others, like José González, a dockworker,

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<sup>38</sup> Duvon Corbitt, “Immigration in Cuba,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 22 (May 1942): 287; Rafael Duharte Jiménez, *El negro en la sociedad colonial* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1988), 91.

<sup>39</sup> Juan Saldana to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 6 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 35.

<sup>40</sup> Pedro Calvo to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 5 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 11.

<sup>41</sup> “Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deporten,” ANC-AP, Leg. 141, No. 6, 1844.

<sup>42</sup> Juan Arregui to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 4 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 17.

<sup>43</sup> Marcos Velásquez to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 8 April 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 40.



hailed from Brazil.”<sup>44</sup> Despite claims of seeking docile, familial lives under the Spanish empire, free people of color arriving from areas of political instability came under increasing scrutiny for their mobility and ability to spread rebellious ideas.

In addition to immigration, manumission and self-purchase contributed to the growth of the free population of color in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup> Masters typically manumitted slaves along age and gender divides. For instance, records from mid-century indicated that women were manumitted between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, suggesting that they gained their freedom through sexual and domestic services for their white owners. Creoles noted this trend, remarking that women of African descent “easily freed themselves” and contributed to the “infinity of free people of color.”<sup>46</sup> In contrast, manumitted men dominated in the 60 and older age group, indicating that owners released male slaves to relieve the economic burden of providing for aging chattel.<sup>47</sup>

Self-purchase or *coartación* offered slaves another means to freedom. Spanish law, which recognized the right to own property and make contracts, enabled slave men and women to purchase themselves.<sup>48</sup> Slaves rented out by their masters could usually keep any earnings above their rental, and retain the surplus from their garden plots on the

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<sup>44</sup> José González to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 29 April 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Arthur Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 159.

<sup>46</sup> Francisco Arango to King of Spain, Havana, 30 August 1830, Código Negro, No. 2, , AGI-Indiferente, Leg. 2828, folio 5.

<sup>47</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 121; Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 91, 93-94.

<sup>48</sup> Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery*, 159.

plantations. Newspapers commonly posted listing soliciting slaves to rent. Examples of requests included advertisements to “rent a good black male coachmen “ or “a black female to cook and wash regularly.”<sup>49</sup> While this practice often allowed masters to reduce the costs of slaves’ maintenance, it also gave slaves the cash to purchase their own freedom. Once a down payment for self-purchase was made, the law stipulated that the slave could not be transferred or sold. Havana manumission records of 1810 and 1811 listed 954 slaves who gained their freedom through self-purchase in an effort to control their lives and pursue a better future for themselves and their children.<sup>50</sup> In doing so, they expanded their knowledge of the legal system and how to maneuver within it.

Richard Robert Madden, a British abolitionist, however, pointed out in his 1840 address to the General Anti-Slavery Convention in London, “the *coartación* was not established to reduce slavery...only to prevent any alteration in the price to the slaves.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, the system of *coartación* was meant to compensate slave owners for the loss of property, rather than facilitate slaves’ access to freedom. For instance, the slave code of 1842 stated that the selling price could be raised if a slave wanted to be sold against the will of his or her master. In addition, the *coartación* could not be applied to both a slave woman and her offspring simultaneously; the children of *coartada* mothers could “be sold like any other slave.”<sup>52</sup> Despite the obstacles, *coartación* became a well-

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<sup>49</sup> *Diario de la Habana*, 4 de October de 1836; *Diario de la Habana*, 31 de July 1837.

<sup>50</sup> Herbert Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York, Oxford University Press 1986), 194-195.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Madden, “Address on Slavery presented to the General Anti-Slavery Convention,” (London: Johnston & Barrett, 1840), 16.

known tool for slaves to obtain their freedom, particularly for those in urban areas.

Finally, a native-born free sector of color comprised the core of *libres de color*. The main factor contributing to the development of the free African-descended population consisted of births by free *pardas* and *morenas*. The 1827 census registered one birth for every six free women of color between the ages of twelve and forty. In comparison, there was only one birth for every seven white women in this age range.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the census revealed that births by free women of color, *pardas* in particular, increased by sixty-nine percent between 1817 and 1827.<sup>54</sup> These figures were remarkable, considering that during this time period free women of color represented the smallest female segment. The data suggested that the largest sector of free women of color consisted of those in childbearing age.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, balanced gender ratios played an important role in the growth of the free population of color. Throughout Cuba, as in other parts of the Caribbean, women comprised the majority of the free sector of color in several cities and towns.<sup>56</sup> The 1827 census indicated that free women of color

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<sup>52</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 270.

<sup>53</sup> Ramón de la Sagra, *Historia económico-política y estadística de la isla de Cuba o sea de sus progresos en la población, la agricultura, el comercio y rentas* (Havana: Imprenta de las Viudas de Arazoza y Solér, 1831), 21.

<sup>54</sup> Sagra, *Historia económico-política y estadística de la isla de*, 23. Percentage increase of births: Free *pardas* - 57.7; free *morenas* - 11.5; slave women - 44.3; white women - 48.7.

<sup>55</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 121, Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 91, 93-94. The 1827 census lists a total of 300,582 women on the island, broken down as follows: free women of color - 54,532; slave women - 103,652; white women - 142,398.

<sup>56</sup> The 1780 census of Cap François, the urban center of Saint Domingue, listed 748 free women of color and 643 free men of color. When France made its last enumeration of Saint Domingue in 1789, free women of color remained in the majority in urban areas. See Susan M. Socolow, "Economic Roles of the Free Women of Color of Cap François" In *More than Chattel*, eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 282; Geggus, "Slave and Free Coloured Women in Saint Domingue," 270, 277 n75; Free women of color also dominated the free population of

frequently matched or outnumbered men of their class.<sup>57</sup> And while Spanish and Creole women were numerically larger than free *pardas* and *morenas*, visitors to the island remarked commonly on the “scarcity” of white women, in contrast to the public prevalence of free women of color.<sup>58</sup>

Overall, the combination of native, foreign, and manumitted *libres de color* gave rise to a rapidly expanding and diverse free sector of African descent. The increasing numbers and racially mixed composition of *libres de color*, however, posed difficulties in the colonial socio-racial hierarchy. In a society where social and political stability demanded that people of African descent be kept in a subordinate position to whites, *libres de color* blurred the boundaries of black and white, and free and slave. Moreover, their consistent presence, averaging fifteen to twenty percent of the total population in the first half of the nineteenth century,<sup>59</sup> enabled them to maneuver for individual and group mobility and legal rights.

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color in Spanish New Orleans (1769-1803). Women outnumbered free men of color two to one between 1777 and 1788. By 1803, the proportion of free females to males in New Orleans had decreased, but women dominated numerically. See Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 91, 93-94.

<sup>58</sup> Antonio Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1873; reprinted New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 26, 28; Robert Francis Jameson, *Letters from the Havana, during the Year 1820* (London: John Miller, 1821) in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 5; John G.F. Wurdemann, *Notes on Cuba*, (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1844) in Robert M. Goldwin, *Physician Travelers* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971), 40; Luís Martínez-Fernández, *Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean: The Life and Times of a British Family in Nineteenth-Century Havana* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 68.

<sup>59</sup> Population figures for free people of color from 1792 to 1841 are as follows: 1792 – 54,152 or 19.8 percent (total population - 272,301); 1817 – 114,058 or 20.6 percent (total population 553,033; 1827 – 106,494 or 15.1 percent (total population – 704,487; 1841 - 152,838 or 15.2 percent (total population 1,007,624); Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 84-86, 88-90.

Cuba's free population of color carved out a substantial niche in the Spanish colony by filling vital roles in society as artisans, teachers, midwives, laborers, and military personnel. However, as men and women fully or partially descendent from African slaves, their anomalous presence questioned racial slavery and challenged the established socio-racial structure. Furthermore, affiliations with *cabildos de nación* (socio-religious and cultural associations for free people of color and slaves) implicated the free sector of color in connection with slave and Creole revolts throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Officials translated these strains on social and racial notions of superiority into impending political conflict that came to a boiling point in 1844.

### ***Free People of Color and the La Escalera Debate***

Historians have debated the authenticity of the Conspiracy of La Escalera for over a century. Some scholars, like Robert Paquette and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, contended that Cuba's history of slave rebellion, examples of collaborative dissidence among slaves, free blacks, and whites, and the massive testimony investigators compiled from the more than four thousand people arrested in connection to the Conspiracy of La Escalera confirmed the possible existence of one or many plots in 1844. Others, including Franklin Knight, and Cuban historians Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux and José Luciano Franco, concluded that the colonial government fabricated the conspiracy and used it as a means to destroy the influence and growth of the free community of color.<sup>60</sup> I join this

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<sup>60</sup> The literature on the Conspiracy of La Escalera includes: Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*; Walterio Carbonell, "Plácido, ¿Conspirador? Revolución y cultura" no. 2 (February 1987): 57; Daisy Cué

debate from a different perspective. Rather than speculating on whether or not a conspiracy existed, I focus on the very real repression that enveloped the free population of African descent.

My study, then, is not about the Conspiracy of La Escalera; it is about its aftermath. Commentaries by scholars of Cuban history, on and off the island, concur that colonial reaction to the alleged plot unleashed an unprecedented wave of violence that devastated the leadership and influence of the island's free community of color, in effect, silencing them. Historians have emphasized how the plot heightened Creole and peninsular concerns over the slave trade, abolition, rebellion, and independence.<sup>61</sup> While

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Fernández, "Plácido y la conspiración de la Escalera," *Santiago*, no. 42 (June 1981): 145-206; José Luciano Franco, "Introducción al proceso de la Escalera," *Boletín del Archivo Nacional* 67 (January-December 1974): 54-63; Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), xxi, 81, 96; Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 193-222; Leonardo Griñan Peralta, "La defensa de los esclavos," In *Ensayos y conferencias* (Santiago de Cuba: Editora del Consejo Nacional de Universidades, Universidad de Oriente, 1964); Philip S. Foner, *A History of Cuba and Its Relations with the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1962), I: 214-28; Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez et al eds., *Historia de la nación cubana*, 10 vols. (Havana: Editorial Historia de la Nación Cubana, 1952); José Manuel de Ximeno, "Un pobre histrión (Plácido)," In *Primer Congreso Nacional de Historia*, 2 vols. (Havana, 1943); Roberto P. De Acevedo and Benito Alonso y Artigas, "Nuevas noticias y documentos acerca del poeta Plácido," *El País*, 25 January 1941; Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, *Manual de historia de Cuba* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales 1971); Herminio Portell Vilá, *Historia de Cuba en sus relaciones con los Estados Unidos y España* (Havana, 1938); Dolores María de Ximeno, "Aquellos tiempos. . . Memorias de Lola María," *Revista bimestre cubana* 19 (November-December 1924); Fernando Ortiz Fernández, *Hampa afro-cubana: los negros esclavos; estudio sociológico y de derecho público* (Havana: Revista Bimestre Cubana, 1916); Vidal Morales y Morales, *Iniciadores y primeros mártires de la revolución cubana* (Havana: Avisador Comercial, 1901); José de J. Márquez, "Plácido y los conspiradores de 1844," *Revista cubana* 20 (1894).

<sup>61</sup> See Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, esp. 4, 233, 264-265; Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera del siglo XIX* (Havana: UNEAC, 1971), 25; Franklin Knight, "The Free Colored Population in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century," in *Sugar Without Slavery: Diversity in Caribbean Economy and Society Since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, Verene A. Shepard, editor, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 241 (224-247); Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 29; Walterio Carbonell, "Plácido, ¿Conspirador?" *Revolución y cultura* no.2 (February 1987): 57; Philip Foner, *A History of Cuba and Its Relationships with the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: 1962-1963), I: 214-228; Herbert Klein, *Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 193-222; David R. Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain and the Abolition of the Cuban Trade* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 172, 178.

there is a rich historiography on Cuban race relations, these studies primarily examine the periods before 1844 or after 1868. Consequently, they reveal little about the impact of the Repression of La Escalera on free people of color or how the event influenced Spanish colonial policy in terms of race relations prior to the Ten Years' War.<sup>62</sup>

While I agree that the repression severely damaged the status and economic viability of *libres de color*, I argue that the extensive violence, deportations, restrictive legislation, and dismantling of social institutions did not spell their social, political, or demographic demise, although many officials and elites of the era sought such an end. Rather, the often inconsistent, contradictory, and fragmented perceptions and policies aimed at free women and men of color contributed to their ability to negotiate the slave regime. Undoubtedly, the Repression of La Escalera shattered the lives of thousands within Cuba's free communities of color. Their collective experience, skill, and knowledge of the slave regime, however, meant that the repression would not be their undoing. By investigating the strategies *libres de color* employed to reemerge culturally, economically, and in numerical size between 1844 and 1868, I chart the processes of

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<sup>62</sup> See Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970); Franklin W. Knight "Cuba" In *Neither Slave Nor Free: The Freedman of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World*, ed. David W. Cohen and Jack P. Greene (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*; Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, *Contribución a la historia de la gente sin historia* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1974); Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, "Historia de la gente sin historia: testamentaria de pardos y morenos libres en la Habana del siglo XIX," *Revista de la Biblioteca José Martí* 63 (May-August 1971): 45-54; Robert Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*; Consuelo Naranjo Orovio and Armando García González, *Racismo e Inmigración en Cuba en el siglo XIX* (Madrid: Ediciones Doce Calles, S.L., 1996); Philip A. Howard, *Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998); Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*; Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Ferrer, Ada. *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

continuity and change, and political expression over time. In doing so, my study bridges and advances the current historical literature on nineteenth-century Cuba.

Examining the aftermath of the repression of La Escalera offers a means of exploring the pressures and contradictions of slave society from a comparative perspective of rebellions. Scholars of slave rebellion in the Americas have aptly utilized these types of societal ruptures as windows for comprehending the perceptions and tensions of slave societies on the eve of revolt.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, I contend that examining the impact of the La Escalera Repression provides a lens for understanding the tense interplay of race, empire, resistance, and identity in colonial Cuba. My study shifts the focus from the conditions that sparked rebellion to post-revolt traumas. By investigating the methods authorities used to reassert control and how the masses involved responded to these efforts, my study sheds additional light on the political and social pressures of slave regimes. Moreover, my analysis of the conflicting responses of Spanish officials to free people of color highlights the intricately wound, yet unstable, nature of race and imperial policy both before and after rebellion.

By concentrating on free people of color and their multiple roles in society, prior to the repression and in its aftermath, my dissertation contributes to African Diaspora studies and research on free people of color in the Americas. Free people of African

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<sup>63</sup> See Robert Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 26; Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 10; James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 145-146; David Barry Gaspar *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua with Implications for Colonial British America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1985), xiv; see Michael Craton, *Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 241; Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), xvii.



descent existed in every slave society in the hemisphere; from Baltimore to the Brazil, and all of New Spain. Spanish Cuba was no exception.<sup>64</sup> Whether free by birth for generations, or recently freed by manumission or self-purchase, *libres de color* represented a powerful contradiction in slave societies; they were not white and free or black and slave.<sup>65</sup> As W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Gilroy, and other scholars of race and identity in colonial and slave societies of the Americas suggest, free people of color were entrenched in a realm of duality.<sup>66</sup> Their duality manifested itself in a variety of ways. As free individuals of color in the midst of slavery, their status threatened the division between free and slave and the racial hierarchy of white over black. Because a large proportion of *libres de color* were of mixed African, European, and, in some areas,

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<sup>64</sup> For the Caribbean, see Harmannus Hoetink, *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1973), 38; Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 17, 20; Mavis C. Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in a Slave Society A Sociopolitical History of the Free Coloreds of Jamaica, 1800-1865* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976), 38; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 104-105; Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía*. Additional works by Deschamps Chapeaux on free people of color include *Contribución a la historia de la gente sin historia* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1974); *El Negro en el periodismo en el siglo XIX: ensayo bibliográfico* (Havana: Ediciones Revolución, 1963) and “Historia de la gente sin historia: testamentaria de pardos y morenos libres en la Habana del siglo XIX,” *Revista de la Biblioteca José Martí* 63 (May-August 1971): 45-54; For Brazil and Spanish America, see A.J. R. Russell-Wood, “Colonial Brazil,” In *Neither Slave Nor Free: The Freedman of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World*, eds. David W Cohen and Jack P. Greene (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 130; James Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532-1560: A Colonial Society* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 222; Douglas R. Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebian Society in Colonial Mexico, 1660-1720* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 15; Ben Vinson, III, *Bearing Arms for his Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 15-16; For the United States, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: The New Press, 1974), 343;

<sup>65</sup> Douglas R. Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination*, 15.

<sup>66</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989 [1903]), 2-3; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 45; Also see Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination*, 15; Hanger, *Bounded Lives*, 2; Arnold Sio, “Marginality and Free Coloured Identity in Caribbean Slave Society,” In *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy*, Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd, editors, (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1991), 153.

Indigenous origins, their bodies represented a physical dualism. In addition, gendered traditions and laws pertaining to occupation provided free people of color a niche in the workforce, but their proliferation in skilled trades or areas deemed sensitive, such as birthing, provoked white resistance. Meanwhile, debates over arming men of African descent for the defense of the Spanish Caribbean empire weighed heavily on the minds of colonial and military officials.

Furthermore, in addition to the large proportion of native-born *libres de color*, colonial conflicts, particularly the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and the Wars of Independence in Spanish America (1810-1825), channeled foreign-born free men and women of African descent to Cuban shores. Their presence contributed another layer of identity, sometimes creating friction, as it did after Haitian refugees arrived. Foreign free people of color sparked concerns among the upper strata of Cuban free blacks and mulattoes over their preferred standing with island authorities.<sup>67</sup> Yet, in order to preserve political and economic security, authorities cast free *morenos* and *pardos* as anomalous in Cuba's slave society. They enforced limits on free blacks based on racist attitudes, suspicion, occupational competition, and restrictive legislation. Nevertheless, the island's prosperity was intertwined with the contributions of free people of African descent.

Situating free people of color in the larger context of slavery, the age of revolution, abolition, and the geopolitical struggles in the Americas after 1844 sheds light

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<sup>67</sup> Francisco Mónico de Flores, Francisco Abrante, Marcelino Gamarra, et al., *Justo sentimiento de pardos y morenos españoles libres de la Habana*, (Havana: Oficina Filantrópica de Don J.M. de Oro, 1823), 208, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Comisión Militar (hereafter ANC-CM), Legajo 60, Exp. 2, folio 208.

on their lives and perceptions of them throughout the Caribbean region and beyond. The rise of slavery in the New World, as scholars such as John Thornton and David Eltis have demonstrated, placed Africans and their descendents at the center of the Atlantic World.<sup>68</sup> Geopolitical struggle and migration, two central processes that fueled the formation of transatlantic worlds, facilitated the dispersal of Africans. In the case of the nineteenth-century Spanish empire, colonial conflict and immigration stimulated the rise of Cuba's sugar industry and its slave society; destroyed its South American holdings; catapulted foreign free women and men of color to Cuba in search of refuge, work, and family; and intensified colonial efforts to avert a Haitian-style slave revolt.

In the wake of the 1844 repression, over a thousand free men, women, and children of color were expelled from Cuba, creating another component of the free black diaspora. Previously unstudied, this exodus illuminates the transpolitical nature of their dispersal. In addition, it offers insight into how they reacted to and managed their situation. Furthermore, their migration reveals the ways in which colonial authorities responded to the unexpected consequences of the expulsions. Examples include correspondence from exiled Cubans of color in Mexico, like José Moreno, to officials in Cuba and Spain; tri-governmental communications between Cuba, the United States, and Mexico; contact between free African Americans and networks of immigrants in New Orleans, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City; and requests for early prison

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<sup>68</sup> Janet J. Ewald, "Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1914," 105, no. 1 (February 2000) : 69; For a detailed discussion, see John Thornton, *Africa and the Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: 1998); David Eltis. *The Rise of Africans in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

release from *libres de color* in Seville, Spain.<sup>69</sup> These exchanges exemplified Atlantic World interactions and interconnectivities. The mobility of free women and men of African descent throughout the Atlantic region gave them access to people, places, and ideas that intricately linked them to the age of revolution and abolition in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, in the eyes of Cuban authorities, these movements magnified the persistent political threat that free people of color posed to the stability of the slave regime on an international level.

Chapter One of the dissertation narrates the roles of free people of color prior to 1844. This section highlights my thesis that free people of color were both vital and threatening by examining issues regarding supply and demand in employment and defense of the island. Societal needs cast *libres de color* as essential for providing services for the colony. In particular, legal prohibitions and Spanish taboos regarding manual labor fostered the predominance of free people of color in skilled and unskilled occupations.<sup>70</sup> Regular newspaper solicitations for and by free black and mulatto

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2000); Phillip D. Curtain, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).

<sup>69</sup> José Moreno to Ministro de Gracia y Justicia, Campeche, Mexico, 26 June 1846, ANC-ROC, Legajo 159, Exp. 106; Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O'Donnell, Washington, D.C., 31 December 1844, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Asuntos Políticos (hereafter ANC-AP), Leg. 140 Exp. 39; "Los individuos José Gertrudis Ramos, Jose Carbo, Damian de Fleites y Damaso Ramos, soliciten indulto," 1847, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Ultramar, Gobierno, Cuba (hereafter AHN-UGC), Leg. 4627, Exp. 9, Nos. 1-3.

<sup>70</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 119 Knight, *Slave Society*, 94; Teresa Ortiz, "From Hegemony to Subordination: Midwives in early modern Spain." 95-114 In *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe*. Hilary Marland, editor. (London: Routledge, 1993), 100, 102; Sarah C. Chambers, *From Subjects to Citizens: Honor, Gender, and Politics in Arequipa, Peru, 1780-1854*

midwives, teachers, and market vendors, signaled their important colonial functions.<sup>71</sup> Simultaneously, the tensions surrounding urban free artisans of color in competition with white workers, heightened occupational concerns in the first half of the nineteenth century. Debates over how to restore status to work deemed dishonorable by tradition and its identification with workers of color raged throughout the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>72</sup> Carpentry and midwifery, in particular, came under heavy fire, with only moderate success in changing the racial makeup of the urban labor sector prior to 1844.

Two main factors facilitated the growth of the Cuban militias of color. First, Spain acknowledged the Caribbean's strategic importance and positioned Cuba as the gateway to mainland Spanish America. Second, the demographic strength of the African-descended population in the region and the scarcity of white males made arming *libres de color* essential to the defense of the Spanish empire. As evidence of their loyalty, militia units of color increased in Cuba over the course of two centuries. Some free *pardo* and *moreno* officers, like Captain Mónico de Flores and aspiring officers such as Vicente Varutica, used their position to garner prestige and honor in their communities. Racial prejudices, however, remained and military service demanded that solidiers of color uphold the slave system through duties that included guarding docked slave ships and

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(University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999), 167-168; Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets: Gender, Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>71</sup> *Diario de la Habana*, August 11, 1828; *Diario de la Habana*, 22 July 1835; *Diario de la Habana*, 4 October 1836.

<sup>72</sup> José Antonio Saco, *Colección de papeles científicos, históricos, políticos, y de otros ramos sobre la isla de Cuba* (Havana: Ministerio de Educación, 1960), 1: 216-217; *Diario de la Habana*, 6 February 1828.

pursuing runaway slaves. Nevertheless, in the pre La Escalera period, *libres de color* recast military duty, like some occupational specialties, as honorable.

The second chapter examines the repression of Conspiracy of La Escalera from the perspective of colonial authorities, free people of color, and foreign interests. Island officials' violent uprooting of the plot made it one of the most controversial episodes in colonial Cuban history. I argue that the Cuban government justified its escalated use of force based on previous responses to mounting internal and external anxieties over slavery and rebellion on the island. To suppress the alleged plan to abolish slavery and overthrow colonial rule, thousands of people of color were arrested, tortured, executed, harassed, or banished under the authorization of the colonial administration, headed by Captain General Leopoldo O'Donnell. Such public display of terror, as scholars like Emilia Viotti da Costa, Michel Foucault, James Sidbury, and Michael Craton have pointed out, emphasized the consensual and unifying power of the government to assert its authority. Officials in Cuba followed this pattern, using a two-pronged, local and international, approach to remove a future threat from free blacks and mulattoes and their allies.<sup>73</sup>

Response to the repression surged from the international community. British Caribbean, French, and North American officials and newspapers condemned the Cuban government's harsh methods, particularly when their citizens were implicated in the plot under false pretenses. To counter these affronts, Cuba blasted foreign powers for meddling in its affairs. Furthermore, island officials reshaped Cuba's international image

from an economic angle, reassuring commercial interests that the island's ports had never been busier.<sup>74</sup> In their repressive tactics, however, Cuban authorities remained unapologetic and persistent.

To secure the island, the colonial regime implemented new legislation targeting free people of color that prohibited or restricted occupational endeavors, social activities, and insubordinate behavior towards whites. I contend that free people of color did not acquiesce completely. *Libres de color* protested, circumvented, or adapted to these restrictions, highlighting that even the initial shock of the repression did not silence them. For example, letters from prisoners, demands to see jailed loved ones, and petitions to reclaim confiscated property initiated attempts by free people of color to express the personal impact of the repression and their efforts to make sense of it.<sup>75</sup> By documenting their responses to the repression, I show how free women and men of color expressed their disagreement with the colonial government's policy of terror and sought justice on their own terms.

Chapter Three explores the responses of *libres de color* in Cuba's efforts to balance issues of race, labor, and freedom in its slave society. Just as the La Escalera

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<sup>73</sup> Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 243; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 125; Craton, *Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, 315; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books 1979), 49.

<sup>74</sup> "...Nuestros puertos, a pesar de esto... nunca ha habido más afluencia de embarcaciones, el comercio y las transacciones mercantile no han sido paraliados..." *Aurora*, 29 June 1844 "Copia de artículos publicados en periódicos "Aurora" de Matanzas dando cuenta de la entrada en papila y ejecución de los reos Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) y otros," ANC-AP, Legajo, 42, Exp. 5, p. 7-8.

<sup>75</sup> Juan Francisco Manzano to Rosa Alfonzo, 5 October, 1844 In *Obras: Juan Francisco Manzano*, ed. José Luciano Franco (Havana: Instituto del Cubano Libro, 1972), 94; María del Fransito Flores to Military Commission, Havana, 12 December 1844, ANC-CM, Leg. 57, Exp. 1, pieza 3; Estefania Rodríguez and Alejandra Castillo to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 2 October, 1844, ANC-CM, Leg. 64, Exp. 8.

Repression intensified colonial response to rebellion, labor concerns after 1844 also escalated. The implication of numerous free artisans of color in the conspiracy compelled authorities to renew the urban labor debate. Tighter restrictions on employment options for people of color ensued. Authorities and elites rationalized that replacing black and mulatto workers with employees would prevent further political upheaval.

The shockwaves of the conspiracy and the repression also had an impact on the agricultural sector. Heightened anxiety over the shrinking slave trade, rising prices for contraband slaves, and meeting international sugar production demands spotlighted agricultural labor shortages. To fill cultivation and production demands, planters, merchants, and officials devised schemes to import free workers from around the world. When Chinese and Spanish immigrants proved to be less than docile, fled to the cities, or died from local epidemics, planters turned their hopes to Africa. Several extensive plans to import free African immigrants as contractual agricultural workers surfaced throughout the 1850s. For instance, planter José Suarez Argudin, submitted numerous proposals to import free black workers, including one that called for bringing 40,000 free Africans from Sierra Leon, Cameroon, Angola, and Mozambique.<sup>76</sup> Colonial fears of a Haitian-style annihilation by men of African descent, however, overrode some potential sources of non-white labor.

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<sup>76</sup> José Suarez Argudin to Ultramar, Madrid, 8 January 1857, AGI-AHNU, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 3, folio 1; José Suarez Argudin, *Projecto, o representación respetuosa sobre inmigración africana*, (Havana: Imprenta de Spencer y Compañía, 1856), AGI-ANHU, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 3, folio 7, p. 4., folio 9, p. 8.



Unlike their successes in securing urban labor positions prior to 1844, Cuba's free population of color were considered ill-suited for the virtual slave conditions they would experience as plantation laborers. Furthermore, they posed a dangerous influence on the bondsmen with whom they would work side by side. To reduce the proportion of free people of color on the island and curtail their economic opportunities, the colony fostered programs for white family and single male immigration to the cities and the countryside. These realities left few options for *libres de color*.

Chapter Four investigates colonial Cuban efforts to rid the island of free people of color and their potentially rebellious elements. With the rise of sugar production, Havana developed rapidly into a thriving port city, "the Pearl of the Antilles," as travelers often called it.<sup>77</sup> Increased sugar production brought slaves. Thousands of Africans and their descendants labored in the countryside and the cities alongside free persons of color, who were often tied to bondsmen through kinship. As the number of slaves increased, fears of slave rebellion sharpened. Indeed, uprisings in Cuba, particularly those involving free people of color and slaves, persisted throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition, with each clash of slave rebellion in the Caribbean region, particularly from Haiti and Jamaica, planters, Creoles, and council members pressured Spain to increase the white population. Furthermore, Cuba endured foreign pressures of abolition, particularly when Britain emancipated slaves in its Caribbean territories. Colonial Cuban officials believed that maintaining a white majority was crucial to retaining control of the island from the massive numbers of slaves. Island councils attempted to foster

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<sup>77</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*.

immigration, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, but with mixed results. The Conspiracy in and the Repression of La Escalera in 1844, however, would refocus their efforts.

To remove the threat of rebellion led by free people of color, the administration and the Military Commission shipped hundreds of free black men and some women off the island between 1844 and 1845. Using a multi-directional approach, the Military Commission sentenced *libres de color* to imprisonment overseas or banishment. Furthermore, faced with continual harassment and surveillance, hundreds of families went into exile. For many, complying with the Captain General's authorization to emigrate, even though those who did so came to be labeled as tacit co-conspirators, seemed the lesser of two evils. Some of those forced to migrate, like José Moreno, with whom we began this chapter, would spend over a decade petitioning to return home.<sup>78</sup> Others, like Claudio Brindis de Salas, circumvented prohibitions on travel and returned to the island through illegal channels from Mexico, the United States, and parts of the Caribbean.<sup>79</sup> By charting the expanding debate over race, population, and empire from the island to the Atlantic World, I demonstrate how the impact of the repression took on unexpected international dimensions. Moreover, I illuminate how free men and women of African descent stretched and broke colonial expectations of their codes of conduct in exile. In spite of displacement to foreign territories, they continued to undercut and challenge colonial attempts to control them.

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<sup>78</sup> José Moreno to Ministro de Gracia y Justicia, Campeche, Mexico, 26 June 1846, ANC-ROC, Legajo 159, Exp. 106.

Chapter Five returns the focus to Cuba by highlighting the dismantling of the militia of color, its reestablishment, and free black response to compulsory service. Prior to La Escalera, debates raged between military officials and Spanish authorities over the logic of arming men of African descent. Prevailing opinion constructed black male bodies as physically apt for military duty.<sup>80</sup> Yet, militiamen of color were contrastingly depicted as duplicitous. Their training and skill had been used to protect the Spanish empire and in revolt to destroy it.<sup>81</sup> In mid June of 1844, the O'Donnell Administration determined that latter to be eminent and dismantled the two-century old institution. Disbanding the militia of color enabled colonial authorities to neutralize a perceived threat, unravel a social institution, and displace thousands of former militiamen. Preoccupied with more pressing horrors of the repression, freemen did not directly challenge the decree.

A decade later, Juan de la Pezuela, Captain General of the island, reestablished the militia of color. Years of battling occupational and familial displacement, however, left *libres de color* suspicious of colonial actions. Consequently, eligible freemen were hesitant to volunteer for service. When Pezuela instituted forced enlistment, hundreds

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<sup>79</sup> "Sobre la salida de Cuba los morenos libres Lino Lamonedá y Claudio Brindis de Salas que se introdujeron claudesinamente," Havana, 22 November 1850, ANC-AP, Legajo 44, Exp. 19.

<sup>80</sup> Rachel Woodward, "It's a Man's Life!': Soldiers, Masculinity and the Countryside," *Gender, Place and Culture*, 5 (1 November 1998) 3: 282-284; See also Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner, editors, *Men's Lives*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995)

<sup>81</sup> Juan de la Pezuela, Cuba Captain General to Secretaria Militar, May 24, 1854, Havana, in M. Estorch, *Apuntes para la historia sobre la administración del Marques de la Pezuela*, (Madrid: Imprenta por Manuel Galiano, 1856), Document 16, 160; Allan J. Kuethe, "The Status of the Free Pardo in the Disciplined Militia of New Granada," *Journal of Negro History* 56 (April 1971) 2: 110; Herbert Klein, "Colored Militia of Cuba," *Caribbean Studies* 6 (June 1966) 2: 22; Ben Vinson, "Race and Badge: Free-Colored Soldiers in the Colonial Mexican Militia," *The Americas* 56 (April 2000), 2: 491; Christon I.

protested. Mothers, fathers, and draftees, like Rita Perez, Pedro Pablo de Rojas, and Prudencio Zara requested exemptions.<sup>82</sup> The bulk of exemption petitions cited poor health as a primary factor, debunking claims heralding the physical fortitude of men of African descent. Hundreds more dissented the militia.<sup>83</sup> Difficulties filling service rosters finally prodded authorities to return military participation to voluntary enlistment, with the goal of eventually phasing out militias of color in the Spanish Caribbean. Examining the tensions surrounding militia service and free *pardo* and *moreno* response to forced enlistment highlights the perpetual dual potential of *libres de color* to support or subvert racial, social, and political boundaries in the slave regime

The dissertation concludes by discussing the state of the free population of color at the onset of Cuba's first war for independence in 1868. It highlights the ways in which they re-emerged from over two decades of restrictive measures stemming from the Repression of La Escalera. Those who returned home joined with those who had remained on the island. Both continued seeking ways to reestablish and stabilize their families. In particular, increases in population and education contributed to a growing and literate free sector of color. The methods *libres de color* utilized to survive the violence and restrictive legislation implemented in 1844 highlights their knowledge, persistence, and ability to negotiate nineteenth-century Cuban slave society.

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Archer, "Pardos, Indians, and the Army of New Spain: Inter-Relationships and Conflicts, 1780-1810," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 6 (November 1974) 2: 235.

<sup>82</sup> Rita Pérez to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 20 September 1859, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Gobierno Superior Civil (hereafter ANC-GSC), Leg. 1267, Exp. 49800; Pedro Pablo de Rojas to Gobernador, Havana, 22 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49816; Prudencio Zara to Gobernador General, Havana, 13 February 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49838.

The ever-present fears of armed men of color turning against the empire, however, came to fruition. Men of African descent, free and slave, joined Cuba's revolutionary army, forming a multi-racial military force.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile, previous conflicts over the meaning and making of race, nation, and citizenship would continue to reshape Cuban politics.<sup>85</sup> The active involvement of free people of color and slaves in the Ten Years' War (1868-1878), as well as their participation in the Little War (1879-1880), and the War of Independence (1895-1898), would heighten the specter of black insurgency in both rebel and royalist camps for decades to come.

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<sup>83</sup> Enlistment Committee to Cuba Captain General, 20 Sept 1859, Havana, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49802, fol. 164-165; 177-183.

<sup>84</sup> Klein, "Colored Militia of Cuba," 25.

<sup>85</sup> For a detailed discussion of black involvement in these conflicts, see Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

## CHAPTER ONE

### Free People of Color in a Slave Society:

### Vital Roles and a Threatening Presence

Havana, a thriving port city of the nineteenth century, bustled with the sights and sounds of a slave society. Sailors, militiamen, artisans, washerwomen, and day laborers, predominantly of African descent, filled streets lined with shops, stately mansions, and dilapidated huts.<sup>1</sup> Carts loaded with sugar, coffee, and molasses rattled alongside carriages. Amidst this bustle, *libres de color* and slaves walked about openly selling fruits and other products.<sup>2</sup> In the outer gates to some homes, free men of color stood smoking, waiting “to eye and answer strangers” who approached the entryway.<sup>3</sup> As Cuba’s slave society prospered, free people of color became entrenched it.

This chapter describes the diverse employment and military activities of *libres de color* and the impact of their growing presence in these areas and in the general population. The occupational pursuits of free women and men of color in colonial Cuba were predicated, in large part, on the merging of Spanish constructions of social status and occupation with race and racial hierarchy in its colonies. Spanish abhorrence for

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<sup>1</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 26, 28; Jameson, *Letters from the Havana* in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 5; Wurdemann, *Notes on Cuba*, in Goldwin, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.; Martínez-Fernández, *Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean*, 68.

<sup>3</sup> Jameson, *Letters from the Havana*, in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 6. Italics in the original.

manual labor for white men and women, efforts to maintain racial purity in professional endeavors, and concerns over rationalizing racial hierarchies, fostered a separate labor sector for free people of color.<sup>4</sup> In fact, legislation prohibited *libres de color* from working in the designated “learned” professions and civil positions, such as government bureaucrats, lawyers, doctors, priests, and pharmacists.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, whites sought out the services of free persons of color for manual labor. Meanwhile, the pragmatics of geopolitical struggle in the Caribbean region facilitated including men of African descent into a segregated militia system granted. As a result, midwives, cooks, housekeepers, bakers, street vendors of color, and *pardo* and *moreno* militiamen soon became commonplace.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, while the combined societal labor prohibitions and demands enabled free people of African descent to fill occupational and defense niches in the first half of the nineteenth century, the public predominance of *libres de color* fueled colonial fears of economic competition and rebellion. Echoing many of the sentiments of their counterparts throughout the Americas, Cuban administrators and elites considered the island’s large free sector of color threatening. The expanding presence of free people of African descent in the midst of thousands of slaves eroded the institution of slavery,

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<sup>4</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 119 Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba*, 94; Ortiz, “From Hegemony to Subordination:”, 100, 102; Chambers, *From Subjects to Citizens*, 167-168; Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets*., 32.

<sup>5</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 119; Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> *El Diario de la Habana*, 22 July 1835 18; 4 October 1836; 5 April 1839; January 1840.

white dominance, and the economic, social, and political stability of the island.<sup>7</sup>

I argue that the vital roles *libres de color* filled in colonial Cuban society enabled to carve out a space to maneuver and mold their restricted freedom in Cuba's slave society. As Cuba gained dominance in sugar production for the international market in the first half of the nineteenth century, its rapid development opened the door for more personnel as servicemen, artisans, domestic laborers, and agricultural workers to support the colony's expanding economy and to protect its shores. By narrating the ways in which free women and men of African descent made their living in Cuba's slave society, I demonstrate how their essential activities allowed them to negotiate, and, at times, reconstructed established meanings of labor and service for their own benefit, in spite of colonial preoccupations over their racial ancestry, free status, and population growth.

### ***Free Women of Color: They "walked about as they pleased"***

Island visitors noted with regularity that "women are scarce," in Cuba.<sup>8</sup> This observation, however, applied specifically to white women. Women deemed "decent" were rarely seen, except in carriage rides, at formal music functions like the opera, or from "the iron gratings at their windows."<sup>9</sup> This description applied typically to Spanish

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion on colonial fears of free people of color, see the Introduction; see also Hoetink, *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas*, 38; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 17, 20; Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in a Slave Society*, 38; Berlin, *Slaves without Master*, 343; Russell-Wood, "Colonial Brazil," 130; Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 222; Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 29; Wurdemann, *Notes on Cuba* in Goldwin, 39-40.

<sup>9</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 29, 36.



and white Creole women with access to higher levels of education who were from the upper strata of society, and their social status excluded them from manual labor.<sup>10</sup>

Religious service as nuns represented elite women's only alternative to marriage or remaining with their parents as a spinster. Convents in the New World required *limpieza de sangre* or purity of blood and strictly enforced the criteria that nuns have legitimate birth and no African ancestry.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, both female and male travelers commented that women of color "walked about as they pleased."<sup>12</sup> Colonial Cuban society notions of womanhood stood in sharp contrast to the realities of poor women, particularly women of color. Accordingly, the vast majority of free *pardas* and *morenas*, whether working for whites or within the community of color, found themselves involved in activities that required their presence in the streets. They became a familiar sight, as they walked about selling fruits, shopping for daily meals, attending to pregnant women, teaching, or doing laundry.

Domestic services, which often combined laundry, cooking, and childcare, comprised the largest sector of employment for free women of color. Foreigners noted the groups of "washerwomen" walking in the streets.<sup>13</sup> Whites and free blacks seeking

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<sup>10</sup> Ortiz, "From Hegemony to Subordination," 100, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España* (Guerro, Mexico: Editorial JUS, 1995 [1946]), 26, 34; also see Susan Soeiro, "The Social Composition of the Colonial Nunnery: A Case Study of the Convent of Santa Clara do Desterro Salvador, Bahia, 1677-1800," *Occasional Papers*, No. 6. (New York: New York University, 1973), 2; Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets* 41-42.

<sup>12</sup> Martínez-Fernández, *Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean*, 68-69.

<sup>13</sup> Jameson, *Letters from the Havana* in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 226.

domestic assistance placed advertisements in newspapers, such as the *Diario de la Habana*. Examples of regular notices solicited “a black female cook who knows how to take care of children.”<sup>14</sup> Others requested “a mulatto or black woman, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty” who had multiple skills in washing, ironing and cooking.<sup>15</sup> Figures for the early 1840s indicated that free women of color comprised over seventy percent of the approximately eleven thousand laundresses on the island.<sup>16</sup> In addition, free *pardas* and *morenas* advertised their own services in the papers. For instance, one *morena* wet-nurse publicized the availability of her “abundant milk” in exchange for temporary housing.<sup>17</sup> Other domestic-related means of employment included work as seamstresses and embroiderers. Of the twenty thousand free people employed in the clothing manufacturing industry in the late 1830s, nine thousand were free women of color.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, women of African descent were a common sight as market or street vendors in Cuba, as well as in mainland Latin America, the U.S. South, and other parts of the Caribbean. For instance, in colonial Peru, free women of color baked bread and biscuits to sell in town markets.<sup>19</sup> Female slave vendors dominated the marketplace in

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<sup>14</sup> *El Diario de la Habana*, 5 April 1839.

<sup>15</sup> *El Diario de la Habana*, 18 January 1840.

<sup>16</sup> Date estimated from the 1846 Census, Cuba, Comisión de estadística, *Cuadro estadístico de la siempre fiel isla de Cuba, 1846* (Havana: Imprenta del Gobierno, 1847), 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Diario de la Habana*, 18 January 1840.

<sup>18</sup> María Dolores Pérez Murillo, *Aspectos demográficos y sociales de la isla de Cuba en la primera mitad del siglo xix* (Cádiz: Servicio de Publicaciones Universidad de Cádiz, 1988), 171-172.

<sup>19</sup> Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 218.

eighteenth-century Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>20</sup> In nineteenth-century San Juan, Puerto Rico, women of color operated small stores called *ventorillos* that typically sold fruit, vegetables and locally produced alcohol.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, free *morenas* and *pardas* dominated the vendor sector in Cuba. Visitors to the island noted free women of color as “hawkers of market goods,” such as Rosario, a self-manumitted woman who sold vegetables in Havana’s market.<sup>22</sup> Artists sketching Havana’s urban character included market women among their subjects.<sup>23</sup> In addition, local newspapers ran regular advertisements soliciting to sell goods.<sup>24</sup> By the late 1830s, free women of color comprised over ninety percent of the two hundred seventy female street vendors<sup>25</sup> The aforementioned positions were bulked at the bottom of women’s already limited socio-economic ladder. Unsatisfied, numerous free women of color advanced into more skilled occupations as midwives and teachers.

African and European traditions transferred to the New World dictated that women work as midwives. In slave societies, African and African descended midwives served plantations and urban areas, delivering children throughout the population. For

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Olwell, “‘Loose, Idle and Disorderly’: Slave Women in the Eighteenth-Century Charleston Marketplace” in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, editors, *More than Chattel*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 99.

<sup>21</sup> Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, *Women and Urban Change in San Juan Puerto Rico, 1820-868* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 1999, 85.

<sup>22</sup> Kimball, “Letters from Cuba,” 545; Jameson, *Letters from the Havana*, in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 226.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Hazard, *Cuba with Pen and Pencil* (Hartford and Chicago: Pitkin and Parker, 1871), 89, 167.

<sup>24</sup> *Diario de la Habana*, 4 October 1836; *El Faro Industrial de la Habana*, 1 July 1842.

instance, women of color monopolized positions as midwives and nurses in eighteenth-century Saint Domingue (Haiti).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in colonial territories like New Spain and Guatemala, which had large indigenous populations, Indian or mestizo women served as midwives, or *parteras*.<sup>27</sup> Women in eighteenth-century Europe held a similar dominance. The typical midwife in Spain practiced in an urban area and her social standing placed her in the middle or lower classes, corresponding to her low level of literacy.<sup>28</sup> The privileged classes maintained their rank by relegating manual labor to others.<sup>29</sup> A similar scenario prevailed in colonial Cuba.

The scarcity of white women in Cuba, combined with colonial codes regarding status, labor, and race, caused them to shun midwifery. Indeed, out of the six midwives who completed formal training in 1828 in Havana, only one was white.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, four out of the five listed as reputable in the 1834 visitor's guide were women of color. The number of Spanish and Creole *parteras* increased nominally over time, but white women

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<sup>25</sup> Pérez Murillo, *Aspectos demográficos*, 171.

<sup>26</sup> Deborah Kuhn McGregor, *From Midwives to Medicine: The Birth of American Gynecology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 38; Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles*, 62; Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," 259-278, 261.

<sup>26</sup> Ortiz, "From Hegemony to Subordination," 100, 102.

<sup>27</sup> Hernández Sáenz, Luz María and George M. Foster, "Curers and Their Cures in Colonial New Spain and Guatemala," in Huber, Brad R. and Alan R. Sandstrom, editors, *Mesoamerican Healers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>28</sup> Ortiz, "From Hegemony to Subordination," 100, 102.

<sup>29</sup> Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>30</sup> "Formado para acuerdo de la Inspectora sobre la necesidad y consecuencia de que las que aspiran a ser examinadas de comadronas reunían los necesarios conocimientos," Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Instrucción Pública (hereafter ANC-IP), Leg. 40, Exp. 2115; *El Diario de la Habana*, 26 December 1829.

would not reach a majority in the profession until almost mid century, and only with lobbying from the medical establishment.<sup>31</sup> The fact that the free community of color increased more rapidly through natural births than the white or slave sectors contributed to the numerical majority of midwives of color.<sup>32</sup> Thus, societal prejudices and realities enabled free *pardas* and *morenas* to dominate the field.

As free women of color attended the elite, slave, free sectors of color, their responsibilities enabled some to redefine their occupational position as honorable within their families and communities. For example, free mulatto and black women performed a crucial role in delivering healthy white heirs and slave infants.<sup>33</sup> In addition, they could be called upon to give testimony in cases involving rape or incest, as well as confirming a woman's virginity.<sup>34</sup> White middle and upper sector's denouncement of delivering newborns as lowly manual labor fostered the development of the *partera* profession among free women of color. Consequently, Cuban *pardas* and *morenas* began to openly reconfigure midwifery as an honorable endeavor.

To this end, midwives of color distinguished themselves via skills obtained from informal and formal training. Those with the means publicized their specialties. For

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<sup>31</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 172.

<sup>32</sup> Cuba's 1827 census lists 54,532 free women of color out of the total 300,582 women on the island (142,398 white females and 103,652 slave females). The 1827 census states that the birth ration for free women of color between the ages of twelve and forty was 1:6. In comparison, the white birth ration was 1:7. Furthermore, free black women, *pardas* in particular, experienced a 79.2% increase in births between 1817 and 1827. The breakdown is as follows: *pardas* - 57.7%, *morenas* - 11.5%, slaves - 44.3%, whites - 48.7%. Sagra, *Historia económico-política y estadística*, 21, 23; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 121, Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 91, 93-94.

<sup>33</sup> Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Palmer, *From Popular Medicine to Medical Populism: Doctors, Healers, and Public Power in Costa Rica, 1800-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 141.

example, María del Carmen Alfonso and María Vicente Carmona, midwives licensed by the *Real Protomedicato*, advertised their services regularly in the Havana newspaper. Alfonso emphasized her credentials as a ‘teacher of the art of midwifery.’ Vicente Carmona offered similar services ‘regardless of the hour.’<sup>35</sup> Newspapers also reported on women completing midwifery programs. One of the earliest schools graduated six students in 1829. All met “the personal conditions required for this occupation;” they were well mannered, pious, and had mastered the material. Notably, five of the six were free women of color.<sup>36</sup> In addition, a listing of reputable midwives appeared in the island’s *Guía de Forasteros* or visitor’s guide in 1834, 1839, 1840, 1841, and 1845. Each roster comprised a majority of women of color, often including the same individuals over the course of several years, such as Vicente Carmona whose name appeared in at least three of the *Guías*.<sup>37</sup>

The vital role *parda* and *morena* midwives played in births and legal cases, their advertised services, and their inclusion in selective visitor guides garnered them a level of respect throughout the broader society, bestowing them with influence and leadership in among *libres de color*. The public announcements highlighted their abilities and their elite position in the free community of color; it took money to attend midwifery schools and place advertisements. Furthermore, the language midwives of color used to

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<sup>35</sup> *El Diario de la Habana*, August 11, 1828; *El Diario de la Habana*, December 1, 1833 quoted in Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 173.

<sup>36</sup> “Formado para acuerdo de la Inspectoría sobre la necesidad y consecuencia de que las que aspiran a ser examinadas de comadronas reunían los necesarios conocimientos,” ANC-IP, Leg. 40, Exp. 2115; *El Diario de la Habana*, 26 December 1829.

<sup>37</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 172-173.

characterize their skill and their dedication to the field over time demonstrated that they had appropriated the concepts of honor and reformulated them to fit the realities of race and occupation for free persons of color.

Just as being a midwife offered a means to upward social mobility for free women of color, teaching also afforded them an escape from a life as a domestic. A career in education enabled free women of color the opportunity ‘to live decently and with honor.’<sup>38</sup> Similarly to midwives, announcements appeared in the classified section of newspapers. Those seeking instructors for their children submitted notices such as, “a family residing in the country [just outside Havana] solicits a white or black woman, to teach three children, with references to her good conduct.”<sup>39</sup> In addition to providing private instruction, free women of color found opportunities to teach in their communities. For instance, Juana Pastor, a free *parda* and native of Havana, was a popular teacher in the 1830s. In 1835, she received permission from the island’s *Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País* (Economic Society of Friends of the Country) to “establish and direct a primary school for persons of her class and sex.”<sup>40</sup> Hers may well have been the one elementary school for females of color in Havana listed in the 1836 report on the state of education to the *Sociedad*.<sup>41</sup> The 1839 edition of the *Guía de*

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<sup>38</sup> A. del Valle, *Historical document from the Conspiracy of the Grand Legion of Aguila Negra* (Havana, 1930) quoted in Deschamps, *El negro en la economía*, 127.

<sup>39</sup> *El Diario de la Habana*, 22 July 1835.

<sup>40</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 128; Matt D. Childs, “Sewing” Civilization: Cuban Female Education in the Context of Africanization, 1800-1860,” *Americas* 54:1 (July 1997): 83. A Royal Decree by the Spanish Crown at the turn of the nineteenth century established the *Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País* to administer public education in Cuba. The *Sociedad* members comprised twenty-seven large landholders.

*Forasteros* included Pastor on the list of reputable instructors.<sup>42</sup> In 1841, María Faustina Peñalver, a free *morena*, also applied for a license from the *Sociedad* to establish a primary school to achieve the ‘honorable . . . conservation [of] family decency and composure so recommended in this society.’<sup>43</sup>

Free men of color also supported education. In 1828, Gabriel Dovoteo Barba, a captain in the *moreno* militia of color, opened a co-ed school for free people of color. In addition, his school accepted slaves. Barba wrote that he “welcomed the entrance of slaves” from those “masters who wanted to supplement their slaves’ instructions in the Catholic doctrine.”<sup>44</sup> Five years later, he established a second school, which primarily served the sons and daughters of his fellow militiamen.<sup>45</sup> His new facility boasted “two teachers, both free women of color, to instruct . . . adult women in washing and reading the catechism.” He also offered classes for young women to “learn reading, the Christian catechism, sewing, and embroidery.”<sup>46</sup> By 1836, out of the two hundred and twenty two schools on the island, thirty-one provided primary education for approximately five hundred children of color.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Wurdemann, *Notes on Cuba* in Pérez, 190-191.

<sup>42</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *Contribución a la historia*, 8-10.

<sup>43</sup> ANC-IP, Leg. 19, Exp 925, quoted in Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 129.

<sup>44</sup> *El Diario de la Habana* 21 February 1828.

<sup>45</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 124.

<sup>46</sup> *El Diario de la Habana*, 6 January 1833.

<sup>47</sup> Wurdemann, *Notes on Cuba* in Pérez, 190-191; Angel Huerta Martínez, *La Enseñanza primaria en Cuba en el siglo XIX (1812-1868)* (Sevilla: Diputación Provincial de Sevilla, 1992), 171.



Given the sparse number of schools on the island, the fact that numerous teachers of color opened their own schools demonstrates how strongly some felt about the importance of a basic education for the African-descended population. The small number of instructional facilities on the island indicates that overall literacy remained low throughout the general population. Nevertheless, it is clear that free persons of color, particularly those in the upper strata, secured the economic means to obtain an education for themselves or for their children. Furthermore, teachers used their influence, often in conjunction with other high status positions, such as the militia of color, to obtain educational opportunities for adults and children of color in the wider community.

The predominance of African-descended women in the streets in a range of activities proved problematic in Cuba's fragile balance of race, occupation, and status. Bound by social traditions of honor, respectable white women were to be virtually unseen. As one observer noted, white "ladies...would sooner die than venture out unprotected."<sup>48</sup> Controlling the movements of women from the elite and middle sectors enabled whites to maintain racial purity.<sup>49</sup> As the potential wives and mothers of Spaniard and Creole men, these women's responsibilities for preserving whiteness were encoded in the racial and gendered labor system. Consequently, the slave society relegated manual labor to women of African descent.

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<sup>48</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Martínez-Fernández, *Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean*, 67; Verena Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 109, xiii.

Furthermore, societal norms cast free women of color as the antithesis of womanhood, making them metaphorically invisible, in spite of their obvious public presence. The fact that visitors noted the scarcity “women” and the predominance of *pardas* and *morenas* in the same breath indicated that females of color were not considered legitimate women in the eyes of whites. This counter construction of femininity fostered the proliferation of women of color in a variety of occupations. Accordingly, they went about unaccompanied by men to sell goods, wash clothes, attend to the sick, and teach *libres de color* and slave students. Their unencumbered access to the streets as they performed work vital to the slave regime enabled them to negotiate prescribed notions of honor, occupation, and womanhood.

***Male Artisans: “We perform the skilled arts at the highest level of perfection”***

Male *libres de color* made themselves indispensable to nineteenth-century Cuba in a variety of occupations. In particular, foreign dignitaries, colonial authorities, and Creole thinkers noted the preponderance of black and mulatto men as skilled laborers. For instance, in his letters from Cuba, B. Huber, the attaché to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, observed the assortment of men of African descent employed as “carpenters, masons, and locksmiths.”<sup>50</sup> When asked about the status of the skilled arts, Cuban Captain General Francisco Dionisio Vives lamented that, “people of color occupy

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<sup>50</sup> B. Huber, *Aperçu Statistique de L’Ile de Cuba, précédé de quelques lettres sur la havane*, (Paris, 1826), 51.

this branch of industry” almost exclusively.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, José Antonio Saco, a Creole intellectual, commented that Cuban whites were so concerned with improving their social status that they had abandoned the skilled arts to free men of color.<sup>52</sup>

Like their female counterparts, free *pardos* and *morenos* held these positions as a consequence of their racial background, although numerous white Creoles also worked as artisans. Nevertheless, free black and mulatto men made the most of their access to these occupations as an avenue for upward social mobility and economic stability. A group of *moreno* and *pardo* militia officers voiced their pride in being artisans, declaring “we perform the skilled arts at the highest level of perfection, admired by the craftsmen of other illustrious nations.”<sup>53</sup>

One of the prized and highly competitive artisan sectors was carpentry. While free men of color did not predominate this field the way that free *pardas* and *morenas* did as midwives or laundresses, these men were noted for their skill and comprised a large proportion of this artisan sector. Employment statistics for the island, just after the repression, listed nearly identical figures of white and free black carpenters.<sup>54</sup> The well-trained achieved relative economic stability. Many used this foundation to garner additional prestige for their family by volunteering for the militia of color. Despite its social benefits, however, military service proved costly, as militia officers and soldiers

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<sup>51</sup> Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana* 4: 350-352. (341-356)

<sup>52</sup> Saco, *Colección de papeles científicos*, 216-217

<sup>53</sup> Mónico, et. al, *Justo sentimiento*, 208, ANC-CM, Leg. 60, Exp. 2, folio 208.

<sup>54</sup> Cuba, Comisión de estadística, *Cuadro estadístico de la siempre fiel isla de Cuba*, 1846, (Havana, 1847), 10. The figures list 2,571 white and free coloreds 2,510 free black carpenters on the island.

were often responsible for providing their own clothing and provisions. This reality established even more reason why numerous militiamen often held skilled artisans positions. For instance, carpenters Nieve Mane, Vicente Varutia, and Manuel Lenaro de Rosa, all aspiring to higher military rank, agreed to serve “without the option of a salary.” Furthermore, they offered to donate additional funds to their units when promoted.<sup>55</sup> Men of color who became worked in carpentry were in high demand within the colony, often finding themselves in direct competition with white male artisans.

In addition, free *pardos* and *morenos* represented a wide range of other skilled occupations. For instance, the same *Guía de Forasteros* that recommended midwives also provided the names of reputable artisans in Cuba. Listings for exceptional phlebotomists, dentists, and bloodletters included several *libres de color*<sup>56</sup> By the late 1830s, free men of comprised three thousand of the twenty thousand tailors on the island.<sup>57</sup> Maintaining employment in high-demand fields, especially when combined with defense service, enabled free men of color to achieve financial stability and high social standing in their communities.

Free blacks and mulattoes also dominated the lower economic levels of society as cooks, sailors, coachmen, porters, stevedores, and day laborers. Travelers indicated their preferences for free *pardos* and *morenos*, over slaves, to provide food preparation,

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<sup>55</sup> Vicente Varutia to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 20 March 1832; Nieve Mane to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 4 March 1832; Manuel Lenaro de Rosa to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 3 November 1830, AGI-Cuba, Leg. 2114, Exp. 9, folios 1346, 1325, 1207.

<sup>56</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 153; Deschamps Chapeaux, *Contribución a la historia*, 8-10.

<sup>57</sup> Pérez Murillo, *Aspectos demográfico*, 171.

luggage handling, local travel, and other daily needs.<sup>58</sup> Foreign officials noted the necessity of free stevedores of color, commenting that without these men, ship captains encountered difficulty in unloading cargo.<sup>59</sup> Because of the high demand for ship personnel to transport products throughout the Atlantic World, sea vessels frequently included sailors of color or *marineros*. Accordingly, *marineros* from all over the Atlantic World made their living in close contact with Cuba's port city of Havana.<sup>60</sup> Similarly to their female counterparts, hundreds of free black and mulatto peddlers and retailers participated in the small internal market of the region.<sup>61</sup>

Men also sought employment in industries involving natural production. By the late 1830s, workers in agriculture, cattle-raising, fishing, and mineral extraction made up approximately seventeen thousand workers. This sector represented the largest occupational sector for all free men, black or white, on the island. In this arena, free men of color worked typically as herdsmen and plantation overseers. They comprised three thousand four hundred or twenty percent of this industry's labor pool.<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, Creoles and Spaniards, particularly those who worked as artisans, undermined the contributions of free men of color. Contrasting perceptions and public

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<sup>58</sup> Jameson, *Letters from the Havana* in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 226.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Rodney to U.S. Secretary of State, Matanzas, April 1844, NA-CD.

<sup>60</sup> El Comisario de Gobierno y El Capitancia to Leopoldo O'Donnell, Havana, 13 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg 139, Exp. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 40; Scott, *Slave Emancipation*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Pérez Murillo, *Aspectos demográficos*, 170 – Pérez uses figures from the 1846 census. Using techniques from population back projection, (for an example see E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), I have adjusted the figures by seven percent to estimate the workforce in the late 1830s

attacks on the employment activities of *libres de color* produced a stereotypic image aimed at degrading them to uphold the virtues of whites. Assertions that *libres de color* simultaneously displaced white workers and were lazy seemed particularly contradictory. For instance, while black and white carpenters appeared to be the primary area of parity, whites hedged out free men of color. Moreover, legislation prohibited *libres de color* from working in the designated “white professions” thus safeguarding white competition with free people of color, except at the lower levels. Most likely, colonial preferences for Spanish personnel displaced Creole workers. Colonial authorities sought to control *libres de color* through coercive legislation and fines, although disagreements over specific solutions for controlling free black and mulatto men in the workforce weakened these efforts.

### ***The Militia of Color***

*Pardos* and *morenos* also served as militiamen. The Caribbean’s strategic importance as the gateway to mainland Spanish America, combined with the demographic strength of the African-descended population in the region, made arming *libres de color* essential to the defense of the Spanish empire.<sup>63</sup> Similarly to the occupational roles of *libres de color*, black and mulatto militiamen faced conflicting notions of their abilities and loyalties. On the one hand, the Spanish Crown frequently pointed out the militia of color’s importance to imperial order. On the other, military

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<sup>63</sup> Kuethe, “The Status of the Free Pardo,” 110; Allan J. Kuethe, *Military Reform and Society in New Granada, 1773-1808*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1978), 29-30.

officials often opposed arming men of African descent because of their potential to foment rebellion.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, their voluntary service to the Spanish Empire was bound by the prejudices of colonial Cuba.

Cuban militias of color were first organized formally in the late sixteenth century and expanded rapidly. By the early seventeenth century, authorities established a one hundred-man *pardo* militia company in Havana. In the eighteenth century, the capital city boasted a militia unit of four hundred men, and additional companies encompassing both *pardos* and *morenos* had been established island-wide. After the British occupation of Havana from 1762-1763, Spain instituted a series of reforms broadening the role of free men of African descent in the military. Concerned over the shortage of white able-bodied men in Cuba, Inspector General Alejandro O'Reilly increased the number of battalions of color.

To strengthen morale and the virtues of military service, such as dignity and loyalty, the Crown expanded military privileges to *moreno* and *pardo* militiamen on an equal level with white soldiers. These benefits included the *fuero militar*, which gave militiamen the right to be tried in military, rather than civil, courts. In addition, military service gave soldiers *preeminencias*, which exempted them from paying municipal licenses and fee exempted.<sup>65</sup> At least in letter, this afforded men of color the same legal rights as soldiers of full European ancestry. In 1769, with the growth of Havana's *pardo* battalion to nine companies totaling eight hundred men. Regulations for Cuba's militias

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<sup>64</sup> Kuethe, "The Development of the Cuban Military as a Sociopolitico Elite, 1763-83," 696; Vinson, "Race and Badge," 491; Archer, "Pardos, Indians, and the Army of New Spain," 235.

<sup>65</sup> Kuethe, *Cuba, 1753-1815*, 25-26.

and cavalry forces reiterated that the military privileges for free men of color would be on equal standing with white servicemen.<sup>66</sup>

By the 1770s, Cuba's militia of color had almost doubled. In 1770 militias de color comprised three full battalions and sixteen companies totaling 3,413 men. Meanwhile, white servicemen totaled 8,254.<sup>67</sup> Given the comparatively smaller number of free men of African descent on the island, approximately 15,000, *libres de color* served well beyond their proportions. One out of every five free men of color, as compared to one out of every twelve white men, participated in the military.<sup>68</sup> The expansion of *pardo* and *moreno* militia companies reflected the significance and growth of the free sector of color in Cuba. In 1774, the island's population of 171,620 comprised 30,847 free men of color (18 percent), 44,333 male slaves (26 percent), and 96,440 white men (56 percent). Consistently remaining at approximately 15 percent in the population into the nineteenth century, military officials could not easily ignore the presence and potential of *libres de color*.<sup>69</sup>

Militiamen of African descent, ever sensitive to the racist overtones that circumscribed their status as freemen of African descent in a slave society, made the most of armed service. The *fuero militar*, which gave servicemen and their families access to

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<sup>66</sup> Kuethe, *Military Reform and Society*, 29-30; Table 5, "Batallón de Pardos Libres de La Habana," Cuba, Reglamento para las milicias de infantería y caballería de la isla de Cuba aprobado por S.M. en real cédula de 19 de enero de 1769 (Havana, 1849); Kuethe, "The Status of the Free Pardo," 110; Klein, "Colored Militia," 18-20.

<sup>67</sup> Klein, "Colored Militia," 20-21. The total 11, 667 white troops were broken down as follows: white militia – 4,645; paid royal forces – 3,609.

<sup>68</sup> Klein, "Colored Militia," 20-21; Kuethe, *Cuba, 1753-1815*, 8, 10.



military courts in criminal and civil cases, and *preeminencias*, which exempted militiamen from civil taxes and fees, bestowed a sense of honor to militia of color and their communities.<sup>70</sup> The benefits of service attracted numerous skilled artisans of color to participate in the militias in Cuba and throughout Spanish America.<sup>71</sup> In the 1830s and 1840s in Cuba, for example, in addition to being a tailor, Francisco Uribe served as a first sergeant in the Havana battalion. Musicians Tomás Vueltas y Flores and José González directed the battalion orchestra and the *moreno* battalion band, respectively. José de la Encarnación Valencia, a phlebotomist, held the rank of first corporal in the *pardo* battalion of Havana.<sup>72</sup> Clearly, those participating in the militia typically represented the upper strata of Cuba's free population of color.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, the soldiers' public performance, via military drills and duties, bolstered their distinction, not only among the African descended population, but also with travelers and colonial officials. For example, Juan Francisco Manzano a slave poet persecuted in the repression of La Escalera, recalled observing Havana unit military drills

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<sup>69</sup> Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 1774-1899, 84-86.

<sup>70</sup> McAlister, *The "Fuero Militar" in New Spain*, 7-8; For a detailed discussion of the *fuero militar* and *preeminencias*, see Kuethe, "The Status of the Free Pardo," 105.

<sup>71</sup> For additional discussion of militiamen of color and civilian occupations, see Chapter Three; See also Ben Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 104-116; Peter Voelz, *Slave and Soldier: The Military Impact of Blacks in the Colonial Americas* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 60-61; James A. Wood, "The Burden of Citizenship: Artisans, Elections, and the Fuero Militar in Santiago de Chile, 1822-1851," *The Americas* 58:3 (January 2002); 443.

<sup>72</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 105-108, 144, 153.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-86.

with his godfather, a battalion sergeant, as a young slave in the early 1800s<sup>74</sup> Traveler Richard Henry Dana, Jr., a native of Massachusetts, noted similar scenes later in the nineteenth century, impressed by the site of “a regiment of one thousand free black volunteers, parading with the troops of the line and the white volunteers.”<sup>75</sup> Island authorities regarded the image of *moreno* and *pardo* militiamen guarding slaves as a symbol of their loyalty to the empire.<sup>76</sup>

In addition, skilled and devoted militiamen who became officers attained even greater community status. Census data from 1770 attests to the fact that numerous men achieved the rank of officer. One *pardo* unit comprised of 800 soldiers listed 59 officers of color, as well as a *pardo* surgeon. On a broader scale, 114 of the 448 active field officers assigned to Cuba were of African descent. Overall, military affiliation, with its legal privileges, opportunities for increased rank and pay, and public displays of status garnered them community respect and enabled them to weaken social and racial obstacles for themselves or for their families.<sup>77</sup>

To this end, free men and women of color and slaves mined the military system for its formally regulated and socially constructed advantages.<sup>78</sup> Those on the lowest rungs of society, like some runaway slaves, enlisted in the militia to escape servitude.

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<sup>74</sup> Juan Francisco Manzano, *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (1840) (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1996), 53.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Henry Dana, Jr. *To Cuba and Back: A Vacation Voyage* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1859) In *Slaves, Sugar and Colonial Society: Travel Accounts of Cuba, 1801-1899*, ed. Louis A. Pérez, (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992), 121.

<sup>76</sup> Childs, “The Aponte Rebellion,” 232.

<sup>77</sup> Klein, “Colored Militia of Cuba,” 25.

Men who took this route to freedom were often aided by *libres de color* in preparing fake freedom papers.<sup>79</sup> Free woman of color married into military families, both intraracially and interracially. As the wives of militiamen, they received *fuero* benefits.<sup>80</sup> Some *pardos* used the militia as a means to achieve social whitening, advancing themselves from humble roots and sending their sons to college to become professionals despite racial prohibitions.<sup>81</sup> Yet, the very structure of the militia – divided into black and mulatto units – reinforced color and class hierarchies within the community of.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, some Cuban militiamen of color made a clear distinction between themselves and foreign men of color. For instance, accusations in the newspaper *La Fraternidad*, challenged the “loyalty and obedience” of the free African-descended sector in Cuba. In response, twenty-four militia officers, the elite cadre of free sector of color, produced a three-page document.<sup>83</sup> Directing their commentary to the newspaper, as well as to island authorities, the men highlighted their skills, economic viability, and generosity as honorable and vital to the colony. Furthermore, they defended the loyalty of militiamen of color to Cuba and the Spanish Empire, stating how African-descended

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<sup>78</sup> Kuethe, *Military Reform and Society*, 39.

<sup>79</sup> Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, *Los cimarrones urbanos* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1983), 31.

<sup>80</sup> Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour*, 13; Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 63; McAlister, *The “Fuero Militar” in New Spain*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> Klein, “The Colored Militia of Cuba,” 26; Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*, 85; George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800-1900* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 132-133; Kuethe, “The Status of the Free Pardo,” 105-117.

<sup>82</sup> Vinson, “Free Colored Voices,” 172.

<sup>83</sup> Mónico de Flores, et al, *Justo Sentimiento*, ANC-CM, Leg. 60, Exp. 2, folio 208.

servicemen “had carried out and sustained their military duties in the midst of misery, insufficient clothing, and starvation.”<sup>84</sup> This distancing from foreigners and the general free population of color and slaves both eroded the colonial caste system and hindered racial solidarity to a certain degree.<sup>85</sup>

The benefits and honor associated with militia duty, however, came with a price, literally and figuratively. While soldiers of African descent participated willingly, they did so at great personal sacrifice and often to the detriment of the slave population. For militiamen of color, serving the Crown meant engaging in duties that supported slavery, including guarding slave ships, escorting human chattel to auction areas, capturing runaways, and suppressing rebellions.<sup>86</sup> For their services, they received only nominal to modest pay, depending on their rank. The 1769 *Reglamento* budgeted monthly salaries for white lieutenants at thirty-four pesos, while *pardo* and *moreno* officers of the same rank earned ten and eight pesos, respectively.<sup>87</sup> In addition, militiamen were forced to expend personal resources to maintain their units.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Mónico de Flores, et al, *Justo Sentimiento*, ANC-CM, Leg. 60, Exp. 2, folio 208.

<sup>85</sup> Vinson, “Race and Badge,” 472, 473; Klein “Colored Militia in Cuba” 17-27.

<sup>86</sup> Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places*, 119, 121-122; Voelz, *Slave and Soldier* 333-337; Aline Helg, “The Limits of Equality: Free People of Colour and Slaves during the First Independence of Cartagena, Colombia, 1810-15,” *Slavery and Abolition* 20:2 (August 1999), 15-16, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Table 8, “Relación que manifiesta a los empleos que gozan sueldo en los batallones de milicias de ingantería, y regimiento de caballería blancos de la isla de Cuba con distinción de su costo anual y mensual;” Table 10, “Relación que manifiesta los empleos que gozan sueldo en el batallón de pardos libres de la Habana, con distinción de su costo mensual y anual;” Table 11, “Batallón de morenos libres de la Habana,” in Cuba, *Reglamento para las milicias*.

<sup>88</sup> Klein, “Colored Militia of Cuba,” 25.

In the 1830s, officers requested promotions without pay. They included Havana carpenters, Vicente Varutica of the *moreno* battalion and José de la Nieves Manes of the *pardo* battalion. Each one sought to increase their rank to first sergeant, and promised that he would serve “without a monthly salary,” which ranged from five to twenty pesos, depending on rank and color.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Manes agreed to “continue contributing the assigned quota” for their unit. Varutica specified that would “donate six ounces of gold” for his promotion to sergeant. These contributions varied, from a high of six ounces of gold given by Varutica, to a low of a one hundred pesos to six ounces of gold donated by *moreno* Marco Rodriguez.<sup>90</sup> Some specified that they required “only the *fuero* and *preeminencias*” benefits that accompanied their new status as officers.<sup>91</sup> This suggests that free people of color placed such a high value on military service and officer rank that they served willingly in spite of the financial hardship it imposed. Their contributions to local units demonstrate a commitment to community since fellow soldiers were typically drawn from home areas.

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<sup>89</sup> Vicente Varutica to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 20 March 1832, AGI-Cuba, Leg. 2114, Exp. 9, fol. 1346; José de la Nieves Manes to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 14 March 1832, AGI-Cuba, Leg. 2114, Exp. 9, fol. 1325; Salaries listed in the for *pardo* and *moreno* battalions in 1789 and 1827 are as follows: *pardos* - majors – 20 pesos, captains – 15, lieutenants – 10, sub-lieutenants – 8, first sergeants – 6; *morenos* – majors – 15 pesos, captains – 11, lieutenants – 8, sub-lieutenants – 6, first sergeants – 5; See Table 10, “Relación que manifiesta los empleos que gozan sueldo en el batallón de pardos libres de la Habana, con distinción de su costo mensual y anual” and Table 11, “Batallón de Morenos libres de la habana,” in Spain, *Reglamento para las milicias de infantería y caballería de la isla de Cuba aprobado por S.M. en real cédula de 19 de enero de 1769* (Havana, 1827).

<sup>90</sup> Vicente Varutica to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 20 March 1832, AGI-Cuba, Leg. 2114, Exp. 9, fol. 1346; José de la Nieves Manes to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 14 March 1832, AGI-Cuba, Leg. 2114, Exp. 9, fol. 1325; Marcos Rodríguez to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 12 July 1830, AGI-Cuba Leg. 2114, Exp. 7, fol. 1200.

<sup>91</sup> José de la Nieves Manes to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 14 March 1832, AGI-Cuba, Leg. 2114, Exp. 9, fol. 1325.

In essence, military service became a double-edged sword. While the privileges of military affiliation set black and mulatto soldiers apart from the civilian population of color, the structure did not protect them from racist treatment from the army establishment. Within the segregated militia, white officers commanded *pardo* and *moreno* battalions.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, in order to show respect, black and mulatto officers, like enlisted men, were required to remove their hats when white officers were present.<sup>93</sup> Clearly, authorities were fearful about African-descended men's ability to command themselves and they used the militia's segregated framework to remind *pardos* and *morenos* of their inferior racial status.<sup>94</sup> Thus, militia participation and affiliation was neither one-dimensional nor an open path to social advancement. The advantages of enlistment privileges and honors were complicated by duties and regulations reflecting the racial prejudices of slave society. Nevertheless, as loyal, yet suspicious, subjects, free people of color redefined service for themselves. The ways in which *libres de color* negotiated military duty, as well as employment opportunities, and competing colonial sentiments revealed the complex and contradictory nature of race and freedom in colonial Cuba.

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<sup>92</sup> Table 10, "Relación que manifiesta los empleos que gozan sueldo en el batallón de pardos libres de la Habana, con distinción de su costo mensual y anual;" Table 11, "Batallón de morenos libres de la Habana," in Cuba, *Reglamento para las milicias*.

<sup>93</sup> Kuethe, *Military Reform and Society*, 39.

<sup>94</sup> Kuethe, "The Status of the Free Pardo," 113.

***“Very prejudicial some day”: Free People of Color and the Politics of Population***

Despite the important function of *libres de color*, colonial authorities found their dependence on and increasing presence of free people of color unsettling. “The existence of free blacks and mulattoes in the middle of the enslavement of their comrades is an example that will be very prejudicial some day,” remarked Francisco Dionisio Vives, Captain-General of Cuba (1823-1832).<sup>95</sup> His comments expressed concerns that extended beyond economic competition from *libres de color*. Vives insisted that the presence of free individuals of African descent among the island’s large enslaved population encouraged bondsmen to embrace a “constant and natural tendency toward emancipation,” which they might take by force.<sup>96</sup> Vives preferred to expel the entire free sector of color, but hesitated because doing so might lead to greater problems, such as widespread revolt by slaves and free people of color. He reasoned that since the numbers of *libres de color* had grown so rapidly and had gone unchecked, there was no way to correct the situation safely without fomenting their rebellion. Vives advocated that, at the very least, convicted free blacks and mulattoes be sent to Spain’s prisons in Africa to minimize the chance of return and further influence on the population of African descent.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, Miguel Tacón, Cuba’s Captain-General in the 1830s, believed that free men of color, “with rare exception,” wanted to “kill all the whites” and take over the

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<sup>95</sup> Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud*, 4: 350-352.

<sup>96</sup> Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud* 4: 353.

island.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, he supported stronger government methods to control free *morenos* and *pardos*, concurring with sending prisoners to Spanish jails in Africa. Furthermore, he recommended expelling all free people of color linked to conspiracies.<sup>99</sup> Their successor would have the opportunity to implement these ideas in the Repression of La Escalera.

Vives and Tacón echoed the sentiments of officials and elites in the Spanish, Dutch, British, French, Brazilian and American territories. Whites feared that the African lineage and free status of free people of color eroded slavery and encouraged slaves to seek liberation that could result in overthrowing the white population, as had been done in Haiti.<sup>100</sup> In addition, free people of color challenged racial and social hierarchies by seeking increased civil rights, creating competitions in the artisan sector, and owning slaves.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, the growing native-born free population of color stood in sharp contrast to the white and slave sectors on the island.

Unlike *libres de color*, the European and enslaved African populations remained dependent on immigration to increase their numbers on the island. Cuba's European population comprised a predominantly male sector. Visitors noted the scarcity of white

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 104-105.

<sup>98</sup> Miguel Tacón, Madrid, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33.

<sup>99</sup> Miguel Tacón, Madrid, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33.

<sup>100</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 104-105; For colonial attitudes toward free people of color in the Americas see Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 17, 20; Lockhart, *Spanish Peru*, 222.

<sup>101</sup> Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination*, 15. Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in a Slave Society* 38; Russell-Wood, "Colonial Brazil," 130; Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 343; need citation for black slaveholders



women by referring to Havana as the “male city.”<sup>102</sup> Census figures corroborated this observation. According to the 1827 data, white males outnumbered white females in every city, except Baracoa in the eastern part of the island.<sup>103</sup> The male to female ratio of Cuba’s slave population also proved strikingly unequal. Male slaves outnumbered female slaves by 28,809 in Havana and by 53,361 in the rest of the western province. In addition, slaves on the island outnumbered the total number of whites by two to one and free people of color by six to one.<sup>104</sup> The persistence of slave unrest, and the ability of *libres de color* to unite with slaves heightened the specter of rebellion and revolution.

Francisco de Arango y Parreño, a highly influential Creole planter and businessman, observed that “the free population of color had increased immensely without breaking.”<sup>105</sup> To remedy the situation and its potential for negative consequences, Arango proposed white immigration as the solution to preventing a massive slave revolt in Cuba. The Marqués de Casa Peñalver echoed Arango’s sentiments, calling for equilibrium between whites and people of color by restricting the number of slave imports and encouraging white immigration.<sup>106</sup>

In 1815, Alejandro Ramírez, recently appointed to the Royal Land Supervisory in Cuba, organized the *Junta de Población Blanca* (White Population Council). Taxes on slaveholders for every male slave owned supplied the Council with funds to subsidize

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<sup>102</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 29.

<sup>103</sup> In Baracoa white males numbered 1,041 to 1,283 white females.

<sup>104</sup> Sagra, *Historia económico-política*, 6; Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 88.

<sup>105</sup> Francisco Arango to King of Spain, 30 August 1830, Havana, AGI-Indiferente, Leg. 2828, folio 4.

European immigration. By the early 1830s, immigrants from Spain, the Canary Islands, the United States, the Dominican Republic, Germany, and Ireland formed a constant migratory flow into the island.<sup>107</sup> Despite the increase in the white population, labor shortages prompted planters to increase slave importations to meet the rising demands of sugar cultivation and production. Between 1815 and 1840, sugar exports more than tripled, growing from 45,396 tons to 161,248 tons.<sup>108</sup> Between 1834 and 1839, the 35,000 European immigrants and 27,000 African slaves arrived in Cuba.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, the free sector of color had increased by 46,344.<sup>110</sup>

Despite governmental support, however, white immigration projects proposed by Arango, Peñalver, and others over the ensuing twenty years did not yield the anticipated demographic balance.<sup>111</sup> Population figures in 1841 announced that the white population at forty-six percent, making them a minority on the island.<sup>112</sup> Whites' fears of a revolt by the African-descended population escalated. Furthermore, by 1841, immigration plans

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<sup>106</sup> Corbitt, "Immigration in Cuba," 282, 285; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 95.

<sup>107</sup> Corbitt, "Immigration in Cuba," 288, 291, 294.

<sup>108</sup> Pérez, *Cuba*, 73, 77.

<sup>109</sup> Corbitt, "Immigration in Cuba," 294.

<sup>110</sup> The free population of color had increased from 106,494 in 1827 to 152,838 in 1841. Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 88-90.

<sup>111</sup> Corbitt, "Immigration in Cuba," 285-286.

<sup>112</sup> The 1841 census lists the total population at 1,007,624 with a breakdown as follows: 152,838 free people of color; 324,000 slaves, and 418,291 whites. Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 55. There are major discrepancies between the 1841 and 1846 census date, particularly surrounding the number of slaves. The 1846 census indicates a 100,000 drop in the slave population, which is highly suspect, and I have recalculated according to Kenneth Kiple's estimations to put the number of slaves in 1841 closer to the 323,759 figure for 1846.

were put on hold because Spanish officials suspected immigration advocates of supporting independence from Spain.<sup>113</sup>

The first half of the nineteenth century provided ample reason for authorities to consider free people of color a serious threat to the island's political stability. Regardless of the vital labor they provided, the realities of life in a slave society fostered colonial distrust of the free population of color. Indeed, *libres de color* had proven willing and able to foment rebellion. In fact, between 1809 and 1839, officials suppressed at least five conspiracies involving free people of color collaborating with slaves and Creoles.<sup>114</sup> With each political challenge, authorities reacted with violent assaults and coercive policies to erode the influence and activities of people of color. The series of slave rebellions that jolted western Cuba in November of 1843 provoked an unprecedented repression in response to the Conspiracy of Escalera.

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The pragmatics of sustaining the Caribbean colony dictated that colonial authorities utilize the labor and services of *libres de color*. Spanish laws and traditions that prohibited women and men of African descent from professional and scholarly endeavors enabled free people of color to secure niches in the artisan, domestic, and unskilled labor, and defense sectors. Although their status as free blacks and mulattoes cast them as threatening to Cuban slave society, the vital roles of *libres de color* afforded

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<sup>113</sup> Orovio and González, *Racismo e Inmigración en Cuba*, 107-109.

<sup>114</sup> For a discussion of these revolts, see Chapter Two.

them the space to revise the intertwined issues of honor, gender, occupation, and ancestry to their own benefit whenever possible.

Free people of color challenged traditional constructions of gender through their public presence and work activities. Visitors noted the proliferation of free women of color in the streets, selling fruits, shopping for daily meals, or doing laundry, commenting that, “hardly any other women than negresses are to be seen about.”<sup>115</sup> In contrast, taboos on Spanish and Creole women being seen unescorted in public persisted to the extent that Cuban natives “suppressed exclamations of the astonished” when foreign white women ventured into the streets alone to shop.<sup>116</sup> As free men of color traversed the streets during their daily work routine, observers commented on the obvious clustering of free men of color in skilled artisan positions. Although white men regarded these positions as lowly, they charged that free *pardos* and *morenos* supplanted them in these fields, causing white vagrancy.<sup>117</sup> From Spanish and Creole perspectives, the public activities of *libres de color* undermined elite notions of proper female behavior and destabilized white males’ economic dominance in the skilled trades.

Militia service also located blacks and mulattoes in the paradigm of essential, yet threatening. Colonial officials called on them time and again despite fears of arming men of African descent. In return, the legal privileges, status, and personal investment in defending Cuban shores that accompanied military duty bestowed honor and status to

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<sup>115</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> Wurdemann, *Notes on Cuba*, 42.

<sup>117</sup> Saco, *Colección de papeles científicos*, 1: 216-217.

*pardo* and *moreno* participants and their families. *Pardo* and *moreno* militiamen, aware of their importance to the Spanish Empire, particularly in terms of their personal and financial sacrifices, voiced opinions about their discriminatory treatment in the face of loyal service. Participation in the militia enabled them to test societal boundaries and improve their status, while maintaining a level of protection.<sup>118</sup>

Unlike the contradictory opinions regarding the occupational and defense activities of *libres de color*, authorities and intellectuals united in their alarm over the growth of the free sector of color. The “very prejudicial” presence and growth of Cuba’s free sector of color raised tensions over the potential for *libres de color* to foment rebellion with slaves and Creole dissidents.<sup>119</sup> Several captain generals recommended expelling free blacks and mulattoes, but feared the repercussions of their abrupt and mass removal. Immigration projects, designed to decrease the proportion of free people of color, transported thousands of Europeans and African slaves to Cuba, but had limited success in accomplishing this goal.

Debates over how to quell the threat from *libres de color* intensified over the first four decades of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Cuban authorities recognized the vital roles free men and women of African descent performed in supporting the colony via labor and military service. The repression of the Conspiracy of La Escalera would strike a devastating blow at the free sector of color. The ways in which free men and women of color responded, however, emphasized their perceived importance and expectations in Cuba’s colonial society. The following chapters explore the efforts of

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<sup>118</sup> Vinson, “Free Colored Voices,” 176; Childs, “The Aponte Rebellion,” 232.

numerous *libres de color* to maneuver the tightened boundaries they faced immediately following the repression and in the two subsequent decades.

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<sup>119</sup> Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud*, 4: 350-352.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Spectacle of Power: The Repression of the Conspiracy of La Escalera**

At dawn, on June 29, 1844, a firing squad executed the accused ringleaders of the Conspiracy of La Escalera. The *Aurora*, a newspaper based in Matanzas, the region where the uprisings emerged, noted the names of all ten conspirators. Eight were *libres de color*: Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, known widely as the acclaimed “Plácido,” José López, Santiago Pimienta, José Manuel Román, Andrés Dodge, Pedro Torres, Manuel Quiñones, and Antonio Abada. Two slaves, José de la O García and Miguel Naranjo, were also killed that morning.<sup>1</sup> The accompanying article, entitled “Execution of Justice,” declared that the deaths of these men provided a satisfying “public vindication” and demonstrated that all “evil will be stifled... through the severe punishment of the guilty.”<sup>2</sup>

Cuban authorities responded initially to the slave rebellions with the expected trappings of a spectacle of public power - arrests, torture, trials, sentencing, and executions – that effectively restored colonial authority.<sup>3</sup> Captain General Leopoldo O’Donnell’s approach, however, went beyond established norms for reasserting power on

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<sup>1</sup> *Aurora*, 29 June 1844, “Copia de artículos publicados en periódico *Aurora* de Matanzas dando cuenta de la entrada en papila y ejecución de los reos Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) y otros,” Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Asunto Políticos, (hereafter ANC-AP-Aurora), Leg., 42, Exp. 5, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Aurora*, 29 June 1844, ANC-AP-Aurora, Leg. 42, Exp. 5, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 243.

the island. With support from Spain, and contacts in the Caribbean, Mexico, and the United States, his administration implemented an unprecedented show of force to quell rebellion on the island. Using the local police and Military Commission tribunals, O'Donnell's restrictive tactics targeted people of African descent, particularly the free population of color. *Libres de color* represented 71 percent of the 3,066 people charged in connection to the conspiracy.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, new legislation curtailed the movements, conduct, and livelihoods of *libres de color* as he dismantled social institutions, banned free people of color from certain occupations, confiscated their property, placed them under public and secret surveillance, or expelled them from Cuban shores. O'Donnell and his supporters declared that the Captain General had saved the island, but others interpreted the calm as a "tranquility of terror."<sup>5</sup>

This chapter explores two issues. The first half discusses the Cuban tensions over slavery and abolition in the Atlantic World and strategies of control in Cuba's slave society in the first half of nineteenth-century, with emphasis on free people of color. Successive waves of rebellion shocked the island from within, as well as from neighboring islands and elsewhere in the Americas. Meanwhile, the increasing incidents of free people of color as instigators of revolt heightened colonial preoccupations over rebellion from the population of African descent. Experiences in Cuba, as well as examples throughout the Americas, gave the island's colonial administration ample

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<sup>4</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 229. Figures from the Military Commission report represent only a portion of the sentences.

<sup>5</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 22 February 1844, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4618, Exp. 11, folio 1; Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 232.



reasons to quell the rebellious spirit of dissidents. These political circumstances help set the stage for understanding the brutality and scope of the La Escalera Repression.

The second section examines the violence and the restrictive measures initiated in 1844, the “Year of the Lash.” Island authorities’ unprecedented use of violence to uproot the plot made the conspiracy one of the most controversial episodes in colonial Cuban history. By charting the tactics colonial officials employed to quell the revolt, restore peace to the island, and reassure foreign interests, I demonstrate the impact of the repression on both local and international levels. Moreover, I refute claims that the repression silenced free people of color or their influence. By documenting *libres de color*’s initial steps in response to the repression, I show how free people of African descent expressed their disagreement with the colonial government’s policy of terror and sought justice on their own terms.

### ***Prelude to 1844: Cuba in the Atlantic World***

The first half of the nineteenth century proved to be a time of rapid and turbulent change for Cuba and the Caribbean Atlantic World. With the loss of Saint Domingue as a colony and leading sugar producer to slaves in the Haitian Revolution, Cuba garnered an economic opportunity tinged with pitfalls.<sup>6</sup> Its rapid ascendancy to replace the former French territory on the world sugar market forged a slave society in Cuba. As sugar production flourished, the increased importation of slaves prodded Spaniards and Creoles

to consider seriously the ability of free and enslaved blacks and mulattoes to overthrow white rule through armed rebellion. Cubans feared that the same could happen to them if the combined free and slave populations of African descent gained a numerical majority.

Colonial Cuban fears became a reality in the first half of the nineteenth century, from both slavery and antislavery sectors. For instance, rising pressure from the growing abolitionist movement throughout the Atlantic World movements, Britain's abolition of the slave trade in 1807, their increased efforts to enforce the Anglo-Spanish anti-slave trade treaties of 1817 and 1835, and abolition of slavery by force (in Haiti) and by decree (in the British Caribbean), heightened Cuban concerns over the political stability of the plantation economy and its slave labor force.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the circulation of antislavery pamphlets via island ports, the growing number of people of African descent (slaves, and native and foreign-born free people of color) in Cuba, and more than twenty regional insurrections during the first half of the nineteenth century sent shockwaves throughout the Caribbean, causing dangerous internal fissures in Cuba's slave society.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick E. Bryan, *The Haitian Revolution and After* (S.I.: s.n., 1979), 60.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 11-12; Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London, Verso, 1988), 158, 438-440, 170; Richard Hart, *The Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, 2 vols., (Kingston, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, 1985), 2:221-222; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 139; Franklin Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2000): 103, 105.

<sup>8</sup> "Diligencias obradas por la introducción de un libreto titulado "El Negro Feliz" que fue descubierto abordo de la valandra *Flor de Mayo* procedente de la isla de Nassau en providencia, Remedios, 20 May 1837," ANC-AP, Leg. 38, Exp. 31; Francisco Arango to King of Spain, Havana, 30 August 1830, Codigo Negro, No. 3, Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Indiferente (hereafter AGI-Indiferente), Leg. 2828, folio 16; David Patrick Geggus, "Slavery, War and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean," In Gaspar and Geggus, *Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1997), 7-8; For a discussion of major slave rebellions in the Caribbean and the circum-Caribbean, see the following: For Virginia, see James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 119; Kenneth S. Greenberg, editor, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; For Louisiana, Albert Thrasher, *On to New Orleans!: Louisiana's Heroic*

Dissent in Cuba proved constant. Between 1809 and 1840, authorities suppressed a variety plots involving varying combinations of slaves, free people of color and Creoles. The Napoleonic invasion that paralyzed Spanish power in 1808 sparked an ill-fated independence movement Cuba. In Havana, in 1809-1810, Cuban-born attorneys Joaquín Infante and Román de la Luz crafted a separatist plot uniting Creoles and *libres de color* in the goal of establishing a new republic, although not necessarily abolishing slavery or guaranteeing equality.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, dissidence persisted. Two years later, free people of color and slaves united in less ambiguous goals concerning liberty and slavery.

In 1812, the government accused José Antonio Aponte, a free *moreno*, of conspiring to overthrow colonial rule. Under the leadership of Aponte, the conspiracy united a wide range of urban and rural slaves and free people of color in its goal of ending Spanish rule and slavery.<sup>10</sup> Aponte, as a carpenter, retired military officer, and

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*1811 Slave Revolt. A Brief History and Documents Relating to the Rising of Slaves in January 1811 in the Territory of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Cypress Press, 1995); José Luciano Franco, *La conspiración de Aponte* (Havana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, Publicaciones del Archivo Nacional, 1963), 53; Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 43; For Barbados, see David Patrick Geggus, "Slavery, War and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean," In Gaspar and Geggus, *Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1997), 7-8; For South Carolina, see Edward A. Pearson, editor, *Designs against Charleston: The trial record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1999); For Guyana, see Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 243; for Jamaica, see Michael Craton, *Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 314-315; for Brazil, see João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Douglas R. Egerton, *He shall go out free: The lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wis. : Madison House, 1999); For Puerto Rico, see Guillermo A. Baralt, *Esclavos rebeldes: conspiraciones y sublevaciones de esclavos en Puerto Rico (1795-1873)*, (Río González, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, Inc., 1982), 99.

<sup>9</sup> Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 410; Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 339, 387-388.

leader of a *cabildo de nación* – a socio-religious and cultural, mutual aid organization for free and slave men and women of African descent – united skilled artisans, such as carpenters, furniture, shoe and saddle makers, along with ox-cart drivers and bellringers.<sup>11</sup> Located throughout the island, *cabildos de nación* offered a sense of group identity and ethnic cohesion. Despite tensions among these organizations, *cabildos de nación* became a refuge for many; an autonomous space in a highly circumscribed world. Their links to subsequent rebellions brought them under close scrutiny by colonial authorities.<sup>12</sup> The proliferation of *cabildos* enabled members associated with Aponte's rebellion to spread plans for an insurrection in the eastern areas of Camagüey (formally Puerto Príncipe) and Bayamo.<sup>13</sup>

In 1825, over three hundred slaves revolted in the Matanzas province, setting fire to twenty-four coffee plantations in the wake.<sup>14</sup> Each eruption of rebellion and conspiracy fed whites' growing fears and suspicions. By the late 1820s, when the

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Aponte Conspiracy, see José Luciano Franco, *La conspiración de Aponte* (Havana: Publicaciones del Archivo Nacional, 1963); Matt Childs, "The Aponte Rebellion of 1812 and the Transformation of Cuban Society: Race, Slavery, and Freedom in the Atlantic World," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2001),

<sup>11</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 177. For a detailed discussion of *cabildos de nación*, see Fernando Ortiz, "Los cabildos afro-cubanos," *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 16 (Jan-Feb 1921): 10-11, Howard, *Changing History*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Howard, *Changing History*, 79-80-81.

<sup>13</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 177. For a detailed discussion of *cabildos de nación*, see Fernando Ortiz, "Los cabildos afro-cubanos," *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 16 (Jan-Feb 1921): 10-11, Howard, *Changing History*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Rafael Duarte Jiménez, *Rebeldía esclava en el Caribe* (Xalapa, Mexico: Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1992), 56.

African-descended sector reached 55.8 percent—thus, the majority of the island’s population—visions of Cuba becoming another Haiti surged.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1830s, uprisings involving free people of color multiplied. In 1835, Hermengildo Jáurequi and Juan Nepomuceno Prieto, the latter a leader of the *Lucumí cabildo* and a retired militia officer, planned the *Lucumí* Conspiracy.<sup>16</sup> Reports described groups of dozens of men carrying machetes in an organized effort to kill anyone who got in their path.<sup>17</sup> They, like Aponte, wanted to abolish slavery and overthrow the government. Similarly, several *pardo* and *moreno* battalion officers organized a revolt in 1839. Captain León Monzón, sub-lieutenant José del Monte del Pino, sergeant José Dabares, and Pilar Borrego, a survivor from the Aponte Conspiracy, led a rebellion in the eastern Cuba’s Guantánamo province, but authorities successfully defeated the uprising.<sup>18</sup> Just a *cabildos de nación* had come under heavy scrutiny for their members’ involvement in revolts, so too, did the militia of color. During the 1820s, men like Félix Varela, a priest and abolitionist, warned that Cuba’s militiamen of color should be viewed as “a potential enemy.”<sup>19</sup> By the 1830s, Spain garrisoned Cuba with a professional, peninsular army of more than 15,000 men.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Knight, “Cuba,” 301; Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York, Harper & Row, 1971), 10; Pérez, *Cuba*, 102-103; Kenneth F. Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba, 1774-1899* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida 1976), 85.

<sup>16</sup> Miguel Tacón, Cuba Captain General to Juan Batista Velasquez, Captain Pedaneo, Havana, 12-13 July 1835, ANC-CM, Leg. 11, Exp. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Miguel Tacón, Cuba Captain General to Juan Batista Velasquez, Captain Pedaneo, Havana, 12-13 July 1835, ANC-CM, Leg. 11, Exp. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, Pedro. *Los batallones pardos y morenos libres* (Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1976), 83-84.

Nevertheless, rebellions persisted. In 1840, slaves revolted on the *Empresa* coffee plantation, killing the owner and the overseer, and decimating the plantation.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, Cuban sugar production surged in the 1840s, bringing increased economic opportunity for Creole planters, Spanish merchants, and the metropolis. By 1841, the census official census listed whites at 41.6 percent of the total 1,007,624 inhabitants. The combination of internal and external revolts and antislavery pressures escalated Cuban fears of black rebellion.<sup>22</sup> Colonial Cuban officials met each political challenge with an increasingly violent assault and coercive policies to erode the position, influence, and activities of people of color.

### *Strategies of Control in a Slave Society*

Based on the increasing tide of revolt, colonial authorities felt justified in exercising their “right to punish” rebels of color.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, on traveler to the island, American physician John Wurdemann, asserted that the “fear of punishment” governed

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<sup>19</sup> Félix Varela, “Memoria que demuestra la necesidad de extinguir la esclavitud de los negros en la Isla de Cuba, atendiendo a los intereses de sus propietarios, por el presbítero don Félix Varela” in José Antonio Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el Nuevo mundo y el especial en los países américo-hispanos*, 4 vols. (Havana: Cultural S.A., 1938), 4: 12; Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*, (London: Pan Books, 1971), 62.

<sup>20</sup> Klein, “Colored Militia of Cuba,” 23.

<sup>21</sup> Manuel Barcia Paz, *La resistencia esclava en las plantaciones cubana, 1790-1870*, (Pinar del Rio, Cuba: Ediciones Vitral, 1998), 33.

<sup>22</sup> The 1841 census has been acknowledged as flawed by contemporary officials and twentieth-century scholars. It is likely that colonial authorities inflated the slave numbers to create fear among Cuban planters and force them to remain loyal to the Crown.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 48.

nineteenth-century Cuba's slave society.<sup>24</sup> Some conspirators, like accused leaders of the 1809-10 revolt, were deported to Spanish prisons off the coast of Africa.<sup>25</sup> Punishments for those remaining on the island often proved more brutal. Officials used torture and public execution as effective methods of punishing acts of insubordination and reasserting control.

One plantation technique included tying slaves face down and striking them with a braided whip made of raw bullhide or manatee skin. Variations on this theme of torture ranged from having the slave enumerate his blows out loud – returning to zero should the pain cause them to lose count – to being struck by two whippers simultaneously.<sup>26</sup> Executions were typically the most public of punishments. For instance, James Alexander, a traveler from London, observed that those sentenced to death by hanging “arrived at the fatal tree, where a multitude waited in anxious expectation of the sight.”<sup>27</sup> Spectators watched the victim climb the ladder, the executioner adjust the rope, and then the body swing, limp and lifeless, remaining that way for hours.<sup>28</sup> Scholars like Emilia Viotti da Costa, James Sidbury, and Michael Craton have documented for Guyana, Virginia, and Jamaica, respectively, that the staging of power through executions enabled

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<sup>24</sup> John George F. Wurdemann, *Notes on Cuba* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1844), 257-62 in Louis A Pérez, Jr., editor, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society: Travel Accounts of Cuba, 1801-1899* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992), 107.

<sup>25</sup> Pérez, *Cuba*, 410; Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 387-388.

<sup>26</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana*, 246-48; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> James Edward C.B. Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches* (2 vols.) (London: Richard Bently, 1833), I: 350-59 in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 137.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches*, I: 350-59 in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society* 137.

authorities to exact retribution, reestablish justice, and reactivate their power.<sup>29</sup> To reestablish order after major conspiracies and uprisings in the Americas, authorities in Virginia (1800 and 1831), Louisiana (1811), South Carolina (1821), Guyana (1823), Jamaica (1831-32), Brazil (1835), Puerto Rico (1841), and Cuba (1812, 1835, 1839, 1840) all employed execution as a major method of punishment.<sup>30</sup> Colonial officials, such as Puerto Rican Governor Méndez Vigo, declared, after the 1841 rebellion, that the impact of publicly executing leaders created such a state of terror and submission among the slaves “that it had been many years since the island had been threatened by a conspiracy from slaves or foreigners.”<sup>31</sup> While the multiple uprisings in Cuba clashed with the Puertorican experience, Méndez Vigo advocated the continued use of public

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<sup>29</sup> Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 243; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 125; Craton, *Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, 315; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 49.

<sup>30</sup> For Virginia, see James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 119; Kenneth S. Greenberg, editor, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); For Louisiana, Albert Thrasher, *On to New Orleans!: Louisiana's Heroic 1811 Slave Revolt. A Brief History and Documents Relating to the Rising of Slaves in January 1811 in the Territory of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Cypress Press, 1995); José Luciano Franco, *La conspiración de Aponte* (Havana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, Publicaciones del Archivo Nacional, 1963), 53; Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 43; For South Carolina, see Edward A. Pearson, editor, *Designs against Charleston: The trial record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); For Guyana, see Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 243; for Jamaica, see Michael Craton, *Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 314-315; for Brazil, see João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Douglas R. Egerton, *He shall go out free: The lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1999); For Puerto Rico, see Guillermo A. Baralt, *Esclavos rebeldes: conspiraciones y sublevaciones de esclavos en Puerto Rico (1795-1873)*, (Río González, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, Inc., 1982), 99; for Cuba, see Childs, “The Aponte Rebellion,” 10; Juan Bautista Velasquez to Miguel Tacón, Cuba Captain General, Havana, 15 July 1835, ANC-CM, Leg. 11, Exp. 1., folio 177; Deschamps Chapeaux, *Los batallones*, 83-84; Barcia Paz, *La resistencia esclava en las plantaciones cubanas*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Les durará mucho tiempo y así no tramarán otra conspiración ya sea por ellos o por enemigos que les rodean.’ quoted in Baralt, *Esclavos rebeldes*, 99.



punishment. In the series of rebellions in Cuba, officials condemned all of the leaders to death. The leaders of Cuba's Aponte Rebellion of 1812 were hung publicly.<sup>32</sup> By the 1830s, execution by firing squad became more frequent. For example, leaders of the island's Lucumí conspiracy in 1835 were sentenced to death by being shot in the back, as were those who led the revolt by mulatto and black militia officers in 1839, and the slave rebellion on a coffee plantation in 1840.<sup>33</sup> In both types of execution, the victim's bodies were often decapitated and their heads mounted on poles and displayed at the sight of the revolt.<sup>34</sup> In the wake of the Conspiracy of La Escalera, Cuban officials undertook similar measures.

### ***The Year of the Lash***

Armed with proof of a conspiracy, the O'Donnell administration launched a wave of violence targeting people of color that spread throughout the island. O'Donnell directed Fulgencio Salas, president of the Military Commission, to exercise any "legal and permitted" action to regain control over the island.<sup>35</sup> His primary goals included

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<sup>32</sup> Childs, "The Aponte Rebellion of 1812," 45, 115, 160, 211, 263, 324, 409; Howard, *Changing History*, 73-75, 78.

<sup>33</sup> Juan Bautista Velásquez to Miguel Tacón, Cuba Captain General, Havana, 15 July 1835, ANC-CM, Leg. 11, Exp. 1., folio 177; Deschamps Chapeaux, *Los batallones*, 83-84; Barcia Paz, *La resistencia esclava en las plantaciones cubanas*, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Juan Bautista Velásquez to Miguel Tacón, Cuba Captain General, Havana, 15 July 1835, ANC-CM, Leg. 11, Exp. 1., folio 177; Childs, "The Aponte Rebellion of 1812," 45; Alexander, *Transatlantic*, I: 350-59 in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 137; Deschamps Chapeaux, *Los batallones*, 83-84; Barcia Paz, *La resistencia esclava en las plantaciones cubanas*, 33.

executing the ringleaders of the plot, sentencing co-conspirators to ten years in prison, and deporting others implicated in the uprising.<sup>36</sup> In particular, O'Donnell targeted *libres de color* for their role as the leaders of the conspiracy. O'Donnell stressed to Salas the “necessity” of the use of violence in prosecuting “free persons of color under indictment,” who refused to name their accomplices in the plot.<sup>37</sup> A few weeks later, O'Donnell reiterated his case against *libres de color* in a letter to the Ultramar. “The vast conspiracy that tried to raise a black rebellion ...on this island ...was led by... a considerable number of free black and mulatto men of color....their bad costumes and vices are harmful elements in this territory...”<sup>38</sup> Under O'Donnell's authority, officials extracted and certified testimony by torture.<sup>39</sup>

From early January through the end of March of 1844, the sector of color faced an intense period of search, arrest, torture, interrogation, trial, and abuse. Observer's described the use of the ladder (*la escalera*) as the primary instrument of torture. Its depictions fueled the gruesome imagery that garnered the plot its name, the “Conspiracy of La Escalera.” Richard Kimball, a foreign observer from New York, described an interrogation session as follows:

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<sup>35</sup> O'Donnell to Salas, 22 February 1844, Escoto Collection, box 10, Houghton Library, Harvard University, quoted in Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood with Blood*, 219-220.

<sup>36</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ultramar, Havana, 30 March 1844, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33, folio 1.

<sup>37</sup> Kimball, Richard. “Letters from Cuba.” *Knickerbocker*, 26 (October 1845): 542-543.

<sup>38</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 30 March 1844, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33, folio 1.

<sup>39</sup> Kimball “Letters from Cuba,” 542-543.

[the /judge/executioner] ordered his victims to be taken to a room which had been white-washed, and whose sides were besmeared with blood and small pieces of flesh, from the wretches who had preceded them. . . . There stood a bloody ladder, where the accused were tied, with their heads downward, and whether free or slave, if they would not avow what the fiscal officer insinuated, were whipped to death. . . . They were scourged with leather straps, having at the end a small destructive button, made of fine wire. . . . Their deaths were made to appear, by certificates from physicians, as having been caused by diarrhea.<sup>40</sup>

In a similarly heinous manner, officials suspended Pedro Nuñez, a free *moreno*, from the ceiling of a house all night after having been viciously whipped. Juan Francisco Manzano wrote to friends about the “proofs...of my suffering,” which included a description of how his “arm had almost been dislocated.”<sup>41</sup> Outside the prisons, military officials traveled throughout their jurisdictions torturing free and slave people of color, extorting confessions, seizing furniture, cattle, horses, and other property of the free population of color, which were frequently sold for cash. In Matanzas, specifically, island visitors reported that officials gratified their sexual desires with the wives, daughters, and sisters of male victims.<sup>42</sup> Thomas Rodney, the U.S. Consulate in Matanzas, anticipated the expulsion or execution of whites and free blacks involved in the conspiracy. He claimed that slaves deserved harsh punishments, but in light of their high value, that only those charged as co-leaders of the rebellion would face death.<sup>43</sup> Rodney deduced a fairly accurate prediction. The Military Commission in Matanzas

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<sup>40</sup> Kimball, “Letters from Cuba,” 543.

<sup>41</sup> Manzano to Rosa Alfonzo, 5 October, 1844 in Franco, *Obras: Juan Francisco Manzano*, 94.

<sup>42</sup> Kimball, “Letters from Cuba,” 542-543.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Rodney to U.S. Secretary of State, Matanzas, April 1844, National Archives, Washington, D.C., U.S. Dept. Of State Consular Dispatches, Matanzas, Cuba, 1820-1889 (hereafter NA-CD).

listed sentences for 1,836 individuals (67 percent *libres de color*) as following: 78 executed (48.7 percent *libres de color*), 1,165 imprisoned (52.9 percent *libres de color*), 435 banished (99.5 percent *libres de color*), 31 sentenced to workhouses and lighter punishments (58 percent *libres de color*) totaling 1836 who received sentences (67 percent *libres de color*).<sup>44</sup> In addition, the O'Donnell administration followed the Military Commission proceedings with new legislation designed to monitor and restrict the activities and movements of slaves and free people of color. Consequently, the proceedings had a significant impact on the lives of free people of color and others implicated in the conspiracy.

From its headquarters in Matanzas, the Military Commission carried out seventy-one rounds of sentencing. More than three thousand were charged in the trials.<sup>45</sup> The number of defendants for each session ranged from eight to two hundred and twenty-two, and included the social, racial, and ethnic status of the accused. For example, the first proceeding, which took place on April 20, 1844, included eleven free people of color, twelve slaves, and one white man. The court records indicated the ethnic or *cabildo* affiliation of several men of African descent. Of the twenty-three people of African ancestry listed, four were designated as Carabalí, three as *lucumí*, and two as *gangá*.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The records for the Military Commission at Matanzas, albeit partial, break down the 1,836 people who were sentenced as follows: 78 executed (38 free people of color, 39 slaves, one woman of color – her social status is unknown), 1 white person; 1,165 imprisoned (617 free people of color, 543 slaves, 4 whites); 435 banished (433 free people of color, 2 whites); 31 sentenced to workhouses and lighter punishments (18 free people of color, 8 slaves, 5 whites), Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 229.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Cuba, *Colección de los fallos pronunciados por una sección de la Comisión militar establecida en la ciudad de Matanzas para conocer de la causa de conspiración de la gente de color* (Comisión Militar Ejecutiva y Permanente, 1844), no. 1.

The final trial included one hundred ninety-seven free people of color (seventy *morenos* and one hundred twenty-seven *pardos*, including one *parda* woman), twenty-two slaves, and three whites. Ethnic designations of slaves included seven *lucumís*, five *gangás*, two *caribalís*, and one each as *congo*, *macuá* and *mandinga*.<sup>47</sup> These examples suggest that a large number of people of African descent charged, slave and free, had strong ties to *cabildos de nación*. These organizations would come under fire from island officials over the ensuing decades. In addition, while some trials, like the first session, sentenced a relatively equal number of free people of color and slaves, subsequent trials charged an increasing number of *libres de color*.<sup>48</sup> For example, nine days after initiating the first trial, the Military Commission held its second session. All of the eight men accused were *libres de color*.<sup>49</sup> Available statistics indicate that of the 3,066 people sentenced, 71% (2,187) were free *pardos* and *morenos*.<sup>50</sup>

Trial convictions generated punishments of execution, jail terms, banishment, and occupational bans.<sup>51</sup> Hundreds were acquitted, but were placed under constant

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<sup>47</sup> Cuba, *Colección de los fallos*, no. 71.

<sup>48</sup> Cuba. *Colección de los fallos*, no. 1; For example, in Session Twelve, free people of color comprised thirty-six of the fifty charged; Session Thirty-One listed seventy-eight free blacks out of eighty-nine; and Session Seventy-One included one hundred ninety-seven free people of color out of the two hundred twenty-two litigants; “Expediente seguido por la Sección del la comisión miliar residente en esta ciudad para cobran las costas causadas en la causa formada contra Gabriel de la Concepción - Plácido .. - 1st pieza,” Matanzas, 30 June 1844, Copy of 12th session of sentencia pronunciada por la Sección de la Comisión militar establecida en la ciudad de Matanzas para conocer de la causa de conspiración de la gente de color (hereafter ANC-AP-Plácido), Leg. 42, Exp. 15; *Diario de la Habana*, 9 December 1844; Cuba, *Colección de los fallos*, no. 71.

<sup>49</sup> Cuba, *Colección de los fallos*, no. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 229.

<sup>51</sup> Cuba. *Colección de los fallos*, no. 1.

surveillance or forced into exile. For instance, in the second session, six men were absolved of their crimes on the condition that they were to be retained in prison until the end of the sentencing.<sup>52</sup> Juan Francisco Manzano endured a similar fate. In June of 1844, the Military Commission tribunal initially agreed to free him, and to keep him under police surveillance for a year.<sup>53</sup> His status as a poet, the similarity of his name to Manuel Manzano, an accused conspirator, and his affiliation with Domingo Del Monte, an abolitionist-leaning liberal Creole, however, extended his incarceration for several months.<sup>54</sup> In October, he described his suffering in prison and its effect on his family. “Today I have close to seven months [in jail]...I have exhausted my methods with which to feed myself in this prison, where each day my health weakens.” He asked friends for donations so that his wife could “feed him and his little girls.”<sup>55</sup> Those who were released and had the resources sought to regain confiscated property.

Predictably, the Military Commission sentenced accused leaders and co-conspirators to death, some by firing squad, others by quartering. Official figures indicate that at least seventy-eight people were sentenced to execution, including one woman of color, one white man, thirty-nine slaves, and thirty-eight free men of color for their leadership or complicity in the plot.<sup>56</sup> Unofficial reports suggest that authorities

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<sup>52</sup> Cuba, *Colección de los fallos*, no. 2.

<sup>53</sup> ANC-AP-Plácido, Leg. 42, Exp. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Manzano to Rosa Alfonzo, 5 October 1844 in Franco, *Obras: Juan Francisco Manzano*, 91, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Manzano to Rosa Alfonzo, 5 October 1844 in Franco, *Obras: Juan Francisco Manzano*, 94.

<sup>56</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 229.

killed dozens on the spot at the start of the repression.<sup>57</sup> Some of the victims included the well-known poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, known as Plácido, and Andrés Dodge, an affluent artisan, both *libres de color*.<sup>58</sup> Dodge, a free *pardo* and a prominent Havana dentist, endured torture on the ladder on three separate occasions before being executed for refusing to confess to any accusations.<sup>59</sup> Session twelve, held in June of 1844, charged thirty-six free men of color (twenty-three *pardos* and thirteen *morenos*) and fourteen slaves. Eight of the free men of color, all *pardos*, faced execution.<sup>60</sup> In addition, Military Commission orders specified the location and method for *negro libre* José Cruz to be executed. Charged with attempting to kill his former master Cruz on the *Mercedes* sugar plantation, Cruz's sentence stipulated that he be returned to the plantation, in the town of San Antonio de las Cabezas, near Ceiba-Mocha, where he would be shot in the back, his head mutilated, and placed on a pole near the site of his crimes. Officials wrote explicitly that Cruz's punishment should serve as an example for all slaves. To insure that the message spread effectively, planters in the area were ordered to send four slaves from each farm to witness the execution.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, slaves like Dionisios carabalí, Tomás lucumí, and Félix gangá, faced violent executions by quartering and decapitation, based on their "confessions" as leaders in the conspiracy and

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas Rodney to U.S. Secretary of State, January 1, 1844, NA-CD.

<sup>58</sup> *Aurora*, 27 June 1844, ANC-AP- Leg. 42, Exp. 5, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 228.

<sup>60</sup> ANC-AP-Plácido, Leg. 42, Exp. 15.

<sup>61</sup> *Diario de la Habana*, 26 December 1844, p.1

for killing their white masters.<sup>62</sup> While the numbers sentenced to capital punishment did not reach the levels of the 344 people executed during Jamaica's rebellion of 1831-32, Cuba's total number of accused, over three thousand, far surpassed their island neighbor and levels in colonial Cuban history.<sup>63</sup>

While public executions displayed the brute force of colonial control, other sentences, such as jail terms, banishment, fines, and the confiscation of property, prolonged the impact of the repression on the daily lives of victims and their families. During the first session, nine slaves received sentences ranging from eight to ten years in prison.<sup>64</sup> Slaves could also face punishments that specified up to fifty lashes and forced labor on a chain gang for two to ten years.<sup>65</sup> Eight free people of color were given jail terms of six to ten years. The remaining three freemen, *lucumí* José Subirá, Alonso and *carabalí* Mateo, and Creole Diego Gonzalez, were to be deported and prohibited from returning to Cuba or Puerto Rico. In addition, the Military Commission fined each free individual the cost of the legal proceedings and confiscated his property.<sup>66</sup>

Commission records and colonial officials actively sought to diminish the number of free people of color on the island, particularly accused conspirators. Free people of color comprised 433 or the 435 people banished from the island. For instance, Juan José Perez Barnuevo received a sentence of ten years in prison in Ceuta, a Spanish territory in

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<sup>62</sup> Cuba. *Colección de los fallos*, no. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Craton, *Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, 314-315.

<sup>64</sup> Cuba. *Colección de los fallos*, no. 1.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 71.



North Africa. Furthermore, the terms of his punishment prohibited from returning to the Spanish Caribbean.<sup>67</sup> Ceuta became a common destination for prisoners destined for jails overseas.<sup>68</sup> Similarly in Session Twelve, held in June of 1844, the Military Commission charged twenty-three *pardos* and thirteen *morenos*, as well as fourteen slaves. All of the *morenos*, the same number of *pardos*, and the bulk of the slaves were sentenced to up to ten years in prison overseas and banished from Spain's Caribbean territories.<sup>69</sup>

Trial records indicate that the individuals involved in the conspiracy had been overwhelmingly male. Of the more than three thousand charged in the Military Commission sessions in Matanzas, however, eleven were women. This gender divide followed the typical pattern of revolts found throughout the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>70</sup> Women, however, did participate in a variety of roles, including transporting food, supplies, and ammunition, carrying messages, and nursing the sick.<sup>71</sup> Few faced trial, but those who did were often implicated due to their relationship with an accused male conspirator.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., no. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., no. 2.

<sup>68</sup> Antonio García Oña to Intendente, Matanzas, 8 June 1844, "Relación de los rematados a presidios en Ceuta en virtud de la causa segunda en la Sección de la Comisión militar establecida en la Ciudad de Matanzas, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3.

<sup>69</sup> ANC-AP-Plácido, Leg. 42, Exp. 15.

<sup>70</sup> Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 126; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 228; David Barry Gaspar, "From 'The Sense of the their Slavery' Slave Women and Resistance in Antigua, 1632-1783," in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, editors, *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 230; da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood*, 24; see also Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*.

Military Commission records indicate that the eleven women implicated in the conspiracy faced a wide range of sentences. For instance, one woman was included among the seventy-eight people executed.<sup>72</sup> Most, however, did not face death. Officials in Cuba targeted *parda* María del Pilar Podeva in the plot due to her family ties to Plácido as his mother-in-law. They accused her of ignoring Plácido's plans and its consequences. Furthermore, the Military Commission deemed her capable of abusing her position as a midwife and harming the white women and children she attended. Consequently, Podeva was sentenced to one year of service in Havana's Hospital de Paula and barred from working as a midwife under penalty of life imprisonment.<sup>73</sup> Sentences requiring hospital service proved common for convicted females. The Military Commission also sentenced Margarita Morejón, *negra libre*, to a year of labor at the Hospital de Paula.<sup>74</sup> In trial thirty-eight, Mercedes Mederos, another *negra libre* was condemned to a similar destination. Authorities accused her of permitting free men of color and slave conspirators to meet in her home. For this offense, the tribunal sentenced her to six years of "hard work" in a Havana women's hospital.<sup>75</sup> Others, such as Candelaria, were acquitted, but placed under constant surveillance for a year.<sup>76</sup> The

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<sup>71</sup> Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles*, 128; David P. Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," in Gaspar and Hine, *More than Chattel*, 272.

<sup>72</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 229.

<sup>73</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 180-182.

<sup>74</sup> Fulgencio Salas, El Brigadier Gobierno to Captain General of Cuba, Matanzas, 6 June 1844, "Relación de los individuos rematados a presidio y deportados a perpetuidad de esta isla y la de Puerto Rico de los que se acompañan duplicados testimonios de condena marcados con los mismos puertos al margen de cada nombre," ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3.

<sup>75</sup> *Diario de la Habana*, 26 December 1844.

varying levels on which free women of color were implicated in the conspiracy demonstrated that authorities considered women who collaborated with male rebels a threat to the stability of the island.

As early as February 1844, O'Donnell claimed victory over the conspiracy. He declared that "tranquility" had returned to the island: the Military Commission trials were proceeding well, property-owners and the general populace trusted the measures adopted by authorities to handle the situation, and there had been no outbreaks of revolt in the plantations zones, "not even a single fire."<sup>77</sup> Indeed, by June of 1844, O'Donnell boasted to his superiors that he had "punished 1,600 men apprehended in [the conspiracy] with death, imprisonment or deportation."<sup>78</sup> His theatre of public power magnified colonial strength, assuring the white population and foreign interests of the stability of the situation. Moreover, the display of authority confirmed the government's ability to identify and crush its enemies.<sup>79</sup> The O'Donnell administration's efforts sent a powerful warning to the people of color who dared to challenge colonial rule. His actions, however, did not go without scrutiny from the international community.

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<sup>76</sup> "Cuaderno de costas no.23 de la causa de conspiración de negros" Matanzas, 12 September 1844, Copia de la sesión 23 of sentencia pronunciada por la Sección de la Comisión militar establecida en la ciudad de Matanzas para conocer de la causa de conspiración de la gente de color, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 18.

<sup>77</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 22 February 1844, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4618, Exp. 11, folio 1.

<sup>78</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 123.

### ***International Reaction***

International reactions to the Captain General's severe actions ranged from supportive to critical. Foreign consuls in Cuba and newspapers from the Americas and Europe documented the continuing reign of terror on the island. Some reports throughout the spring of 1844 challenged the Captain General's claims of political, juridical, and moral victory over the Conspiracy of La Escalera. Others, albeit relieved at that the uprisings had ceased, highlighted the less palatable aspects of O'Donnell's approach.

U.S. Consuls in Cuba described the brutality of the repression and their outrage over the treatment of white Americans implicated in the plot. The Consul in Matanzas, highlighted the intensity of the violence, proclaiming that

The examination of the blacks and mulattoes whether slaves or free is conducted with a cruelty ...of the Inquisition. They are questioned under the lash and numbers have died under the operations, and in hearing questions one [is] asked it is easy to see that the most innocent may be incriminated... [under such] exquisite torture [victims may] say anything that will relieve them...<sup>80</sup>

The U.S. Consul in Cárdenas wrote that "several foreigners, and among [them] some American citizens, have been arrested and placed in close confinement."<sup>81</sup> Thomas Rodney, the U.S. representative in Matanzas, reported the case of Christopher Boone, an American working as a machinist and engineer in the region. He claimed that Boone's arrest and fifty-one day confinement had been based on "absurd charges." Spanish authorities accused him, drawing on the testimony of a slave, of having three thousand weapons in his possession "under a tree." Rodney refuted the charges and condemned

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas M. Rodney to U.S. Secretary of State, Matanzas, 13 April 1844, NA-CD.

Boone's treatment, characterizing him as "the innocent victim of official tyranny, outrage and abuse." Furthermore, Rodney called for the U.S. to claim damages in the amount of \$10,000.<sup>82</sup>

Foreign newspapers also detailed the treatment of blacks and mulattoes in the wake of the Conspiracy. In Jamaica, where full emancipation in the British Caribbean had been stimulated by slave uprisings there in 1831, news of slave insurrection in Cuba came almost without surprise.<sup>83</sup> Reports from Jamaica's *The Spectator* declared

"...that by flogging some of the conspirators, their accomplices had been discovered. Some of the Negroes were flogged to death!! ...It may be in some cases, that the poor wretches are driven, by the excruciating agonies of the tortures applies, to confess, or rather consent to the confession of conspiracies, which exist only in the minds of despotic rulers...In any case it is to be hoped the authorities may see the extreme wickedness and wretched policy of driving the poor slaves to desperation ere it be too late, and scenes of woe, such as were perpetrated in Hayti, become the inevitable result."<sup>84</sup>

Newspapers in the United States also expressed their disgust of the situation in Cuba. The *Philadelphia-North American* commented, "the horrible cruelties perpetrated by Governor O'Donnell, and the military commissioner at Matanzas ...seems a reproach to Christendom that monsters such as O'Donnell are tolerated."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Franklin Gage to U.S. Secretary of State, Cárdenas, April 1, 1844, NA-CD.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas M. Rodney to U.S. Secretary of State, Matanzas, 13 April 1844, NA-CD.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Craton, *Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, 323.

<sup>84</sup> *The Spectator*, 25 April 1844, AGI-AHN, Leg. 5064, Exp. 28, No. 3, folio 3.

<sup>85</sup> *North American* 6 July 1844 quoted in Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 229.

Commentary in New Orleans described similar scenes, but condoned Cuba's approach. The former Spanish territory, and later a destination for free people of color banished from Cuba, residents demonstrated an avid interest in the island's events of 1844. *The Daily Picayune* reported "some hundred Negroes have been executed already at Matanzas, and a great many more are yet to suffer."<sup>86</sup> In addition, New Orleans papers reported the daily arrests and the overflowing prisons and indicated the local population's familiarity with several prisoners scheduled for execution in Cuba.<sup>87</sup> Among the condemned were two American free men of color, Carlos Blackely and Félix Barbosa. They were described as being rich mulattoes who made their living in Havana as a dentist and an undertaker, respectively.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the New Orleans paper praised O'Donnell's efforts, declaring

...it is fortunate for Cuba that it [the insurrection] reached its crisis when a man of the energy of General O'Donnell was in possession of power. He ... is determined to eradicate every symptom of disaffection. It is said that he will very materially diminish the number of those engaged in labor on the island, but he will thereby give greater security to life and property.<sup>89</sup>

Most likely, New Orleans' stance arose from the challenges it faced with its large population of free people of color and slaves. Free blacks and mulattoes represented 18 percent and slaves 22.94 percent, respectively, of the total population of New Orleans in 1840.<sup>90</sup> In contrast, territories critical of the repression in Cuba had abolished slavery.

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<sup>86</sup> *The Daily Picayune*, 11 May 1844, 2.

<sup>87</sup> *The Daily Picayune*, 11 May 1844, 2.

<sup>88</sup> *The Daily Picayune*, April 20, 1844.

<sup>89</sup> *The Daily Picayune*, 20 April, 1844, 2.

The general condemnation of the repression by the international community, however, put the island's political credibility and economic viability at risk. To counter the affront, colonial officials in Puerto Rico and Spain announced that they would enforce laws that prohibited all written material that might "damage the morale and peace" of Cuba.<sup>91</sup> Newspapers in Matanzas ran articles chastising foreign nations that questioned Cuban methods. The *Aurora* stated that:

Some foreign newspapers are poorly informed or have sinister intentions; they have taken part in alarming commercial nations regarding the critical state that they imagine our island to be in. ... The island of Cuba, where its white inhabitants are illustrious and loyal ...and where a large group of armed forces exists...have nothing to fear from those who conspire against our well-being.<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, O'Donnell took steps to calm some foreign representatives concerns regarding their countrymen and the security of their commercial investments. Local newspapers reported: "...Our ports, in spite of this [the conspiracy], have never been more crowded...shipping, commerce, and mercantile transactions have not been paralyzed."<sup>93</sup> For instance, the Captain General reassured the French Consul in Havana that the majority of French planters in Matanzas maintained "honorable conduct" during the uprising. O'Donnell claimed that the small number of Frenchmen found mixed in

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<sup>90</sup> In 1840, free people of color in New Orleans represented 18 percent or 19,226 out of the city's total population of 102,000., 75 In 1840, the slave population represented 22.94 percent or 22,398 of the New Orleans's total of 102,000 inhabitants, Harold D. Woodman, "Comment," in *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies*, Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 452.

<sup>91</sup> Ultramar to Conde de Marasol, Puerto Rico Captain General, Madrid, 15 October 1844, AGI-AHN, Leg. 5064, Exp. 28, No. 1-2.

<sup>92</sup> *Aurora*, 29 June 1844, ANC-AP-Aurora, Leg. 42, Exp. 5, p. 7-8

<sup>93</sup> *Aurora*, 29 June 1844, ANC-AP-Aurora, Leg. 42, Exp. 5, p. 7-8;

with the other perpetrators would not alter the “good relations” between France and Cuba.<sup>94</sup> Outraged, the French Consul officer responded immediately. He countered that six French planters residing in Matanzas had been unjustly detained because of the continued hatred and suspicion that surrounded Frenchmen since the initial group of refugees fled to the island from Haiti in 1808. Furthermore, he asserted his right to question his comrades directly and establish their innocence.<sup>95</sup>

Official rhetoric helped reassert colonial dominance on the island. Cuba’s Royal Council on the Development of Agriculture and Commerce (*Real Junta de Fomento de Agricultura y Comercio*) praised O’Donnell’s leadership in the repression as a “brilliant page of service.”<sup>96</sup> Whites were heralded as having moral “superiority over the lazy Ethiopians.”<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, Cuban newspapers depicted leaders of the rebellion as being “in a state of extreme barbarism and immorality.”<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, reports claimed that Spain’s “imperial superiority” had rooted out all plots against the island.<sup>99</sup> The staging of official power crushed the conspiracy of La Escalera, reestablishing immediate order.

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<sup>94</sup> O’Donnell to French Consul in Cuba, Havana, 24 February 1844, AGI-AHN, Leg. 8, Exp. 14, No. 12, folio 1-2.

<sup>95</sup> Mollier, French Consul in Cuba to O’Donnell, Havana, 25 February 1844, AGI-AHN, Leg. 8, Exp. 14, No. 14, folio 1.

<sup>96</sup> Real Junta de Fomento de Agricultura y Comercio de la Isla de Cuba to Queen of Spain, Havana, 2 April 1844, AGI-AHN, Legajo 16, Exp. 9, No. 3, folio 2.

<sup>97</sup> *Aurora*, 27 June 1844, ANC-AP-Aurora, Leg. 42, Exp. 5, p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> *Aurora*, 27 June 1844, “...solo visionarios sin educación, en el estado más abyecto de barbarie é inmoralidad...” ANC-AP-Aurora, Leg. 42, Exp. 5, p. 2.



***Long-Term Plans to Secure the Island: ‘Tranquility of Terror’***<sup>100</sup>

To extend the reach of the repression beyond the initial violence and court sentences, as in many prior episodes of rebellion, new laws restricted the local movements, livelihoods, behavior, and population growth of free people of color, and curtailed their interaction with slaves.<sup>101</sup> O’Donnell and the *Junta de Fomento* implemented stronger legislation to control slaves and free people of color, superseding police regulations from two years prior.<sup>102</sup> The new slave regulations directed slave owners to arrest free or slave persons of color who arrived on an estate without proper the credentials. In addition, planters were authorized to scrutinize the “conduct” of free *moreno* and *pardo* employees, viewing those who rented land in the countryside with suspicion.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, O’Donnell complained that he needed to correct his predecessor’s error of issuing more than three hundred *cartas de libertad* (freedom papers) to former slaves. Consequently, O’Donnell suspended this practice, claiming that it was “an undeniable fact that free men of color were engaged in mass in the vast plot.”<sup>104</sup> By curtailing the movements and interactions of *libres de color* and slaves,

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<sup>99</sup> *Aurora*, 27 June 1844, ANC-AP-Aurora, Leg. 42, Exp. 5, p. 3.

<sup>100</sup> *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter*, 21 August 1844, PRO, FO 84/508 quoted in Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 232.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas H. Holloway, “A Healthy Terror”: Police Repression of Capoeiras in Nineteenth-Century Rio de Janeiro,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 69 (Nov., 1989) 4: 674; João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 223; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 125, 129; Michael Craton, *Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*, 324.

<sup>102</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 231-232.

<sup>103</sup> José María Zamora y Coronada, *Biblioteca de legislación ultramarina en forma de diccionario alfabético*, 7 vols. (Madrid: Imprenta. de Alegría y Charlain, 1844-1849). 3:139-141; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 273-274.

authorities hoped to stem the spread of liberty among slaves. Officials also sought to limit the growth of the free of the color. Both pursuits proved difficult to enforce.

Laws called for greater vigilance of the gatherings, conditions, and conduct of people of color. The legislation prohibited people of African descent from meeting without permission from local authorities.<sup>105</sup> While these laws did not refer explicitly to restricting *cabildo de nación* gatherings, they were clearly designed to include them. The increase in requests to establish more of these organizations in the 1850s and 1860s followed by legislation to curtail their growth demonstrates both governmental suspicion of these groups and their continued influence among *libres de color* and slaves.<sup>106</sup>

Authorities in Puerto Príncipe (Camagüey) complained that both free men and women of African descent continued acts of “excess” and insubordination. Officials blamed lenient punishments; the current jail time for such offenses lasted only thirty days. To remedy the situation they recommended that black and mulatto men and women be sentenced to four months of hard labor in public works and in the hospital, respectively, certain that this harsher punishment would “without a doubt produce the best results.”<sup>107</sup> Dolores

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<sup>104</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3.

<sup>105</sup> Zamora, *Biblioteca de legislación*, 3:139-141; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 273-274.

<sup>106</sup> Examples of these requests are as follows: “Expediente sobre la solicitud que hace José Ángel Ponce para establecer un Cabildo bajo la advocación de San Juan de Dios” Havana, 17 January 1854, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Gobierno Superior Civil (hereafter ANC-GSC), Leg. 1677, Exp. 83980; “Expediente que se refiere a la solicitud hecha por Antonio Bonilla y otros, para establecer un cabildo de nación bajo la advocación de Nuestra Señor de Regla,” Havana, 21 June 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1677, Exp. 83983; “Solicitud de Esteban Muñoz, de que se le conceda la correspondiente patente al Cabildo Nuestra Señora de las Mercédes,” Havana, 12 April 1862, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1677, Exp. 83996; “Expediente que se refiere a la solicitud de Antonio Iglesias y José Hevia, para establecer un Cabildo bajo la advocación de Nuestra Señora de Regla,” Havana, 30 May 1863, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1677, Exp. 83998; “Consulte sobre no permitir cabildos de negros criollos,” Havana, 5 September 1864, ANC-GSC, Leg. 8, Exp. 562.

Ruiz, a widowed *morena libre*, petitioned for the release of her son, Andrés Poveda, from the Isle of Pines. A white boarder insulted Ruiz, who had rented him a room to help support her family. Her son came to her aid and had been sentenced to three months of deportation for defending his mother against the man's verbal attacks.<sup>108</sup> Enforcing certain behaviors of people of color with punitive measures enabled authorities to appear to shape the conduct of free people of color to reflect the hierarchy of the slave society. *Libres de color*, however, continued to exercise their understanding of appropriate behavior, particularly under threat of abuse.

The combined terror of government repression, criminal trials, and the restrictive legislation, severely diminished *libres de color's* ability to recover and rebuild their communities. Faced with the loss of everything they had worked for, however, some free women and men of color challenged these rulings. Initial attempts to reclaim their lives came in the forms of establishing contact with their jailed loved ones and petitioning for items and property confiscated during the repression. After María del Francito Flores' brother, Miguel, had been incarcerated, she "demanded [to know] the state of his health."<sup>109</sup> Serverino Flores, upon his release from jail, requested that officials return the

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<sup>107</sup> Teniente Gobernador de Puerto Príncipe to Captain General of Cuba, Puerto Príncipe, 4 November 1845, "Expediente en que el Señor Teniente Gobernador de Puerto Príncipe ocurre a esta Real Audiencia exponiendo la necesidad de reprimir ejecutivamente las frecuentes faltas y excesos de las gentes de color y solicita se sierva autorizarle para imponer hasta cuatro jueces de obras públicas sin procedimiento escrito," ANC-AP, Leg. 43, Exp. 5, folio 3.

<sup>108</sup> Dolores Ruiz to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 4 September 1848, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1449, Exp. 56824.

<sup>109</sup> María del Fransito Flores to Military Commission, Havana, 12 December 1844, ANC-CM, Leg. 57, Exp. 1, pieza 3.

money taken from him, “four... pesos,” when he was apprehended.<sup>110</sup> In addition to currency, appropriated goods included money, horses, houses, and furniture, as well as slaves.<sup>111</sup> For instance, when María de los Angeles Pedroso’s husband, Lázaro, was jailed for his suspected involvement in the conspiracy, authorities claimed the couple’s house, land, and two slaves in the town of Santa Cruz in the Matanzas province. Pedroso successfully petitioned for the return of the house and land because they were her “exclusive property,” producing documentation verifying that she had acquired them before her marriage.<sup>112</sup> Estefanía Rodríguez and Alejandra Castillo submitted a more complicated request. Their husbands, Juan Reyes y Julian Cepero, respectively, had been found innocent, although Julian had recently died in prison. Their letter stated that officials had “not only confiscated their belongings, but also the goods [of their neighbors] on adjacent property.” In total, the women petitioned for the return of five slaves, as well as clothing, furniture, food, a gold watch, a horse, and a pig.<sup>113</sup> These types of requests demonstrate that, while the repression provoked terror, free people of color, in spite of that fear, used proven methods to reclaim what was rightfully theirs, no matter how nominal it might have seemed to authorities.

Over the next two decades, both colonial officials and free people of color sought to reinterpret life on the island. To remove the threat from armed soldiers of African

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<sup>110</sup> Severino Flores to Military Commission, Havana, 12 December 1844, ANC-CM, Leg. 57, Exp. 1, pieza 3.

<sup>111</sup> Military Commission, Matanzas, 14, December 1844, ANC-CM, Leg. 64, Exp. 1, folio 9.

<sup>112</sup> María de los Ángeles Pedroso to Brigadier Presidente de la Sección de la Comisión Militar, Matanzas, 28 August 1844, ANC-CM, Leg. 79, Exp. 9.

descent, O'Donnell dismantled the militia of color, a two-century old institution on the island. *Pardo* and *moreno* militiamen had served voluntarily in defense of the Spanish Crown. Its demise left thousands of *libres de color* without military service benefits and the community honor they known previously.<sup>114</sup> In addition, Cuban authorities, fearful of “the general contamination from free people of color” created avenues to purge them from the island, including forced migration.<sup>115</sup> *Libres de color* in exile, however, proved even more troublesome as reports claimed that they had established networks on and off the island. For instance, as early as April of 1844, O'Donnell became aware of the existence of a revolutionary council (*junta revolucionaria*) in Havana operated by Cuban *pardos* and whites with foreign abolitionists who were instructing blacks on the island.<sup>116</sup> To maintain his image of full power over island affairs, O'Donnell sent carefully worded reports to his superiors in Spain. Twenty-two out of the twenty-five letters claimed that all was safe on the island.<sup>117</sup> In reality, however, the calm veneer O'Donnell had

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<sup>113</sup> Estefanía Rodríguez and Alejandra Castillo to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 2 October, 1844, ANC-CM, Leg. 64, Exp. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3, fol. 1-2; Deschamps Chapeaux, *Los batallones de pardos y morenos libres*, 90; Deschamps Chapeaux, *El Negro en la economía habanera*, 62; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 240; Herbert Klein, “Colored Militia of Cuba,” 18.

<sup>115</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3.

<sup>116</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 30 April 1844, AGI-AHN, Legajo 8, Exp. 14, No. 16, folio 1.

<sup>117</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 30 November 1844, 31 January 1845; 14 February 1845; 2 and 12 March 1845; 5 and 18 April 1845; 9, 21, and 31 May 1845; 31 July 1845; 10 and 31 August 1845; 10 and 28 September 1845; 11 and 31 October 1845; 4, 10 and 30 November 1845; and 10 Dec 1845, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4619, Exp. 5; Correspondence from 30 April 1845 reports of damage to the sugar harvest by a hurricane; Correspondence from 30 June and 10 July 1845 report on accidental fires in Matanzas.

constructed began to fray and unravel, as free people of color maneuvered through the Repression of La Escalera.

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Colonial efforts to “secure the future” of the island in the wake of the Conspiracy of La Escalera gave rise to an unprecedented repression, targeting people of African descent.<sup>118</sup> According to Cuban historian, Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, colonial authorities used a variety of methods to dominate the sector of color, whom they deemed inferior, because blacks and mulattoes “constituted a growing and constant threat to [Spain’s] total hegemony.”<sup>119</sup> Indeed, to stifle that threat, by June of 1844 O’Donnell calculated that he had condemned over 1,600 people to death, imprisonment, or banishment in his efforts to root out conspirators.<sup>120</sup> Contemporary reports of the time and scholars of the conspiracy of La Escalera have claimed that by the summer of 1844 “the worst of the fury had passed.”<sup>121</sup> Yet, given the fact that the last Military Commission trial in Matanzas would not take place for another eight months, the preliminary figure of 3,066 suggests that thousands more faced the same terror.<sup>122</sup> For free people of color, in particular, the repression continued.

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<sup>118</sup> Leopoldo O’Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana, 30 March 1844, AHN-UCG, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33, folio 5.

<sup>119</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El Negro en la economía habanera*, 26.

<sup>120</sup> Leopoldo O’Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3.

<sup>121</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood* 232.

Scholars of conspiracies and revolts have often claimed to “tell the story of the rebels.”<sup>123</sup> Certainly, these episodes provided a “window” into slave societies and how “Black[s] perceived themselves, their oppressors, and their world.”<sup>124</sup> More specifically for Cuba, Robert Paquette demonstrated how “looking at La Escalera, with all its contending forces, affords a promising opportunity to observe the related workings of the trans-Atlantic political economy and Cuba’s slave society” in the age of revolution and modernization.<sup>125</sup> But what of the aftermath of these revolts? I posit that examining the Repression of La Escalera offers another lens for understanding the rebels, slave societies, and the Atlantic World politics of the mid nineteenth century.

In the subsequent chapters, I examine the challenges free people of color faced in the aftermath of the Repression of La Escalera. While the devastating hurricane that washed over Matanzas in October of 1844 symbolized, to some, the “divine retribution” promised by Plácido, the accused leader of the conspiracy,<sup>126</sup> to others it may have also signaled a cleansing of the pain and the hope of the future. Free black efforts to reclaim their lives, both on and off the island, reveal the complex mixture of individual, racial, and political identities that emerged from their experience in the repression. People of color may not have joined in a united force against slavery and colonial rule until 1868,

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<sup>122</sup> For a compilation of the sentences of the Matanzas Branch of the Military Commission, see Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 229; Morales y Morales, *Iniciadores y primeros mártires de la revolución cubana*, 173.

<sup>123</sup> Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, xiv.

<sup>124</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 26; Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 145-146; Gaspar *Bondmen and Rebels*, xiv.

<sup>125</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 26.

the advent of Cuba's first war for independence from Spain, but the violence and tragedy they experienced in the La Escalera Repression had a profound effect on their political consciousness. *Libres de color* contested colonial efforts to maintain control over them through a variety of means. Moreover, the memory of the repression prepared *libres de color* for and entrenched them in the ensuing three decades of war to end slavery and colonization on the island.

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<sup>126</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 232.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Labor and La Escalera

Prior to 1844, Spaniards and Creoles raised exaggerated claims that free men and women of color monopolized artisan and midwife positions at the expense of the livelihood of whites on the island. Consequently, in the wake of the Repression of La Escalera, free workers of color faced an array of restrictive policies. Officials targeted the upper strata of the *libres de color* for immediate and harsh punishments. Some, like acclaimed poet, Plácido, were executed. Fellow poet, Juan Francisco Manzano endured several months in jail before being released. The Military Commission banished Claudio Brindis de Salas, director of a popular orchestra, from the island.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, authorities established policies designed to shift the racial balance of labor over the long-term. This chapter examines two areas in which restrictive policies had a major impact on the occupational choices of free women and men of color: skilled labor, particularly midwives and artisans, and agricultural labor.

New legislation placed native and foreign-born workers under close scrutiny, sentencing some to imprisonment on and off the island. The revised codes prohibited people of African descent from working on plantations as porters, carters, and muleteers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *Contribución a la gente*, 8-10; “Sobre la salida de Cuba los morenos libres Lino Lamonedá y Claudio Brindis de Salas que se introdujeron clandestinamente,” Havana, 22 November 1850, ANC-AP, Leg. 44, Exp. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Zamora y Coronada, *Biblioteca de legislación ultramarina*. 3:139-141; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 273-274.

Furthermore, they stipulated that only whites should be employed in positions that required workers to leave the confines of the plantation. In addition, Captain General O'Donnell proposed limiting the number of blacks who worked as mechanics, cooks, and domestics. He reasoned that replacing them with Creoles would reestablish white dominance in these areas and prevent further political upheaval.<sup>3</sup> O'Donnell's sentiments reverberated throughout the colony. Plans to infuse whites into a wide range of occupations, particularly in the medical and artisan areas, took center stage. Although Creole or migrant labor increasingly supplanted free blacks and mulattos, when *libres de color* could, they challenged measures designed remove them from their livelihoods.

### ***Midwives under Suspicion***

As discussed in Chapter One, prior to 1844, African-descended women's occupational roles often placed them in the public eye. While numerous island visitors marveled at the predominance of free black and mulatto women in the cities, Cuban officials, intellectuals, and other travelers noted it with increasing suspicion. The duties of domestic labor, teaching, and healthcare afforded free women of color a degree of autonomy not normally accorded to Spanish and Creole women. In an effort to maintain *pardas* and *morenas* in master-slave type positions, or at the very least, subordinate to whites, Cuban authorities and elites scrutinized this public presence of women of color.<sup>4</sup> Some whites sensed that free women of color challenged lower-status white females for

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<sup>3</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario del Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de Ultramar, Havana. 20 April 1844, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4618, Exp. 14, folio 4.

jobs. The bulk of these women, who competed as seamstresses, hairdressers, and laundresses, received little attention in the media.<sup>5</sup> The elite sector throughout the Americas, however, paid close attention to midwives.

African and African descended midwives serving in urban areas and on plantations came under constant scrutiny. For instance, in the French Antilles, slave owners both praised and condemned *parteras* of color. They saw her work as essential to the natural increase in the slave population, but were suspicious of her potential hand in the high mortality of slave infants that plagued the slave era.<sup>6</sup> In nineteenth-century Brazil, physicians attributed the spread of disease to midwife neglect and criticized her disinterest in obtaining formal training.<sup>7</sup> While physicians in Mexico spurned women's "unprincipled" practice of passing on knowledge of the field informally from mothers, sisters, and relatives, medical officials concurred that those practicing midwifery not be subjected to examination. They conceded that most of these women could not pay the applicable fees, regardless of pressures by the medical board.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, as colonial officials shifted their attention towards advancements in white, male-centered,

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<sup>4</sup> Olwell, "'Loose, Idle and Disorderly,' 99, (97-110).

<sup>5</sup> Cuba, *Cuadro estadístico*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> McGregor, *From Midwives to Medicine*, 38; Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles*, 62.

<sup>7</sup> Julian G. Peard, *Race, Place, and Medicine: The Idea of the Tropics in Nineteenth Century Brazilian Medicine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 119.

<sup>8</sup> John Tate Lanning, John Jay TePaske, editor. *The Royal Protomedicato: The Regulations of the Medical Professions in the Spanish Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), 303-305.

institutionalized medicine of the nineteenth century, black female-dominated midwifery came into increasing conflict for hindering the modernization of the colonies.<sup>9</sup>

The presence of midwives of color in Havana prompted a similar negative response. The medical establishment became defensive about Cuba's international image because *pardas* and *morenas* dominated the field. Furthermore, the growing number of women of color practicing midwifery without adequate knowledge prompted Dr. Domingo Rosain to publish his *Manual on Theory and Practice for Midwives* in 1824. His prologue emphasized the need to bring white women into the midwife profession.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, a newspaper article, entitled "The Public Good," published in 1828 reiterated his point. It stated that midwifery had been considered an honorable profession all over the civilized world. The article noted that Cuba, however, had not sustained this reputation. The author exaggeratingly claimed that Cuba was now the only place in which this profession had become "degraded and abandoned to all the women of color who were the most miserable and destitute of the city."<sup>11</sup> In reality, few cities in early nineteenth-century in Latin America could boast of a sizeable cadre of white midwives.<sup>12</sup> To remedy the situation, the final paragraphs of the article outlined a course of study specifically aimed at increasing the number of white midwives in Cuba. The plan

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<sup>9</sup> Peard, *Race, Place, and Medicine*, 119.

<sup>10</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> *El Diario de la Habana*, 6 February 1828.

<sup>12</sup> Mexico City appears as the main exception, listing twenty-four midwives in its 1811-1812 census. Palmer, *From Popular Medicine to Medical Populism*, 140; Hernández Sáenz and Foster, "Curers and Their Cures in Colonial New Spain and Guatemala," 38; Lanning and TePaske, *The Royal Protomedicato*, 298.

boasted that the midwives emerging from the program would not only be well-trained, but they would also execute their position in a “refined manner.” In turn, the combined formal education and idealized racial and behavioral elements would restore the honor due to the profession and repair the island’s besmirched reputation.<sup>13</sup>

Medical institutionalization continued to encroach upon midwifery. Efforts to regulate midwives continued into the 1830s. The Royal Council of Medicine and Surgery announced the prohibition of unlicensed midwives, stipulating fines of up to 300 pesos for transgressions.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the Spanish medical establishment expressed a general dissatisfaction with efforts to enforce the licensure in its colonies. The explicit criticism of the profession being “abandoned to women of color” and dishonored in the process highlighted the pervasive and informal nature of midwife activities and training. The traditions that made race, occupation, and honor inextricable in the Spanish empire, now appeared paradoxical. The medical society in Chile foreshadowed the Cuban situation, lamenting that literate white women, who could afford the costs associated with midwife training certification, eschewed the practice, in part because they would be forced to share the field with ‘rustic’ women of color.<sup>15</sup> The situation appeared to impair the island’s progress. Birthing practices by whites became analogous with modernity. In the hands of women of color, midwifery appeared tantamount to savagery.

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<sup>13</sup> *El Diario de la Habana*, 6 February 1828.

<sup>14</sup> Miguel Tacón to the Spanish Ministry of Interior, 29 October 1835, “Reglamento de la Real Junta Superior de Medicina y Cirugía, establecida en la Siempre Fiel Isla de Cuba, Conformó la real cédula espedida en nueve de enero de mil ochocientos treinta,” Oficina de Don José Doloña, Impresor de la Real Marina por S.M., Habana, 1834, 25-26 AGI-Cuba, Leg. 2350A.

<sup>15</sup> Lanning and TePaske, *The Royal Protomedicato*, 305-306.

### ***The Demise of Parda and Morena Midwives***

The revised slave codes of 1844 diminished opportunities connected to the medical field. Regulations forbade free people of color from becoming apothecaries or making prescriptions. Midwives came under close surveillance from the Military Commission and the medical establishment.<sup>16</sup> The case of María del Pilar Podeva, a prominent *parda* midwife, demonstrated their apprehension.

Charged as an accomplice primarily because the accused rebellion leader was her son-in-law, Plácido, the Military Commission sentenced María del Poveda to a year of service in Havana's San Francisco de Paula Hospital. In addition, the Military Commission deemed her capable of abusing her position as a *partera* and harming the white women and children she attended. The Military Commission barred Poveda from working as a midwife under penalty of life imprisonment and prohibited her from living with her family in Matanzas.<sup>17</sup> While it was common for women to be sentenced to hospital labor, the stipulation that Poveda complete her sentence in Havana, far from her family, appeared extreme when compared to the treatment of other women charged as accomplices in the conspiracy. For instance, when the Military Commission sentenced Mercedes Mederos to work in a Havana women's hospital, commission officers agreed to allow Mederos' young daughter to remain with her.<sup>18</sup> By isolating Poveda from her family and barring from her from midwifery, Military Commission officials succeeded in

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<sup>16</sup> Zamora, *Biblioteca de legislación*, 3:139-141; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 273-274.

<sup>17</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 180-182.

making an example of Poveda. They stripped her of honor, social status, family comfort, and the income from a highly specialized profession.

After completing her sentence, however, Poveda petitioned to lift the occupational ban. In her letter, she explained how the separation from her family had caused an economic vacuum. Her three sons and “aging and ailing husband...had been reduced to the greatest misery” without her income as a midwife. To bolster her request, she referred to the support she had from the “elite ladies of her town.” She instructed the notary who prepared the letter to highlight that these women “could not criticize her actions in any way” and that “they did not limit themselves to pay her at the level to which her expertise distinguished her.”<sup>19</sup> Officials granted her request. In spite of her success, the combination of Poveda’s role in the conspiracy, the continued predominance of free women of color as midwives over the first half of the nineteenth century, and the less than successful efforts to attract more white women to the field, prompted officials to take a more focused effort to change the situation.

Immediately following the Military Commission trials in 1845, concern over the state of midwife training and practices prompted colonial authorities to take formal action. They established a director to oversee the women studying obstetrics at the San Francisco de Paula Hospital where new classes were being held.<sup>20</sup> The program required that new female students, *pardas*, *morenas*, and white women, submit a variety of

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<sup>18</sup> *Diario de la Habana*, 26 December 1844.

<sup>19</sup> Pilar Poveda to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 27 August 1845, ANC-IP, Leg. 40, Exp. 2114.

<sup>20</sup> Inspección de Estudios de las islas de Cuba y Puerto Rico to Francisco Alonso Frudz, Presidente de la Sección 3a, Havana, 20 September 1845, ANC-IP, Leg. 40, Exp. 2115.

documents to meet the entrance criteria. To demonstrate religious integrity and sound moral character, students submitted their baptismal record and a certificate of good conduct from their church or local judge. Literacy regulations stipulated that they demonstrate their ability to read and write. Furthermore, women had to provide written permission from their husbands to participate in the program. The school required widows to submit their husband's death certificate.<sup>21</sup> In 1849, the Council of Development and the Economic Society of Havana recommended establishing a school where midwife trainees could gain practical experience.<sup>22</sup> Like the hospital program, the Council's guidelines stipulated that "midwives must have the combined qualities of good conduct, religious devotion, and empathy...necessary to inspire trust" in her patients and their families.<sup>23</sup>

Efforts to establish additional midwife schools and regulate the character of candidates continued over the next two decades. Controlling the character of midwife applicants helped ensure that the profession would be upheld as honorable. Meanwhile, the search for preferred candidates would force middle and upper status white women into positions they may have typically seen as being beneath them for its association with manual labor and work of women of color. In essence, by institutionalizing and

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<sup>21</sup> "Reglamento para la clase de parteras establecida en el hospital de caridad de San Francisco de Paula de esta Ciudad, bajo los auspicio de la Real Sociedad Patriótica y dirigida por el Don. D. Domingo Rosain," Havana, 1845, ANC-IP, Leg. 40, Exp. 2115

<sup>22</sup> Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, *Anales de las Reales Juntas de Fomento y Sociedad Económica de La Habana*. Vol. I (Havana: Imprenta del Gobierno y Capitanía General, 1849), 38.

<sup>23</sup> Ambrosio Gonzáles del Valle, *Manuel de obstetricia* (Havana: Imprenta y Liberia de A. Graupera, 1854), 110.



regulating the participants of midwifery programs, the medical establishment reshaped previous notions of white female honor and labor.

By the late 1850s, legislation and public debate over the need for more white midwives began to display signs of progress. More white women finally began submitting requests to become *parteras* on the island.<sup>24</sup> By 1869, the shift appeared complete. Commerce records listed fifteen women matriculating as midwives. None of them were women of color. Expense hindered many free women of color. All students were required to make a “contribution to the treasury” ranging from one hundred twenty to two hundred pesos.<sup>25</sup> It is likely that potential *parda* and *morena* candidates could not afford to enroll in the training programs. Nevertheless, given that the free and slave populations continued to increase, numerous free women of color may have continued to practice unlicensed.

### ***Artisans under Scrutiny***

If colonial attitudes about the occupational activities of free women of color unsettled island authorities and elites prior to 1844, free men of color caused even greater alarm. Contradictory perceptions of race and labor plagued male *libres de color*. While Spanish tradition and laws fostered conditions for African-descended men to work in skilled areas, Spaniards and Creoles claimed that the clustering of men of color in this field caused dishonor for whites. In addition, while some visitors to the island marveled

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<sup>24</sup> “Real Orden remitiendo a informa la solicitud de Doña Francisca Calderón pidiendo ejercer el oficio de partera,” Havana, 5 January 1857, ANC-ROC, Leg. 196, Exp. 10.

at the numerical presence of free black and mulatto male artisans, others depicted *libres de color* as lazy. Accordingly, the tensions of these contradictions heightened concerns surrounding *pardos* and *morenos* economic avenues.

Foreign comments described two different scenarios. On one occasion, Englishman Robert Francis Jameson remarked, “a free man of color . . . will work half this day, a third of the next, abandon his work the day after, and return as he feels the necessity . . . no dependence is to be placed on him.”<sup>26</sup> On another, he reconsidered and remarked that overall importance of free black and mulatto workers in everything from food preparation to luggage handling.<sup>27</sup> Foreign diplomats from France observed the variety of skilled artisans of color and the U.S. Consul in Matanzas deemed black and mulatto stevedores a “necessity.”<sup>28</sup>

Local residents held more closely to the negative viewpoints. Creole José Antonio Saco railed against free men of color as the root of white vagrancy. He argued that despite incentives to ensure a high status for whites employed in the skilled trades, potential artisans considered occupations *degradante* (without honor). The heavy concentration of free people of color in positions such as carpenters, masons, barbers, and musicians made this sector even less attractive because it blurred the lines of race, employment, and status.<sup>29</sup> Captain General Vives agreed with Saco’s assessment, adding

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<sup>25</sup> “Matricula General de Comercio en el año 1869-70,” Havana, ANC-GG, Leg. 478, Exp. 23542.

<sup>26</sup> Jameson, *Letters from Havana* in Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society*, 225.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>28</sup> B. Huber, *Aperçu Statistique de L’Ile de Cuba, précédé de quelques lettres sur la havane*, (Paris, 1826), 51; Thomas Rodney to U.S. Secretary of State, Matanzas, April 1844, NA-CD.

that if whites on the island, like those in the United States, did not stop viewing the skilled arts with “contempt,” then they would never work in these areas. He predicted that abandonment of this field would lead to widespread vagrancy among white men.<sup>30</sup> In other words, white disengagement from crucial skilled labor eroded the island’s socio-occupational hierarchy.

Sailors of African descent represented another occupation that fell under attack. The rigors of transatlantic travel offered another niche for freemen. Crewmen of color assisted in transporting crucial products between colonial and metropolis ports. Their movement also fostered a web of communication that facilitated the spread of information, rumors, and political events, including rebellions and antislavery movements, within the African Diaspora in the Americas. For instance, in the late 1830s, Cuban authorities confiscated an abolitionist pamphlet printed in Spanish by a London publisher that had been circulated by crewmen of color from the Bahamas.<sup>31</sup> The ability of these international travelers to spread revolutionary ideas, particular in the aftermath of Haitian Revolution and the wars for independence in Spanish America, made officials cautious.<sup>32</sup> Cuban authorities were no exception.

In 1837, Cuban officials rigidly prohibited free people of color from entering island ports. According to observers, *moreno* and *pardo* seamen, upon arrival, were

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<sup>29</sup> Saco, *Colección de papeles científicos*, 1: 216-217.

<sup>30</sup> Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana*, 4: 354.

<sup>31</sup> Antonio Lorenzo Valdés to Alcalde, Remedios, 20 May 1837, ANC-AP, Leg. 38, Exp. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Julius S. Scott, “The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution.” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1986), 82, 113, 175, 295, 297.

seized and jailed until their ship prepared for departure.<sup>33</sup> In 1842, just prior to the Conspiracy of La Escalera, Cuba's police force attempted to curtail black and mulatto crewmen's contact with locals by confining sailors of color to their ships.<sup>34</sup> As the decades progressed, island authorities gathered more evidence that portrayed free men of color as harmful, rebellious, perverse and violent.<sup>35</sup> In the case of sailors of color, officials seemed less concerned with whether or not white men comprised the majority. Rather, authorities focused their attention on these seamen's potential to infect the colony with contagious notions of black liberty.

### ***Artisans under Attack***

As a direct result of the repression, free *pardos* and *morenos* faced efforts to erode their employment positions after 1844. To monitor the occupational activities of free men of color, authorities tightened licensing guidelines for establishing businesses. For instance, Ramón Campos requested a license to open a mortuary. His request, however, remained unsettled for several months because the initial report indicated that his space was "unsuitable." Campos rejected this assessment, indicating that he had previously registered to receive a license without difficulty, but had not received the paperwork. His request went unanswered.<sup>36</sup> José Isidoro Hernández faced a similar situation. He wrote

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<sup>33</sup> David Turnbull, *Travels in the West* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1840), 70.

<sup>34</sup> Ultramar to Cuba Captain General, Madrid, 1 September 1856, ANC-ROC, Leg. 195, Exp. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana*, 4:354.

to request a license for his “carpentry workshop that he had owned for more than eight years.” When licensing authorities investigated the site, however, they described it as being in a “miserable state.” Hernández explained that he “almost always left the shop closed in order to work in the homes” of his customers. Similarly to Campos’ request, authorities left Hernández’s petition unsettled.<sup>37</sup>

José María Pacheco, a mortician, and José Lamarra, a barber, had better luck. Pacheco had been “operating without a license for twelve years.” He explained that he started his business through Joaquin Muños, an established mortician, at the same location. After much debate, including a reference from the mayor of San Antonio, Pacheco’s hometown, who vouched for his good conduct, officials fined Pacheco fifty pesos and granted his license.<sup>38</sup> José Lamarra asked for a barber license for a business he had already established. Like Pacheco, he was fined fifty pesos and granted the license.<sup>39</sup> The fact that these men had established practices, in some cases for over a decade, demonstrates their skill in circumventing certain legalities, and maintaining a certain level of autonomy over their livelihoods.

In 1849, the *Sociedad Económica del Amigos del País* (Economic Society of

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<sup>36</sup> Ramón Campos to Gobierno Superior Civil, Havana, 18 June 1848, 28 June, 1848, 3 July 1848, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Gobierno Superior Civil, Licencias (hereafter ANC-GG-L), Leg. 1245, Exp. 49303.

<sup>37</sup> José Isidoro Hernández to Gobierno Superior Civil, Havana, 20 May 1848, ANC-GG-L, Leg. 1245, Exp. 49332.

<sup>38</sup> José María Pacheco to Gobierno Superior Civil, Havana, 20 April, 1848; Felipe de Loira, Tenencia de Gobierno Político y Militar to Gobierno Superior Civil, San Antonio, ANC-GG-L, Leg. 1245, Exp. 49330, Exp. 49332.

<sup>39</sup> José Lamarra to Gobierno Superior Civil, Havana, 1 April 1848, ANC-GG-L, ANC, Leg. 1245, Exp. 49316.

Friends of the Country) reported that Matanzas had made notable progress in decreasing the number of free people of color employed as skilled artisans. Of the one thousand two hundred sixty-six individuals enumerated in the Industry and Commerce records, only four hundred and thirty-eight (thirty-six percent) were free black and mulatto men. Pleased with the results, the Society further stated, “we are not looking for the cause” behind the change that shifted the ration 3:1, in favor of white artisans. Nevertheless, *libres de color* retained a relatively strong presence as carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, bakers, and tobacco workers.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to enforcing licensing for established artisans, authorities restricted the movements of black and mulatto artisan apprentices of throughout the late 1840s and 1850s. New regulations in 1849 extended the typical training period to a maximum of ten years for women and twelve years for men. Previous apprenticeships lasted no more than five years.<sup>41</sup> The regulations met with increasing resistance. Trainees were incarcerated for questionable behavior, deserting their assignments, or insolent acts.

Apprentices of color were often charged with poor or disruptive behavior. For instance, Asensión Herrera, a master stonemason, requested the release of his apprentice, Victor Modesto, from prison. Modesto had been jailed after being found sleeping in a plaza.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, officials apprehended Gavino Iglesia, a cigarmaker trainee, sleeping

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<sup>40</sup> Sociedad Económica, *Anales de las Reales Juntas de Fomento*, 1: 47-46.

<sup>41</sup> Joan Casanovas, *Bread, or Bullets!: Urban Labor and Spanish Colonialism in Cuba, 1850-1898* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 59.

<sup>42</sup> José Valdés Farchio, Presidente de la Sección de Artes to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 22 September 1851, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1055, Exp. 37486.

in front of the Tacón Theatre.<sup>43</sup> Estevan Valdés' case proved more alarming. Local police encountered him "stumbling in the street, completely drunk and wounded in the head." He was released from prison after Francisco Gonzales, Valdés' white supervisor, explained the unusual circumstances. Gonzales explained that eighteen-year old Valdés "was an excellent cigar maker...[but] not accustomed to drinking."<sup>44</sup>

Others deserted their apprenticeships. For instance, authorities found José Jermin Martínez in the countryside. His white instructor and breadmaker, Juan Rodriguez, secured the apprentice's release.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Merced Valdés, one of the few women recorded as an apprentice, had particularly unseemly behavior. She fled her white instructor, Merced Orduña, five times in four years. Consequently, Oruña no longer wanted to work with the apprentice.<sup>46</sup>

More threatening episodes also transpired. Authorities arrested Teodoro Opropera, an apprenticing cigarmaker, for carrying a small knife; laws prohibited free people of color from carrying weapons. He was freed two weeks later after witnesses confirmed that he typically had good conduct.<sup>47</sup> In the case of Pedro Veitia, a carpenter-in-training, witnesses confirmed his threatening conduct and possession of a weapon. Veitia

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<sup>43</sup> Manuel Roque, Sección de Artes to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 17, April 1852, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1055, Exp. 37553.

<sup>44</sup> José Ramón Cabello to Gobierno Superior Civil, Havana, 5 February 1851, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1055, Exp. 37496

<sup>45</sup> Antonio Eligio, Secretaria Política to Real Cárcel de la Habana, Havana, 19 March 1851, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1055, Exp. 37488.

<sup>46</sup> Manuel Roque, Sección de Artes to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 3 September 1852, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1055, Exp. 37514.

reportedly carried a small rock in his hands as he prepared to throw it at Andres Dapena, “without respect for him [Dapena] being a white man.” While Veitia never physically assaulted anyone, the apprentice was arrested and charged with shouting insults.<sup>48</sup> For José Elias Mendiola, working for Narciso Jiménez, a white cigarmaker, had been tense. One day he lost his temper and shouted obscenities in reference to Jiménez’s mother. For his insolent behavior he spent eight days in jail.<sup>49</sup>

These examples of disruptive behavior suggests that many *libres de color* had little choice in becoming apprentices or selecting their occupational trade. Once placed, they became indentured servants. Acts of insubordination signaled their dissatisfaction.

Sailors of color, particularly the foreign-born, also faced restrictions. In 1844, when the regulations regarding sailors of color became more strongly enforced, *marineros* protested. For instance, Antonio Herrera and Federico Plata, natives of Portugal and Mozambique, respectively, demonstrated their dissatisfaction with their fellow seamen. In a joint petition, twenty-three seamen of color explained that while they were not natives of Cuba, they had been born free, identified themselves as Spanish subjects, and had been loyal crewmen for the Spanish empire.<sup>50</sup> O’Donnell permitted twenty-one of the *marineros* to continue their duties. Those who received approval were

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<sup>47</sup> Manuel Roque, Sección de Artes to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 1 February 1852, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1055, Exp. 37564.

<sup>48</sup> Gefetura Principal de Policía to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 30 November 1851, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1055, Exp. 37496.

<sup>49</sup> Manuel Roque, Sección de Artes to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 11 March 1852, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1055, Exp. 37516.

<sup>50</sup> Navia Velloa, Comandancia General de Marina del Apostadero de la Habana to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 7 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg 139, Exp. 3.



born in Europe, like Antonio Herrera, or in former Spanish territories, like Peruvian José Ortiz, Dominican Valentín Pérez, Colombian Ventura Narvaez, and Floridian Juan Arroyo.<sup>51</sup> Predictably, African-born seamen, like Federico Plata, were not approved for entry into Havana.

Island authorities continued to be suspicious of foreign-born *libres de color*. With the threat of subversive ideas outside of Cuba, O'Donnell established anti-immigrant legislation targeting the free persons of color. On May 13, 1844, the colonial administration ordered the expulsion of all foreign-born free blacks and mulattos within fifteen days.<sup>52</sup> Numerous *libres de color* protested the order. Considering the colonial government's legislation against free immigrants of color, the foreign-born experienced a high success rate in their petitions to remain on the island. Furthermore, in spite official efforts to diminish occupational competition from free people of color, the majority of skilled artisan petitions, seventy-two out of a total of ninety-three, were approved. For instance, Antonio Merlin, a native of New Orleans, wrote that his "good behavior" over the last twenty years as an ironsmith, husband, and father were sound reasons for granting his request.<sup>53</sup> African-born Juan Drake, a cook, claimed exemption from the new law on the same basis.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, another cook, Pedro Calvo, *nación carabalí*, from Santo Domingo, explained that he "had behaved honorably" during his fourteen years in Cuba,

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<sup>51</sup> El Comisario de Goberino y El Capitancia to Leopoldo O'Donnell, Havana, 13 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg 139, Exp. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, 13 May 1844, Havana, ANC-ROC, Leg. 133, exp. 220.

<sup>53</sup> Antonio Merlin to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 17 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Juan Drake to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 2 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 23.

as a husband, father of six children, and numerous grandchildren.<sup>55</sup> The most successful appeals resonated with the language of labor and honor.

New legislations placed stricter controls on native-born individuals whose employment situation appeared questionable. O'Donnell called for a general investigation of men of color on the island who were unemployed, did not own property, or who had not proof of living accommodations. He proposed establishing a private tribunal for these individuals, whom he defined as vagrants, because of their danger to society.<sup>56</sup> To make his point, several free men of color were arrested for vagrancy and jailed. For instance, authorities charged Juan García Feblita for vagrancy and sentenced him to six months in public works, after which he would be transferred to the Royal Prison.<sup>57</sup> Others labeled as vagrants, particularly people charged with making accusatory comments toward whites, faced deported to the Isle of Pines (present day Isle of Youth off the coast of Cuba).<sup>58</sup> Such was the case for Dolores Ruiz, a widow, who rented rooms to supplement her income. When a white boarder insulted Ruiz, her son, Andres Poveda came to her aid. Poveda's actions to defend his mother landed him a three-month prison term in the Isle of Pines.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Pedro Calvo to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 5 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 11.

<sup>56</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, Havana, 31 May 1844, Circular, "Prohibo que por ningún motivo o causa sea cual fuese la que se a le que tenga entrada en esta Isla aunque sea procedente de ella o haya mediado corta ausencia, individuos alguno de color clase de libres o emancipados," ANC-ROC, Leg. 133, Exp. 220.

<sup>57</sup> Juan García Feblita, Havana, 24 January 1845, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1448, Exp. 56802.

<sup>58</sup> "Lista general de los deportados que han estado en la Isla de Pinos desde 1844 a 1850," ANC-GSC, Leg. 1449, Exp. 56820

<sup>59</sup> Dolores Ruiz to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 4 September 1848, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1449, Exp. 56824.

The combined terror of government repression, criminal trials, and the restrictive legislation, severely curtailed the ability of *libres de color* to rebuild their communities. Moreover, denying free people of color access to work in their chosen professions weakened the economic stability of families and the hard-earned material gains of individuals. Nevertheless, free women and men of African descent continued to pursue employment in the urban sector. Using the language of honor, they refashioned notions of race and occupation to make their case for gaining exemption from occupational bans, obtaining business licenses, and remaining on the island despite foreign birth. More pressing issues from Cuban elites, however, overshadowed the gains of *libres de color*. Colonial elites and businessmen turned their attention to slave labor and sugar production.

### ***Agricultural Labor Crisis***

La Escalera exacerbated colonial tensions over slavery and agricultural production. To prevent further upheaval, in 1845, Spanish authorities implemented a new law to abolish the slave trade.<sup>60</sup> Acquiring slaves, legally and illegally, became increasingly difficult. Without sufficient chattel labor, however, planters feared that the lucrative sugar industry would collapse.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, news that the black population

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<sup>60</sup> Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 105; Jordi Maluquer de Montes, *Nación e inmigración: los españoles en Cuba s* (Oviedo, Spain: Ediciones Jucar, 1992), 32.

<sup>61</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 27-28; See also David Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain, and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

had reached a majority on the island shocked the white sector. This reality, combined with the wave of uprisings, sparked renewed fears of a Haitian-style slave revolt. These combined pressures pushed colonial authorities, planters, and merchants to explore ways to reduce the size of the population of African descent and the island's dependency on them for labor.<sup>62</sup>

As sources for and costs of slaves shifted, the demand for plantation labor soared. Cuba's established contraband trade network insured the island of a constant supply of slaves. While this enabled Cuba to circumvent anti-slave trade treaties with Britain throughout the nineteenth century, it also stimulated high prices for slave workers, particularly those brought in illegally.<sup>63</sup> Between the 1820s and 1860s, the cost of slaves skyrocketed to as much as 1,500 pesos.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, a mild cholera epidemic in the 1850s resulted in high slave mortality. The combination of these factors, along with a rising demand in sugar production, resulted in a severe dearth in agricultural workers. These realities forced colonial Cuban authorities and planters to consider importing free agricultural workers, white and non-white.<sup>65</sup> A series of plans emerged to contract Europeans, Asians, and in spite of the perceived danger, Africans to solve Cuba's agricultural labor shortage.

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<sup>62</sup> Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 89-90, 92-93; Spain, Superintendencia General, *Informe fiscal sobre fomento de la población blanca*, 6; Cuba, Comisión de estadística, *Cuadro estadístico*, inserts 1-2;

<sup>63</sup> Jordi Maluquer de Montes, *Nación e inmigración*, 32; Duvan C. Corbitt, *A Study of the Chinese in Cuba, 1847-1947* (Wilmore, KY: Asbury College, 1971), 2; Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 105.

<sup>64</sup> Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 105.

Initially, colonial authorities focused their efforts on securing white laborers. In 1845, officials in Spain completed a report entitled *The Development of the White Population in Cuba and Progressive Slave Emancipation*. It concluded that Cuba needed to create a solid base on which to establish a stable and natural increase in the white population. The study cited European family immigration as the most effective way to obtain this goal. Furthermore, the report stated that these immigrants, many of whom would be agricultural workers, would replace people of color. In essence, the immigration of “hardworking and honorable families” would rid Cuba of its dependence on slaves for agricultural production.<sup>66</sup>

Colonial officials had made previous attempts to attract European laborers to the island. In the 1830s Franciso Arango y Parreño and later José Antonio Saco encouraged Spanish immigration to Cuba to fill the need for workers.<sup>67</sup> By 1840, the Count of Villanueva requested permission to create immigration societies that would bring in white workers.<sup>68</sup> The *Ultramar*, Spain’s overseas council, recommended laborers from the Canary Islands and Northern Spain because the high unemployment these countries made the population more inclined to migrate to the Americas.<sup>69</sup> Spanish overseas authorities wrote to military leaders and the Council for Agricultural and Commercial

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<sup>65</sup> Naranjo Orovio and García González, *Racismo e inmigración en Cuba*, 103; Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 27-28.

<sup>66</sup> Spain, Superintendencia General, *Informe fiscal sobre fomento de la población blanca*, 37.

<sup>67</sup> Franciso Arango y Parreño to King of Spain, 30 August 1830, *Código Negro*, No. 3, AGI-Indiferente, Leg. 2828; Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana*, 4: 59.

<sup>68</sup> Naranjo Orovio and García González, *Racismo e inmigración*, 105.

Development in Cuba regarding the necessity to adopt measures to “replace the ...workers of color with white laborers.”<sup>70</sup> While many agreed that bringing in white workers was vital to maintaining Cuba’s security and wealth, they wondered where they would find “four or five hundred thousand Europeans” to substitute for slaves in agricultural and domestic labor.<sup>71</sup> Officials from Lugo and Pontevedra in Galicia, Spain suggested agricultural workers from the region who were already immigrating to South America, particularly Montevideo, Uruguay.<sup>72</sup> These immigrants were deemed more preferable to the current flow single young male artisans and shopkeepers from Spain.<sup>73</sup> Under the Direction of the direction of the *Junta de la Población Blanca* (White Population Council), Cuba began importing white laborers and artisans.<sup>74</sup>

Efforts to introduce white laborers and artisans, however, proved problematic. For instance, immigrants transported from the Canary Islands to work on Cuban railroads complained of poor provisions and inadequate housing, among other abuses.<sup>75</sup> Miguel Estorch’s plan to import Catalan workers in the early 1840s failed, as Catalan laborers

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<sup>69</sup> Ultramar to Ministro de la Gobernación de la Península, Madrid, 3 March 1841, AGI-AHN, Leg. 91, Exp. 3, No. 4, folio 1; Recommended locations in Spain La Coruña, Lugo, and Pontevedra.

<sup>70</sup> Ultramar to Intendente de Ejército de la Habana and Presidente de la Junta de Fomento de Agricultura y Comercio, Madrid, 8 March 1841, AGI-AHN, Leg. 91, Exp. 3, No. 3, folio 1.

<sup>71</sup> Ayuntamiento to Ultramar, Santiago de Cuba, 14 May, 1841, AGI-AHN, Leg. 91, Exp. 3, No. 15, folio 3.

<sup>72</sup> Antonio Magín Plá to Ultramar, Lugo, 31 March 1841, AGI-AHN, Leg. 91, Exp. 3, No. 23, folio 2; Gobierno Político to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación de la Península, Pontevedra, 21 March 1841, AGI-AHN, Ultramar, Leg. 91, Exp. 3, No. 25, folio 1.

<sup>73</sup> Antonio Magín Plá to Ultramar, Lugo, 31 March 1841, AGI-AHN, Leg. 91, Exp. 3, No. 23, folio 2.

<sup>74</sup> Naranjo Orovio and García González, *Racismo e inmigración en Cuba*, 107

came close to rioting in Cuba's harsh climate and working conditions. The bulk deserted the plantation for domestic or trade opportunities in the cities.<sup>76</sup> Similar problems occurred with immigrants from Northern Spain (Galicia) and Ireland. The difficulties led Cuban authorities to dissolve White Population Council and establish the White Population Commission as a branch of the *Junta de Fomento* (Development Council) in 1842. To bolster the Commission's charge to increase the number of white sugar workers, the Development Council established a bank that would award funds to plantation owners who brought in twenty-five families or more or acquired contracts to transport Cuban sugar to India. Furthermore, officials created funds for white colonization by requiring slaveholders to pay taxes on each person of color they employed in domestic services.<sup>77</sup> Due to immigrant dissatisfaction and administrative challenges, scarcities in plantation labor escalated in 1846.

Planters looked to non-white sources for a more immediate solution with Asian workers. Pedro Zulueta, a former contraband slave trader, offered his British firm, Zulueta and Company, to fill the shortage with Chinese laborers.<sup>78</sup> Zulueta's company convincingly depicted the Chinese as 'docile, industrious, frugal, temperate, hardened to rural life, especially in the cane fields, and accustomed to the rigorous climate of the

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<sup>75</sup> Naranjo Orovio and García González, *Racismo e inmigración en Cuba*, 114.

<sup>76</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 95.

<sup>77</sup> Naranjo Orovio and García González, *Racismo e inmigración en Cuba*, 107-109, 115

<sup>78</sup> Corbitt, *A Study of the Chinese in Cuba*, 4.

country.’ His contract initiated the arrival of Chinese laborers into Cuba.<sup>79</sup> Between 1847 and 1874, nearly one hundred twenty-five thousand arrived, many by coercion or deception.<sup>80</sup> While their contracts channeled Chinese workers into sugar cultivation, they also worked on plantations as carpenters, masons, and locksmiths. In addition, they labored on the railroads and served as urban domestics.<sup>81</sup> Although Cubans called it “free labor,” Chinese immigrants clearly worked under forced conditions.<sup>82</sup> Once on the island, they were regarded as slaves.

Varying sources confirmed their treatment. Travelers to the island portrayed Chinese workers as more anguished than docile. “When stirred by vindictive passions, [he is] indifferently ready for murder or suicide.” In contrast, slaveholders described the Chinese as “unmanageable.”<sup>83</sup> Inquiries by China revealed that planters sold these workers with their eight-year contracts. In addition, plantation overseers whipped these laborers, forced to work in chains, and withheld their payments. At the end of their tenure, planters forced them to either renew their contract or pay their own expenses to leave the country.<sup>84</sup> Those who escaped the plantation sought work in the cities “in a

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<sup>79</sup> Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Junta de Fomento, Libro 195, 121 quoted in Corbitt, *A Study of the Chinese in Cuba*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> “Expediente general sobre la colonización asiática en Cuba, 1852-1866,” AGI-AHN, Leg. 85, Exp.1-9; Expediente general sobre la colonización asiática en Cuba, 1873-1877, AGI- AHN, Leg. 87, Exp. 1-7.

<sup>81</sup> Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba*, 28-29, 32-33; Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution* ( New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 115.

<sup>82</sup> Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba*, 28-29, 32-33.

<sup>83</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 109.

<sup>84</sup> Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba*, 28-29, 32-33.



variety of handicrafts.”<sup>85</sup> Consequently, in spite of the arrival of Chinese workers, Cuban labor shortages continued, leading those concerned to consider other options.

In 1848, the Council for Agricultural and Commercial Development renewed its efforts to find an external solution to the labor crisis. Council members cited Britain’s practice of acquiring free immigrants of color, primarily from India, whom they called apprentices, to work on England’s Caribbean colonies where slavery had been abolished. Some proposed acquiring slaves from the French Caribbean and Brazil, claiming that they would be easier to adapt to Cuba’s Catholic practices and customs. They also welcomed the use of Mexico’s Yucatan Indians from Mexico, whom they considered docile.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, their proximity to Cuba facilitated the use of families, as opposed to single, male Chinese contracted workers.<sup>87</sup> The options presented by the Council, however, resolved little. Consequently, planters and merchants, stimulated by lost profits and high production costs, took matters into their own hands.

The 1850s witnessed a plethora of plans that claimed to solve Cuba’s agricultural labor demands. Similarly to Britain’s practice of contracting workers from India, Cuban planters and businessmen proposed to contract free Africans, whom they would call apprentices, to work on sugar and coffee plantations. For example, in 1853, merchant, Ignacio María Zangroniz requested to introduce five thousand free African

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<sup>85</sup> Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 109.

<sup>86</sup> Junta de Fomento de Agricultura y Comercio to Ultramar, Havana, 31 July 1848, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Ultramar, Fomento (hereafter AHN-Fomento), Leg. 23, 2<sup>nd</sup> pieza, Exp. 7, No. 4, folio 2.

<sup>87</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 104.

“apprentices.”<sup>88</sup> Spanish officials reacted to his proposal somewhat negatively. They claimed that introducing free Africans in the midst of slavery would undermine the tranquility of the island. The comparisons between their free status and those of slaves while they toiled side by side on the plantation would create a precarious situation. Moreover, they argued that, “as long as Cuba maintained slavery, Britain would not believe ... that introducing free people of color would diminish the nature of slavery on the island.”<sup>89</sup>

In 1857, Ramón Mandillo, a navigator and businessman from Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the Canary Islands requested permission to bring ten thousand free African immigrants from the Canary Islands to augment Cuba’s supply of workers. He claimed that,

these men, of the black race, are naturally fit for cultivation and the climate of Cuba; the idea of slavery, condemned by the forces of morality, humanity, civilization, and justice, must be substituted by the colonization of the same black race.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the contradictions in substituting African and African descended slave laborers with free African immigrant workers in a system that amounted to coerced labor and virtual slavery, Mandillo asserted that he promoted the best interests of the government

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<sup>88</sup> Ignacio María Zangroniz to Ultramar, Havana, 23 December 1853, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4642, Exp. 13, No. 2, folios 1-3.

<sup>89</sup> Ultramar to Cuba Captain General, Madrid, 16 March 1854, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4642, Exp. 13, No. 1, folios 2-3.

<sup>90</sup> Ramón Mandillo to Ultramar, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 24 April 1857, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 7, folios 1-4.

and the immigrants.<sup>91</sup> Officials in the Canary Islands submitted letters in support of Mandillo. Felix Fanlo, an administrator commented that the project could result in “incalculable advantages” for Cuba, without any “inconvenience” whatsoever.<sup>92</sup> Officials supporting Mandillo’s plan called the African immigrants “the most appropriate [choice] for enduring the rigors of Cuba’s climate and the hard labor of cultivation.”<sup>93</sup> While officials, businessmen, and merchants disagreed on the question of slave abolition, they conceded that servile men of African descent would secure their wealth and Cuba’s prosperity.

Expectations ran high on the prospects of fulfilling these proposals. In 1859, Ruiz Lacasa wrote to the Ultramar requesting support for his company to be the primary carrier for African immigration to Cuba. His project, which he characterized as “highly humanitarian,” proposed to introduce twenty thousand free African workers over the course of two to four years. Lacasa asserted that bringing in free Africans would be much more useful than the Chinese immigrants currently being used on the island. Lacasa cited similar activities of the French and British of bringing in workers from India to their overseas colonies. He reasoned that Spain, too, could and should contract Africans for labor in the Caribbean. He cited two examples. Hythe Hodges and Company and Regis Aimé, companies in from England and France, respectively,

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<sup>91</sup> Ramon Mandillo to Ultramar, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 24 April 1857, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 7, folios 1-4.

<sup>92</sup> Dirección General de Administración to Ministro de la Gobernación, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 25 April 1857, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 6, folio 1.

<sup>93</sup> Ministro de la Gobernación to Ultramar, Madrid, 7 June 1857, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 4, folio 1.

channeled Indian workers to the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. Furthermore, Lacasa declared that Spanish already used African migrant workers in Fernando Poo and Corsico, Spanish territories off the coast of Africa.<sup>94</sup> To lend credibility to his plan, Lacasa outlined over thirty-five regulations to insure the success of the endeavor as well as a sample worker's contract.<sup>95</sup>

José Suárez Argudin made a series of proposals to introduce up to forty thousand free African immigrants.<sup>96</sup> He stressed a number of factors to assert the urgency of securing immigrant workers on a large scale. One primary reason included the abysmal state of the plantation labor force. By the time he submitted his initial proposal in 1857, Suarez added disease a contributing factor to the weakened state of the agricultural labor force. The cholera epidemic of 1853 had caused the death of more than thirty thousand slaves.<sup>97</sup> Outbreaks of yellow fever a few years later compounded health problems.<sup>98</sup>

A fierce debate in the *Diario de la Marina* and *La Prensa* newspapers during the end of January and early February of 1855 highlighted Suarez's point regarding the urgency for and supply of workers. The articles called for the need to remedy the

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<sup>94</sup> Ruiz Lacasa y Compañía to Ultramar, Madrid, 16 January 1859, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 13, folios 1-7.

<sup>95</sup> Ruiz Lacasa y Compañía, "Reglamento para llevar a cabo el proyecto de inmigración africana en la Isla de Cuba, and "Empresa de colonización africana de la Isla de Cuba, autorizada por S.M. la Reina de España, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 13, folios 8-14.

<sup>96</sup> José Suárez Argudin to Ultramar, Madrid, 8 January 1857, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 3, folio 1; Suárez Argudin, *Proyecto, o representación respetuosa sobre inmigración africana*, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 3, folio 7, p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Suárez Argudin, *Proyecto, o representación respetuosa sobre inmigración*, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 3, folio 7, p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> José de la Concha, Cuba Captain General to Ministro de Estado, Havana, April – July 1855, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4643, Exp. 7, Nos. 7, 12, 20-24.

shortage of agricultural labor, with a “main preference, above all others” for workers from Africa.<sup>99</sup> Suarez agreed, commenting that the pragmatics of the situation called for planters “to look for indirect methods, since the direct methods are insufficient.” He concluded that the best “indirect method” was to introduce enough African immigrants to at least reduce the labor problem. Furthermore, Suarez pointed out that there were no laws prohibiting this type of migration. He argued that, “if Cuba permits European, Yucatan, and Chinese immigrants, African immigrants should be allowed.”<sup>100</sup>

Convinced that he had the solution, Suarez outlined a detailed plan of the transport locations, immigrant benefits, and planter rewards of his proposal. He specified four non-slave African ports: Sierra Leon, Cameroon (Old Calibar), Angola (Loanda and Benguela), and Mozambique (Sofala).<sup>101</sup> He claimed that African immigrants would enjoy the same advantages as European immigrants. In Cuba, he asserted, they could start a new life, “saving themselves from their own destruction” and become useful members of society, benefiting from monthly payments, and the opportunity to leave the island at the end of their ten-year term.<sup>102</sup> As for financial benefits to planters, African contract workers would cost only one hundred and seventy pesos, as compared to seven hundred pesos for the average slave. Furthermore, even if planters could afford the high

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<sup>99</sup> José Suárez Argudin, “Extracto de las razones en que se fund el vivo empeño de los habitantes de Cuba de ver introducida en su suelo la inmigración africana y de las que se ofrecen así mismo para que por ningún motivo justo y razonable pueda ser impugnada; y se publica con el objeto de que agregado al proyecto que acaba de imprimirse en la Habana, referente á este importante fin, pueda contribuir de algún modo á su favorable resolución” Havana, 1 May 1856, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 3, folio 14, p. 3.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., folio 11, p. 12.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, folio 9, p. 8.

cost of slaves, they ran the risk of receiving them under the contraband trade that could jeopardize their operations if discovered by strict officials. Above all, Suarez asserted that African immigration would breathe new life into Cuba's agricultural industry.<sup>103</sup>

Suarez pushed his plans for several years. In 1857, he revised his original proposal, reducing the original forty thousand workers. Under the new plan, Suarez would import twelve thousand free Africans, ten thousand women and two thousand men.<sup>104</sup> Two years later, Mariano J. de Corsio, a member of the Spanish parliament, wrote in support of Suarez's plan. Corsio explained that he and University of Havana senate members had reviewed Suarez's original proposal. The not only agreed with Suarez's plan, they argued that Cuba needed at least one hundred twenty thousand migrant workers, triple Suarez's original proposal, to meet current labor demands.<sup>105</sup> Acknowledging that such a large number would be unmanageable, Corsio reiterated his support of Suarez's revised plan.<sup>106</sup> By the 1860's Suarez had joined forces with Cuban plantation owners, Manuel Basilio de Cunha Reis from Portugal and Luciano Fernandez Perdone from Asturias in a final attempt to bring African migrant workers into Cuba.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Suárez Argudin, *Proyecto, o representación respetuosa sobre inmigración africana*, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 3, folio 11, p. 12; folio 8, p.5; folio 12, p.13.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., folio 11, p. 12; folio 12, p. 13.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., No. 8, folio 2.

<sup>105</sup> Mariano J. de Cosio to Ultramar, Madrid, 15 January 1859, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 11, folios 1-2.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., folio 7.

<sup>107</sup> José Suárez Argudin, Luciano Fernández Perdone, and Manuel Basilio de Cunha Reis to Ultramar, Madrid, 9 July 1861, AGI-AHN, AGI, Seville, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 23, folios 1-3; Manuel Basilio de Cunha Reis and Luciano Fernández Perdone to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 3 March 1860, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 17, folios 1-9.

In the early 1860s, a decade after Ignacio María Zangroniz's 1853 request initiated proposals to introduce African "apprentices," Spanish officials finally took up the matter with the England. The Spanish Consul in London reported that the entire English cabinet opposed the idea. Cabinet members asserted that because slavery still existed in Spanish Caribbean, it would be easy for Cuba to convert these free workers into slaves. The Spanish Consul, distressed at the news, lamented that the "wealth of Cuba will disappear with the slaves."<sup>108</sup> The negative British reply encouraged some Spanish authorities and Cuban planters to become more vocal on the issue of contract labor.

A renewed debate over the issue of non-white labor took hold. The *Junta Informativa de Ultramar* (Information Council of the Ultramar) posed a series of questions to colonial politicians and plantations owners in Cuba and Puerto Rico. The interviews produced a massive report. The 350-page document included sections dedicated to "*negros libres*" in response to the question "On what basis can the work of free blacks be established as obligatory?" In other words, how could they force the island's present free population of color to engage in plantation labor and offset the shortages?<sup>109</sup> The questions caused a split among officials and planters.

Not all Spanish Caribbean officials agreed that it was possible to force free individuals of African descent to work. For instance, commissioners from Puerto Rico,

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<sup>108</sup> Director de Política del Estado to Ministro de la Guerra y de Ultramar, Palacio, Madrid, 19 June 1861, AGI-AHN, Leg. 90, Exp. 14, No. 21, folios 1-3.

<sup>109</sup> Ministerio de Ultramar, *Junta informativa de Ultramar; Extracto de las contestaciones dadas al interrogatorio sobre la manera de reglamentar el trabajo de la población de color y asiática, y los*

José J. de Acosta, Ruiz Bélvis and Francisco Mariano Quiñones, all agreed to the unfeasibility of sustaining the forced labor of free people of color. They concurred that “the population of color in Puerto Rico, primarily the workers ... is ...not only one of the most important elements in production, but also merit the most respect for their constant desire to improve their social position.” In other words, coerced laborers hindered individual development and economic production. Furthermore, they claimed that any move to establish new legislations that forced *libres de color* into a slave-type labor system would be “dangerous and profoundly disturbing” to the “tranquility and progress” of island.<sup>110</sup>

Cuban planters, however, argued against the Puerto Rican stance. Suarez, known for his adamant position on the need for contract laborers of color, also gave his commentary in the 1866 report. He stressed the need for free Cubans of color to be “useful” employees. Those who did not meet these standards should be “forced to work” in areas stipulated by the government, such as public works.<sup>111</sup> Manuel José de Posadillo, a member of Havana’s administrative council, agreed with Suarez. Posadillo followed typical arguments regarding African immigrants, stating that, “their robustness and resistance are the most appropriate and useful for cultivating sugarcane.”<sup>112</sup> Posadillo added the island needed two kinds of immigrants – *colonos* and *braceros*.

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*medios de facilitar la inmigración que son más conveniente en las mismas provincias* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Biblioteca Económica, 1869), AGI-AHN, Leg. 288, Exp. 16, No. 1, folio 4, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., folio 21, p. 37, 40.

<sup>111</sup> Ministerio de Ultramar, *Junta informativa de Ultramar*, AGI-AHN, Leg. 288, Exp. 16, No. 1, folio 51, p. 45.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., folio 82, p. 160.



*Colonos* would come as families, work the land, and establish residency on the island, like many Europeans. On the other hand, the importation of *braceros* amounted to a business transaction. Thus, he reasoned that other governments had no right to speculate or interfere in Cuba's internal affairs. As for local unemployment or vagrancy within the free population of color, Posadillo conceded that Cuba adapt several of Puerto Rico's guidelines, such the *libreta*, a booklet where employers recorded workers wages, as well as calling on local authorities to closely monitor and control free laborers, black and white, to curtail vagrancy.<sup>113</sup>

Debates over using non-white foreign labor resurrected previous ideas to secure European immigrant workers. Supporters reasserted that white colonization could provide Cuba with an ample supply of white cheap labor.<sup>114</sup> Under the Commission, European immigration increased dramatically, but with difficulty. Immigrant complaints over harsh working conditions, echoed those from the first half of the century. Urbano Fejióo Sotomayor commented that the *gallegos*, immigrants from Galicia, Spain, suffered from malnutrition and inadequate shoes, clothing, and housing. He attributed their high death rates to their miserable living conditions, which made them prone to disease. Canary Islanders transported to Nuevitas, Cuba on the coast just east of Camagüey, expressed similar hardships. Despite the persistence of these types of complaints throughout the nineteenth century, efforts to bring more white immigrants continued. Businessmen from the Canary Islands, such as José María Gutiérrez and Bernardo

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<sup>113</sup> Ministerio de Ultramar, *Junta informativa de Ultramar*, AGI-AHN, Leg. 288, Exp. 16, No. 1, folio 82, p. 160; folio 81, p. 158.

Forstall, agreed to transport three hundred families to the Spanish Caribbean, two hundred to Cuba and the remainder to Puerto Rico, where they would receive a horse and plot of land to cultivate. Spaniards in residence in Cuba, like Gaspar Madrazo arranged for approximately two thousand *isleños* (Canary Islanders) to be transported to Puerto Príncipe (Camagüey).<sup>115</sup> To monitor and control immigrants, José Gutiérrez de la Concha, Cuban Captain General from 1854-1859, attempted to institute the *libreta* system based on the Puerto Rican model, on immigrant tobacco workers. His plan, which imposed slave-like indebtedness on free workers, however, failed and became obsolete by the 1860s.<sup>116</sup>

Although not all efforts to foster immigrant labor proved fruitful, they did manage to decrease the actual and proportional amount of *libres de color* employed in the free labor sector. For instance, in 1846, free workers of color in Havana numbered 19,338. In 1861, they were listed at 19,729; barely a two percent increase in more than a decade. Accordingly, the proportion of free people of color had dropped from thirty-two percent to twenty-five percent of the urban workforce. Contrastingly, the number of white workers climbed by 27,515 to represent eighty-six percent of Havana workers.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 105; Gallenga, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, 109; Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 115-116.

<sup>115</sup> Naranjo Orovio and García González, *Racismo e inmigración en Cuba*, 115, 120, 117-118.

<sup>116</sup> Casanovas, *Bread, or Bullets!*, 61.

<sup>117</sup> Data compiled from Casanovas, *Bread, or Bullets!*: 35; Cuba, *Cuadro estadístico*, 56.

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Balancing race, labor, and freedom had always proved contentious in colonial Cuba's slave society. The employment opportunities free people of color secured prior to La Escalera that helped shape their dual position as vital yet threatening to the slave regime took on new meanings in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Repression of La Escalera heightened concerns over the racial and gendered boundaries of occupation and status. Despite the essential roles free people of color filled in society, *libres de color* came under attack in the aftermath of the 1844 uprisings.

The colonial government made a concerted effort to remove or diminish the presence of free people of African descent from the urban work force. Immediate executions and sentencing of alleged conspirators exacted a heavy toll on the upper strata of the free community of color. Furthermore, as disease and anti-slave trade enforcement threatened skyrocketing production demands and profits, labor needs, particularly in sugar cultivation, shifted to the plantation sector. Plans to secure European, Asian, and Amerindian laborers diminished the proportion of free people of color working in both the rural and urban sectors. Ultimately, the long-term policies officials established to shift the racial and gendered balance of labor to create a white majority proved successful.

After the 1844 repression, concerns over worker shortages in the agricultural sector shifted political and economic needs from urban to plantation labor. Colonial officials, planters, and merchants encouraged the use of free non-white and white immigrant workers to meet production demands and maintain profits. Consequently,

competing notions of race and work resurfaced. By the 1860s, local and international pressures simultaneously reshaped and reinforced previous meanings associated with race, labor, and freedom in colonial Cuba.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Cubans of Color in Exile

Carlota Molina, a free *morena* and native of Santiago de Cuba, heard about the uprisings and the repression while in Kingston, Jamaica, en route to Cuba. In 1835, she had left Cuba to care for a “sick relative living in Curacao.”<sup>1</sup> Upon the family member’s death in 1843, she prepared to return to home. When Molina approached the Spanish Consul in Jamaica to prepare the paperwork for the final segment of her trip, however, he informed her that he could “not consent to her request.”<sup>2</sup> The tumultuous events on 1843 led Cuban authorities to enforce previous regulations denying free people of color entry to the island. Molina was caught in the middle. Laws established in 1842, after Molina’s departure, prohibited colonial authorities from issuing passports to *libres de color* to travel to foreign territories.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, legislation established in 1832 called for authorities to scrutinize free blacks and mulattoes arriving from Jamaica. The Cuban restrictions, which coincided with revolts and slave emancipation in the British Caribbean, asserted that freedmen from Jamaica were “a dangerous class ...contagious with the false and fictitious doctrines of revolutionaries.”<sup>4</sup> Molina’s status as a free person of color, her prior departure from the island, and her current location in Jamaica

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<sup>1</sup> Carlota Molina to Cuba Captain General, Kingston, Jamaica, 10 January 1844, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Asuntos Políticos (hereafter ANC-AP), Leg. 140, Exp. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Circular, Havana, 22 December 1842, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 36.

made her a prime target as the Repression of La Escalera took hold.

Molina, however, pushed the issue. Determined to be reunited with her children and other family members, she had Carlos Duquesnay, a Spanish consulate official, write a letter on her behalf. His letter attested that she had “always behaved honorably” and that she had a sincere desire to simply “return to her family in Santiago de Cuba.”<sup>5</sup> Her persistence paid off. Authorities granted her request, in large part because of timing. Molina had been away from the island during the revolts in Matanzas. Furthermore, her request arrived several months before island authorities implemented new legislation and plans designed to remove free people of color from the island.

Other Cubans of color who found themselves in exile after May of 1844, would not be as fortunate as Molina. The Repression of La Escalera extended beyond the initial arrests, tortures, and executions of the first three months of 1844. From March of that year to the general amnesty in 1857, free people of color charged in the conspiracy faced expulsion and banishment from Cuba. Partial records from the Military Commission in Matanzas listed 433 free people of color sentenced to banishment.<sup>6</sup> Colonial authorities forced approximately 1,000 more, labeled as criminals and conspirators, into exile in Mexico, the United States, and other parts of the Caribbean where they were interned or subjected to constant surveillance by local authorities.<sup>7</sup> Those who left Cuba under these circumstances found themselves exiled indefinitely.

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<sup>4</sup> Circular, 20 July 1832, Havana, ANC-ROC, Leg. 133, Exp. 220.

<sup>5</sup> Carlota Molina to Cuba Captain General, Kingston, Jamaica, 10 January 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 229.

This chapter examines the shifts in how the Cuban colonial government addressed the large, diverse, and rapidly growing, free sector of color on the island. In the first half of the nineteenth century, rising suspicions among colonial officials and Creoles sparked debates over the dangers of having so many free and enslaved men and women of African descent in the territory. Divided over the appropriate approach to diminish the number of *libres de color*, the 1843 uprisings gave the issue new urgency. Using data from court sentencing, anti-immigrant legislation, coerced migration plans by government officials, and petitions by and on behalf of free women, men, and children of color, this chapter explores the multiple ways that *libres de color* responded from their position as Cubans of color in exile.

#### ***A “Prudent and Calculated Expulsion”: Cuba’s Free Black Diaspora***

The repression of La Escalera gave officials license to enforce expulsions and coerce free people of color to emigrate. Between March of 1844 and June of 1845, over a thousand *libres de color* left Cuban shores for other parts of the Americas, Europe, and North Africa.<sup>8</sup> The initial expulsion phase began after the Military Commission concluded seventy-one rounds of sentencing, charging 3,066 people; 2,187 (71 percent) were *libres de color*.<sup>9</sup> A total of 433 free individuals of color were banished for their

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<sup>7</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> Pedro Pascual de Oliver, Ministro de España en México to Señor Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado, Mexico, May 27, 1844, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Spain, Estado (hereafter AHN-Estado), Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 1.; Leopoldo O’Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3; Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 25-26.

explicit or implicit connection with the conspiracy.<sup>10</sup> Because of the threat they posed, many were sent to Spain or Spanish territories in North Africa.<sup>11</sup> For example, the sentencing banished many free men of color from the island, such as *pardos* Leocadio López and José Francisco Froilan and *morenos* Carlos Villamil and Miguel Parran, prohibiting them from residing in Cuba or Puerto Rico under the penalty of imprisonment overseas, typically in the Spanish possession of Ceuta, in North Africa.<sup>12</sup> *Libres de color* like José Fertrudis Ramos, Jose Carbo, Damian de Fleites and Damaso Ramos were sentenced to imprisonment in the southern Spanish town of Seville.<sup>13</sup> *Pardo* Felipe Valdés García faced a ten-year sentence in a Valladolid prison in northern Spain.<sup>14</sup> Others, such as Ignacia Gomez, Nicolas Quevedo, and Catalino Marrero, were told simply they could never return to Cuba.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 229. The breakdown for the 3,066 individuals sentenced by the Military Commission in Matanzas is as follows: free blacks, 2,187; slaves, 783; whites, 96 (82 of the whites were acquitted).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.; Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ultramar, Havana, 30 March 1844, "Sobre salida de la Isla de Cuba de los negros y mulatos libres y sobre que puedan pasar a Fernando Poó los que voluntariamente lo soliciten," AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ultramar, Havana, 30 March 1844, "Sobre salida de la Isla de Cuba de los negros y mulatos libres y sobre que puedan pasar a Fernando Poó los que voluntariamente lo soliciten," 30 March 1844, Havana, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> "Expediente seguido por la Sección del la comisión miliar residente en esta ciudad para cobran las costas causadas en la causa formada contra Gabriel de la Concepción - Plácido .. - 1st pieza, Copia de la session doce of Sentencia pronunciada por la Sección de la Comisión militar establecida en la ciudad de Matanzas para conocer de la causa de conspiración de la gente de color," Matanzas, 30 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 15, folio 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Anslo Cabalino to Ministro de Gobernación del Reino, Madrid, 13 July 1847, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4627, Exp. 9, No. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Felipe Valdés García to Presidente del Consejo de Ministros, 31 March 1854, Madrid, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4641, Exp. 2.



Leopoldo O'Donnell, Cuba's Captain General during the Conspiracy of La Escalera, however, felt that this was not enough to safeguard the island. He and the Military Commission judges determined that the best way to weaken rebellious activity was through the "slow, successive, prudent and calculated expulsion of free blacks and mulattoes."<sup>16</sup> In his next act to remove *libres de color* from the island, he advocated prohibiting the immigration of free people of color to the island. The *Ministro de Ultramar*, Spain's authority for its overseas territories, concurred that all foreign-born adult free *pardos* and *morenos* should leave the island and be prohibited from returning. Violators would face death.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, on May 13, 1844, the colonial administration ordered the expulsion of all foreign-born free people of African descent.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this, men like Ramón Granados, a native of Santo Domingo; José Luis Arolas, a native of Africa; former Floridian Diego Domingo, and Colombian-born Vicente Pacheco, all skilled artisans, fought the order.<sup>19</sup>

The final phase of O'Donnell's plan called for the mass emigration of Cuban-born free people of color. To encourage their departure, he granted passports to all *libres de*

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<sup>15</sup> "Cuaderno de costas no.23 de la causa de conspiración de negros. 15 December 1844, ANC, Copia de la session 23 de la Sentencia pronunciada por la Sección de la Comisión militar establecida en la ciudad de Matanzas para conocer de la causa de conspiración de la gente de color," Matanzas, 12 sep 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ultramar, 30 March 1844, Havana, "Sobre salida de la Isla de Cuba de los negros y mulatos libres y sobre que puedan pasar a Fernando Poó los que voluntariamente lo soliciten," AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33, folio 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, folio 7.

<sup>18</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, Havana, 13 May 1844, ANC-ROC, Leg. 133, exp. 220.

<sup>19</sup> "Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deporten," ANC-AP, Leg. 141, No. 6; "Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deporten," ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 38.

*color* who requested to leave the island.<sup>20</sup> Still reeling from the initial repressive measures, including executions, arrests, torture, and confiscation of property, and fearing further persecution, hundreds of *libres de color* secured passports to foreign territories. Scholars have calculated that 739 *libres de color* left Cuba via voluntarily emigration between March of 1844 and June of 1845.<sup>21</sup> While this figure represents a small percentage of the total 152,838 free people of African descent on the island, their activities in exile plagued Cuban authorities in subsequent years.<sup>22</sup>

The bulk of the seven hundred free people of color who left Cuba fled to Mexico, the United States, and other parts of the Caribbean.<sup>23</sup> For instance, José Moreno, his wife Merced Santa Cruz, and their son Jacinto left for Campeche, Mexico with a group of several families totaling nineteen individuals.<sup>24</sup> Despite obtaining permission to leave the island, those who left under these conditions were labeled as co-conspirators.<sup>25</sup> Spanish

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<sup>20</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, Cuba Captain General to Pedro Pascual de Oliver, the Ministro de España in Mexico, to Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado, Havana, 8 July 1844 in Javier Malagón Barceló, et al, *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas (1839-1898): Documentos procedentes del Archivo de la Embajada de España en México*, 4 vols. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 1949-1966), 3: (1966) 71.

<sup>21</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El Negro en la economía habanera*, 25-26, Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood*, 228.

<sup>22</sup> The figure 152,838 is taken from the 1841 census; the last census prior to the Repression of La Escalera. Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 84-86, 88-90.

<sup>23</sup> Pedro Pascual de Oliver, Ministro de España in México to Señor Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado, Mexico, 27 July 1844, AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 1.; O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3, 1844; Deschamps Chapeaux, *El Negro en la economía habanera*, 25-26.

<sup>24</sup> José Moreno to Ministro de Gracia y Justicia, Campeche, Mexico, 26 June 1846, ANC-ROC, Leg. 159, Exp. 106.

<sup>25</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, Cuba Captain General to Pedro Pascual de Oliver, the Ministro de España in Mexico, to Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado, Havana, 8 July 1844, in *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas*, 3: 71.

Consuls in the United States reported groups of Cuba *espulsados* or exiles in New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.<sup>26</sup> By the summer of 1844, O'Donnell noted that with the voluntary departure of over three hundred *libres de color* in the previous two and half months. With their departure, he declared that Cuba had finally “obtained the opportunity to purify the class of color, which is contaminated in general.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, O'Donnell contended that purging the island of rebellious blacks and mulattoes would also stop “white attempts ...to obtain the independence of the island.”<sup>28</sup>

And so the cleansing began. O'Donnell believed that these harsh measures would ensure that none of the free blacks or mulattoes who left would want to return to the island. In addition, he reasoned that their departure would leave slaves with few influences towards demanding freedom.<sup>29</sup> As a result, authorities characterized the forced migration as successful. Yet, the O'Donnell administration and Spanish Consuls in Mexico and the United States found their victory short-lived. Removing allegedly rebellious *pardos* and *morenos* from the island may have curtailed a localized threat, but regional communications revealed a potential danger from several groups of *espulsados*. Reports from Mexico and the United States denounced their clandestine travel, reported

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<sup>26</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *Negro en la economía habanera*, 25-26; Ángel Calderón de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O'Donnell, Washington, D.C., 31 December 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140 Exp. 39.

<sup>27</sup> O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

access to financial resources, and alleged ties to an international rebel network poised to take over the island. The significance of the seven hundred known expulsions of free people of color redefined the spatial dynamics of the politics of race. What colonial officials had previously considered a threat from within became a threat from without.

### *Negros Espulsados in Mexico*

On May 15, 1844, a British steamship arrived in Veracruz carrying twelve *negros espulsados*. Mexico's Minister of Foreign Relations agreed to O'Donnell's request to have them confined far from the country's eastern coast.<sup>30</sup> The following month, a Mexican official reported that he had confined the twelve free men of African descent, but was concerned over another issue. Apparently, prior to May 15, one hundred and eight *libres de color* had disembarked in Veracruz. Their passports, issued by O'Donnell, appeared to be in order, so they had been processed normally. In hindsight, however, authorities wondered if the large group free group of color had actually been *espulsados*. One officer noted that two men from this group requested to be registered at the Consulate as Spanish subjects, including free *pardo* Bernardo de la Rosa.<sup>31</sup> Although Veracruz authorities had been instructed by O'Donnell to consider all *libres de color* from Cuba criminals and not to be registered as Spanish citizens, they thought de la Rosa might qualify as an exception. De la Rosa had presented a letter of reference signed by

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<sup>29</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ultramar, Havana, 30 March 1844, "Sobre salida de la Isla de Cuba de los negros y mulatos libres y sobre que puedan pasar a Fernando Poó los que voluntariamente lo soliciten," AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33, folio 4.

<sup>30</sup> Pedro Pascual de Oliver, Ministro de España en México to Señor Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado, Mexico, 27 May 1844, AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., doc. 4.

O'Donnell attesting to his "good conduct" and giving him permission to travel from and return to Cuba.<sup>32</sup> O'Donnell decided to leave the final decision in the matter to Mexican officials, however, he made it clear that De la Rosa would be the only exception.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, O'Donnell directed consulate officers to deny all persons of color authorization to enter Cuba.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, a royal order from Spain decreed that all free people of color entering Mexico from Cuba were to be considered *espulsados*, regardless of their official passports, and that they should be confined from the coasts.<sup>35</sup> Spain's Minister of Foreign Relations recommended that the governors on the coastal Mexico, particularly Veracruz, Tampico, Tabasco, Campeche, and the Yucatán, detain all Cuban *espulsados* entering these ports. Furthermore, he requested that Mexican authorities relocate and confine Cubans of color at least ten leagues (thirty miles) from the coast.<sup>36</sup> These

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<sup>32</sup> Pedro Pascual de Oliver, the Ministro de España in Mexico to Leopoldo O'Donnell, Captain General of Cuba, 22 Mexico, August 1844 in *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas*, 3:, 100-101; Leopoldo O'Donnell to Commissioner, Havana, 20 May 1844 in *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas*, 3:, 101.

<sup>33</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, Captain General of Cuba, to Pedro Pascual de Oliver, the Ministro de España in Mexico, Havana, 9 September 1844 in *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas*, 3:, 101.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:. 102.

<sup>35</sup> Real Order from Ramón María Narváez, Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado to Pedro Pascual de Oliver, Ministro de España in Mexico, Madrid, 2 September 1844 AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 5.

<sup>36</sup> M.C. Rejón, Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores to Pedro Pascual de Oliver, the Ministro de España in Mexico, Palacio Nacional, Mexico, 27 September 1844 in *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas*, 3:, 102-103; Salvador Bermúdez de Castro, Ministro de España in Mexico to the Spanish Consuls in Tabasco, Campeche, Sisal, Laguna del Carmen, and Tampico, Mexico, 24 September 1845, Mexico in *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas*, 3:. 260; Pedro Pascual de Oliver, Ministro de España en México, to Señor Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado, Mexico, May 27, 1844, AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 1.

reactions demonstrated Cuba's continuing and heightened fear of black revolutionary contamination carried by mobile *libres de color*.

By October of 1844, the number of Cuban *espulsados* in Veracruz had increased to over two hundred, making Spanish officials in Mexico anxious. During one evening in the previous month, numerous *espulsados* had gathered for a meeting. Frustrated that they had traded an oppressive situation in Cuba for a similar one in Mexico, members of the crowd reportedly shouted "death to all Spaniards; death to the tyrant."<sup>37</sup> Local officials broke up the gathering, but under the cover of night, they found it impossible to apprehend anyone. This episode pressured all Spanish Consul offices to scrutinize the activities Cuban *libres de color* more vigilantly.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these efforts, in November Cuban authorities received new reports about the subversive activities of *negros espulsados*. O'Donnell notified the Spanish Consul in Veracruz that at least one ship, the *Abon*, had repeatedly slipped past consulate port authorities and carried passengers to Havana.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, these passengers, all free persons of color, had taken up residence in the capital and established a dissident cell on the island. According to local informants, the former exiles included several members of their central unit, headquartered in New York City, which officials dubbed the *junta revolucionaria* (revolutionary council). Sources also alleged that these men planned to

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<sup>37</sup> Pedro Pascual de Oliver, the Ministro de España in Mexico, to Ramón María Narváez, Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado, Mexico, 24 October 1844 AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 8.

<sup>38</sup> In this letter, free people of color were quoted as saying "mueran los españoles; muera el tirano;" Pedro Pascual de Oliver, the Ministro de España in Mexico, to Ramón María Narváez, Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado, Mexico, 24 October 1844 AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 8.

organize the “systematic, daily killing of a white person.”<sup>40</sup> The Spanish Consul in Veracruz confirmed all of the O’Donnell’s reports: the illegal travel of the *Abon* and its passengers, the existence of the *junta revolucionaria*, their financial backing from New York, and their alleged plans against whites on the island.<sup>41</sup>

Obviously, Cuban requests that Mexico confine the *espulsados* thirty miles from the Mexican coastline had proven insufficient. In an effort to safeguard Cuba, O’Donnell ordered that all English vessels, regardless of their destination, be detained at the main jail depot and searched for foreign passengers.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Spain issued a royal order requesting that Mexico confine all Cuban *negros espulsados* they encountered.<sup>43</sup> Despite these instructions, however, many *libres de color* were not interned for more than a year, particularly in the Yucatán. The Spanish Consul in the Yucatán reported that he had never received the Spanish crown’s order to intern all free people of color who arrived from Cuba.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Cuban *espulsados* in Yucatán may have had the ability to move freely in this region of Mexico, giving them access to travel beyond the Caribbean.

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<sup>39</sup> O’Donnell to Telestono G. De Escalante, Consulado de España en Veracruz, Havana, 5 November 1844, AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Spanish Consul in Vera Cruz to Cuba Captain General, Havana 22 November 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140 No. 39.

<sup>42</sup> Leopoldo O’Donnell, Captain General of Cuba to Primer Secretario de Estado y del Despacho, Havana, 22 November 1844, AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Royal Order from Francisco Martínez de la Rosa, Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado to Pedro Pascual de Oliver, Ministro de España in Mexico, Madrid, 4 January 1845, AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, doc. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Salvador Bermúdez de Castro, Ministro de España in Mexico to Primer Secretario de Despacho de Estado, Mexico, 20 February 1846 in *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas*, 3: 259.

Over a year later, in January of 1846, the Mexican Minister of Foreign Relations finally ordered the Yucatan Governor to enforce the confinement of Cubans of color.<sup>45</sup>

O'Donnell's reports to the Ultramar, however, revealed little about the external activities and clandestine travel of *libres de color*. He maintained that all was well on the island.<sup>46</sup> His communications with Spain's Secretary of State Francisco Martínez de la Rosa, however, demonstrated how seriously he considered the threat from Cuban of color abroad.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the international nature of exile activities prompted Spanish authorities in Mexico and the U.S. to launch an intense investigation to verify the plans, movements, networks, and resources of *negros espulsados*.<sup>48</sup> The triangular correspondence among and the actions taken by colonial authorities in Cuba, the United States and Mexico between 1845 and 1847 show that Cuba's status was far from tranquil. Beneath the calm veneer O'Donnell constructed stood a political powder keg that threatened Cuba's stability, Spain's colonial authority and influence, and foreign relations in the region.

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<sup>45</sup> J.M. de Castillo y Lanzas, Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de México to the Governor of Yucatán, Mexico, 19 January 1846 in *Relaciones diplomáticas hispano-mexicanas*, 3: 263.

<sup>46</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernador de Ultramar, Havana, 30 November 1844, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4619, Exp. 5, letter no. 214.

<sup>47</sup> Francisco Martínez de la Rosa, Primer Secretario del Despacho de Estado to Leopoldo O'Donnell, Madrid, 4 January 1845, AHN-Estado, Leg. 8039, Exp. 10, No. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernador de Ultramar, Havana, 30 November 1844, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4619, Exp. 5, letter no. 214.



### *Negros Espulsados in the United States*

Court documents did not indicate where free people of color would be sent upon being expelled from Cuba, except in the case of some prison sentences in North Africa. Historian Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, who has examined passport records from this migration has calculated that approximately forty *libres de color* fled voluntarily to the United States. These individuals, all men, arrived primarily in the port cities of New York and New Orleans.<sup>49</sup> And while not as large in number as the four hundred or more who fled to Mexico, free people of color bound for the United States reportedly entered the country with substantial financial resources and connections to New York abolitionists. Furthermore, they quickly established ties with their countrymen in Philadelphia and Baltimore.<sup>50</sup>

After receiving an extremely confidential correspondence from O'Donnell in December of 1844, Francisco Stoughton, the Spanish Consul in New York, had been attempting to verify the existence of the *junta revolucionaria*. Denied diplomatic assistance from the U.S. government to infiltrate the group, Stoughton resorted to working with personal contacts in the local police department. Stoughton planned to have a trusted New York officer regularly visit African American neighborhoods in the city and investigate activities and meetings held there. In February of 1845, the officer unexpectedly encountered the suspected group. While attempting to pick up a fugitive from justice, he stumbled upon twenty *negros españoles*, among other people, celebrating

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<sup>49</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 25-26.

<sup>50</sup> Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O'Donnell, Washington, D.C., 31 December 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 39.

in the street.<sup>51</sup> Surveying the crowd, the officer spotted an American woman of color whom he recognized. The officer had previously met this woman, dubbed “La Mulata” by officials in their correspondence, when, as a slave, she had informed authorities about plans for an uprising. In exchange for the information, she obtained her freedom.

The New York officer inquired about her acquaintances. She responded that she was dating one of the *negros españoles*, as she called the Spanish-speaking men of color. However, she added that although they had been spending a lot of time together, she had no knowledge about the *junta revolucionaria*. Nevertheless, she agreed to inform the officer about the movements of her lover and his companions.<sup>52</sup>

A few days later, La Mulata spoke with the officer again. She met the him at his home and reported on her lover’s activities. She stated that during the previous Saturday and Sunday, he and four other men spent the entire weekend writing incessantly. The men he worked with were described as Spanish; three were mulattoes, and the fourth was “tall” and “almost white.” The latter, she said, spent a lot of time traveling and attended all of the group’s activities in Philadelphia.

On the previous day, in fact, La Mulata and her lover had traveled to Philadelphia. He had left her in the city while he accompanied these men to Washington, D.C. In his absence, La Mulata had taken the opportunity to return to New York to report to the officer. She stated that his companions planned to travel New Orleans for a one-month stay. The young woman also provided clues to the financial status of the *espulsados*.

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<sup>51</sup> Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O’Donnell, Washington, D.C, 18 February 1845, 21 February 1845, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 39.

Her lover, whom his associates often called “El Secretario,” for his business expertise, had been given the task of determining how to withdraw their money from Cuba. Satisfied with the information, the officer arranged for his informant’s morning train passage back to Philadelphia. He anticipated additional evidence of the *junta*’s activities and did not want to jeopardize this opportunity by arousing suspicion in El Secretario.<sup>53</sup>

When she returned, La Mulata told the officer that another trip was planned for Philadelphia in a few weeks, but that she had intended to accompany them. Not wanting to lose momentum, police officials agreed to pay for her travel so that she could keep them informed of the suspects’ activities. A day after her departure, several New York officers traveled to Philadelphia to seek out cooperative local authorities. In total, La Mulata and the officers observed thirty *negros españoles*. Twenty arrived from New York, seven from Philadelphia, and three from Baltimore. The group met for five consecutive nights on the outskirts of the city. Although she did not attend the discussions, the young woman questioned her boyfriend frequently about their content. When he finally responded that she had a “singular curiosity,” she ceased her inquiry. At the conclusion of the meetings, most of the men returned to their respective cities, while La Mulata and her group remained in Philadelphia. Stoughton considered these observations sufficient evidence to confirm the existence of Cuban *libres de color* in the U.S. and that their objective was to promote a revolution among free people of color in

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<sup>52</sup> Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O’Donnell, Washington, D.C, 21 Feb. 1845, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 39.

<sup>53</sup> Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O’Donnell, Washington, D.C, 18 Feb. 1845, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 39.

Cuba. Stoughton and his superiors recommended continued vigilance over the situation.<sup>54</sup>

A month later, however, the investigation appeared to be in jeopardy. La Mulata, still in Philadelphia, reported that her lover had become infatuated with another woman, a young, “cuarterona” slave who had apparently escaped from Virginia. Since this would compromise the investigation, not to mention cause jealousy and tension between La Mulata and El Secretario, officers in Philadelphia, with the aid of abolitionists, had the *cuarterona* sent to a small town away from the city. In addition, their informant reported that a *pardo* from New Orleans, whom she had never met, would arrive soon with a letter for El Secretario, and that he had received several in this manner. The Spanish Consul in New Orleans confirmed that he, too, had observed similar activities and had his contacts watching the movements of these men in his city. The collective intelligence confirmed that there were groups of black Spaniards in several cities, with at least twenty in Philadelphia and another twenty in New York.<sup>55</sup>

In spite of the evidence collected from surveillance activities, anticipated support from Spanish officials in the United States faltered. To O'Donnell's dismay, Spanish Consul authorities in the United States concluded that, due to the irregularity of the group's movements and meetings, *negros espulsados* in the United States were not a threat to Cuba. Rather, Spanish consulate authorities claimed that the groups they observed were simply participating in the “typical rumblings against slavery in [Cuba]

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<sup>54</sup> Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O'Donnell, Washington, D.C, 18 Feb. 1845, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 39.

from a few poorly behaved blacks.”<sup>56</sup> In response, O’Donnell, who could not readily dismiss the potential threat, especially for the safety of Cuba, informed Spanish officials in Washington and New York that he would continue to scrutinize these groups on the island, and urged them to do the same in the U.S.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile, during the investigations off the island, O’Donnell considered ways to remove all free people of color in Cuba. In September of 1845, the Spanish crown authorized another voluntary emigration scheme. The plan called for shipping *libres de color* to the Fernando Poó and Annobón islands, Spanish possessions in the Gulf of Guinea where they would work in agricultural production and as skilled artisans.<sup>58</sup> After a year of effort, however, the project collapsed. Given England’s anti-slave trade patrols and common reports of liberated slaves bound for Africa attacking the ship’s crew and captain, few ships were willing to transport *libres de color* to the coast of Africa.<sup>59</sup>

By the spring of 1847, news from the U.S. heightened O’Donnell’s tensions. In spite of the lack of assistance from Spanish consuls in the U.S., he maintained secret

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<sup>55</sup> Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O’Donnell, Washington, D.C, 18 Feb. 1845, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 39.

<sup>56</sup> Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S. to O’Donnell, Washington, D.C, 22 April 1845, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 39.

<sup>57</sup> O’Donnell to Angel Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S, Havana, 5 June 1845, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 39.

<sup>58</sup> Ministro de Marina to Leopoldo O’Donnell, Captain General of Cuba, Madrid, 13 September 1845, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33; Francisco María Marín, Primer Secretario del Despacho del Estado to Conde de Aberdeen, Ministro de Negocios Estrangeros de España in Britain, London, 11 October 1846, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33.

<sup>59</sup> Francisco María Marín, Primer Secretaría del Despacho del Estado to Ministro de Marina, Comercio y Gobernación de Madrid, Palacio, 23 October 1845, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33; Francisco María Marín, Primer Secretaría del Despacho del Estado to Conde de Aberdeen, Ministro de Negocios Estrangeros de España in Britain, London, 11 October 1846, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33.

communications with local police in Washington, D.C. In April of 1845, he traveled to the U.S. to meet with his contact personally. According to his informant, various secret societies of blacks and mulattoes still existed in the city, and they had affiliate organizations in Philadelphia and New Orleans that were preparing ways “to emancipate their race and give a repetitive and simultaneous attack on the Antilles.” Furthermore, British abolitionists attended their meetings. The officer also told him about the existence of white Cuban dissident groups in the U.S.<sup>60</sup> In addition, confidential reports from Jamaica and Haiti confirmed renewed conspiratorial plans against Cuba from British abolitionists and from slaves in the Caribbean. Based on this information, O’Donnell concluded that the triumph of annexationists, abolitionists, and island dissidents would spell the victory of people of color, and, ultimately, the ruin of the island.<sup>61</sup>

In an effort to resist foreign attack, the Spanish crown ordered the Ministry of War to send ships and troops to defend Cuba permanently. They also authorized the Treasury Department to maintain a monetary reserve to fund any necessary activities in defense of the island.<sup>62</sup> While the crown’s financial offering of 600,000 pesos covered only one month of expenses for Cuba’s active armed forces, O’Donnell assured his superiors that he would continue transmitting any news regarding plots to emancipate the

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<sup>60</sup> O’Donnell to Calderon de la Barca, Spanish Consul in U.S- Washington, D.C., New York City, 8 April 1847, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4628, Exp. 5, No. 3, folio.1-2.

<sup>61</sup> O’Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación del Reina, Havana, 29 April 1847, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4628, Exp. 5, No. 2, folio 1, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Ultramar to O’Donnell, Madrid, 28 June 1847, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4628, Exp. 5, No.9, folio 2.

island, and that disturbances would be handled by the “valiant and disciplined army.”<sup>63</sup> Yet, while O’Donnell and other Spanish officials braced for black rebellion from abroad, an unanticipated situation caught their attention. In spite of the horrors of the La Escalera repression, hundreds of *libres de color* petitioned to return to Cuba. Whether foreign-born or native, they considered Cuba home and fought for their right to family and community on the island.

### ***Petitions to Remain in Cuba***

In April of 1844, O’Donnell called for the expulsion of all foreign-born free people of color. A month later, a royal decree by the King of Spain, enforced the plan.<sup>64</sup> Numerous free immigrants of color protested the order immediately, petitioning the government to allow them to remain in Cuba. An examination of ninety-three petitions submitted by *libres de color* from countries including Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Mexico, and the United States between April and August of 1844 demonstrate the diverse methods in which foreign *morenos* and *pardos* arrived on the island and the paths they took to establishing their loyalty and contributions to Cuba and the Spanish empire.

Arguments against expulsions included testaments to Spanish loyalty, references of good conduct, and experience in a skilled trade or ownership of a business. Veracruz-

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<sup>63</sup> Navarro, Ministro de la Gobernación de la Reina to Ultramar, Madrid, 14 November 1847, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4628, Exp. 5, No. 2, folio 11, 12; O’Donnell to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobernación del Reino, Havana, 20 November 1847, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4628, Exp. 5, No.16, folio.1-2.

born Juan Arregui proclaimed that his Spanish language, customs, occupation as a carpenter, and service in Havana's *pardo* militia proved his loyalty to the crown.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Venezuelan León de Rojas declared that his service in the Royal Spanish Army should exempt him from suspicion. Francisco Novén claimed that his work as a carpenter and ownership of a coffee plantation, not his birth in Spanish Santo Domingo, should be considered in granting his petition to stay in Cuba.<sup>66</sup> Vicente Pacheco, a native of Caracas, argued that he had spent the past thirty-seven years in Cuba working as bricklayer. He had sixteen apprentices and owned several houses.<sup>67</sup> In addition, although born in Cartegena, *pardo libre* José Ramon Ortega, age forty-eight, requested to stay because he was married and had built a career on the island as a shoemaker.<sup>68</sup>

Others petitioned to remain in Cuba were based on family obligations, poor health, or advanced age. For instance, seventy-year old José Luis Arolas contended that although African by birth, he had been baptized in Cuba at the age of twenty-one. Arolas even produced references to support his claims.<sup>69</sup> Sixty-nine year old, Brazilian-born José Gonzalez had lived in Cuba for twenty-nine years. He argued that during his time on the island, he had been married to a Cuban woman for fourteen years until her death

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<sup>64</sup> Circular by Leopoldo O'Donnell, Havana, 31 May 1844, ANC-ROC, Leg. 133, Exp. 220.

<sup>65</sup> Juan Arregui to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 4 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 17.

<sup>66</sup> "Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deposite," 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 141, Exp. 6.

<sup>67</sup> "Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deposite," 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 38.

<sup>68</sup> José Ramón Ortega to Captain General of Cuba, Havana, 19 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 139, Exp. 13.

<sup>69</sup> "Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deposite," 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 141, Exp. 6.



during the cholera epidemic of the 1830s, made a living as a dockworker, and had exhibited good conduct.<sup>70</sup> Pedro Rivas appealed for reconsideration on the basis that he had arrived in Cuba at the age of nine and now supported his aging father.<sup>71</sup> José Ramón Ortega, a native of Costa Firme, maintained that he had cataracts and produced references from corroborate his statement.<sup>72</sup>

Some native Cubans petitioned on behalf of foreign-born children or spouses. Such was the case for Eusebia Josefa Courbille and Soledad Vargas. Courbille petitioned on behalf of her two adult children, Carlos and Patricio, who were born in Pensacola in the 1820s. She had met their father, an Anglo American, in Havana. When she became pregnant, the couple moved to Florida. Later, she returned to Cuba with her children. To ensure that her sons remained on the island, she indicated that they were both skilled artisans, Carlos was a shoemaker and Patricio was a tailor, and provided local baptismal records and references.<sup>73</sup> Officials granted Courbille's request, but Soledad Vargas was not as fortunate. Vargas, a white native of Holguin, Cuba, petitioned twice, in 1847 and 1851. She sought permission for her Jamaican-born husband, José María de la Peña, a free person of color, to be reunited with her. Despite having purchased the title of "Don" which gave de la Peña legal whiteness, it did little to safeguard him from the restrictive

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<sup>70</sup> José González to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 29 April 1844, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Asuntos Políticos, Leg. 140, Exp. 20.

<sup>71</sup> "Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deposite," 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 141, Exp. 6.

<sup>72</sup> "Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deposite," 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 38.

<sup>73</sup> Eusebia Josefa Courbille to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 6 May 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, Exp. 6.

laws implemented in the Repression of La Escalera.<sup>74</sup> Although local officials confirmed that her husband had resided in Holguin for twenty years, worked as a watchmaker, and owned numerous properties, they denied her petition. Stricter enforcement of new laws prohibiting the entry of all *libres de color* without regard to nationality left her with little recourse.<sup>75</sup>

Officials denied other petitions based on a variety of reasons. Some had insufficient documentation. Two were flatly denied because the petitioners spoke English and references attested to their bad conduct, which included using foul language and frequenting the company of other foreigners.<sup>76</sup> Overall, however, the bulk of the ninety-three petitions I examined garnered favorable responses: seventy-two (seventy-seven percent) out of the total ninety-three. Those that did often asserted their loyalty to Spain through military service or attachment to Cuba through family connections or personal references. The bulk of the successful petitioners demonstrated their viability as skilled artisans and property owners, suggesting that colonial officials place more weight on free individuals of color's ability to support themselves and contribute to the wealth of the colony.

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<sup>74</sup> Soledad Vargas to Spanish Consul in Jamaica, Santiago de Cuba, 31 October 1851, "Documentación relacionado con la solicitud hecha por Doña Soledad Vargas para que se permitirse regresar a Cuba a su esposo José María de la Peña." Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba, Gobierno General (hereafter ANC-GG), Leg. 525, Exp. 27015.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.; Leopoldo O'Donnell, Havana, 13 May 1844, ANC-ROC, Leg. 133, Exp. 220.

<sup>76</sup> "Solicitudes de negros extranjeros para que no se les deporte," 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 140, No. 38.

### ***Petitions to Return***

In May of 1844, a new law prohibited all free persons of color from entering Cuba.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, the combination of closed ports of entry, coerced emigration, and internment in foreign countries, all but extinguished opportunities for free men and women of African descent to return to Cuba. While the two-year investigation of *negros espulsados*' political activities involving government officials, local police, and civilian informants in Cuba, Mexico, and the U.S. suggested that many individual Cuban exiles managed to remain mobile, few families of color had the ability to do so. Swept up in the mass migration to Mexico as the most prudent alternative in a time of turmoil, *libres de color*, appealed to officials in Cuba, Spain, and foreign territories to return home with their spouses, children, and extended family. Several letters from families in Campeche, Mexico reached the Ministerio de Marina. Among them was Trinidad Oquendo's collective request. Not only did he and his wife, Agustina Geralda, seek a homecoming, but so did Agustina's sister, Francisca Franeito Oliva, and their friends' families, including José María Padezo and his son Santiago, and José Valentine Martínez. Oquendo explained that they were all *libres de color*, natives of Havana, and wanted to return to their homes. They had fled, like so many others, in the aftermath of the conspiracy, and arrived in Mexico with valid passports.<sup>78</sup> The Spanish Consul in Campeche verified that, since their arrival, they had "behaved very well, focused only on

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<sup>77</sup> O'Donnell, Havana, 13 May 1844, ANC-ROC, Leg. 133, Exp. 220.

<sup>78</sup> O'Donnell to Ministerio de Marina, Havana, 22 April 1846, ANC-AP, Leg. 141, Exp. 15.

... working in their respective occupations.”<sup>79</sup> Their group petition was forwarded to Ministry of Justice in Spain for further consideration.

Likewise, in June of 1846, José Moreno petitioned the Ministro de Gracia y Justicia to allow him, his African-born wife Merced Santa Cruz, and their son Jacinto to return from Campeche to Havana. In addition, Moreno’s request included five families: Pedro González and his family; Justo Bobadilla and his family; Juan Bautista Arango and his son Domingo, Pedro García and his wife Tomasa Alburquerque, Juliana Castro and her three young sons, as well as several other individuals. In all, the group totaled nineteen. In their petition, they renounced the conspiracy, stating “fortunately the rebellion was discovered among the men of color,” but that they “we are not those [free] people [of color].”<sup>80</sup> Moreno’s letter explained that the group had immigrated to Campeche voluntarily and legally where they had lived for the past two years. In an appeal to the official’s sense of sacrifice and humility, Moreno asserted that “we have honorably searched the scarce means” available to support ourselves.<sup>81</sup> This letter was also forwarded to Spain.

Ultimately, Spanish authorities denied Oquendo and Moreno’s group requests, as well as other petitions that had accumulated over the year. The Overseas Council claimed that while numerous *libres de color* had left Cuba after the repression, these numbers had proven insufficient to safeguard the island. Furthermore, Spanish officials

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<sup>79</sup> O’Donnell to Ministerio de Marina, Havana, 22 April 1846, ANC-AP, Leg. 141, Exp. 15.

<sup>80</sup> José Moreno to Ministro de Gracia y Justicia, Campeche, Mexico 26 June 1846, ANC-ROC, Leg. 159, Exp. 106.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

claimed that, “very few of the men of color who initiated the insurrection fled the island.”

<sup>82</sup> As evidence, the Overseas Council pointed towards the post-repression behavior of free people of color: the formation of *juntas* in Mexico and the United States and the rebellious intentions and desires expressed in correspondence intercepted by government officials.<sup>83</sup> By late November of 1846, the Overseas Council decided to deny all requests made by free blacks and mulattoes to return to Cuba, upholding Cuba’s law prohibiting the return of any person of color, particularly the native-born who had emigrated voluntarily. Island and peninsular authorities concluded that in spite of the forced departures of more hundreds of *libres de color*, the local situation remained unsafe.<sup>84</sup>

While restrictive legislation left individuals, couples, and families with little official recourse, *libres de color* continued to press the boundaries of the law. Some, like *morenos* Lino Lamonedá and Claudio Brindis de Salas attempted to return illegally and were deported.<sup>85</sup> As jail terms came to an end, former prisoners began petitioning to return to Cuba. When convicted co-conspirators José Gertrudis Ramos and Damian de Fleites requested authorization to reenter the island, having completed their two-year prison terms in Seville, Spain, officials denied their requests.<sup>86</sup> Pardo Felipe Valdés García fared somewhat better. Valdés García, at the end of his ten-year jail sentence in

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<sup>82</sup> Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de la Gobierna de Ultramar to Ministro de Gracia y Justicia, Madrid, November 24, 1846, ANC-AP, Leg. 141 Exp. 15.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> “Sobre la salida de Cuba los morenos libres Lino Lamonedá y Claudio Brindis de Salas que se introdujeron clandestinamente,” Havana, 22 November 1850, ANC-AP, Leg. 44, Exp. 19.

Valladolid, Spain, petitioned to return to Cuba to put his business affairs in order and reunite with his wife and family. Ever suspicious, officials compromised. They authorized a brief visit with his family, but not permanent residency in Cuba. He was ordered to reside in Spain or another country.<sup>87</sup>

The activities of Cuban exiles in Mexico and the United States highlight the variety of ways *libres de color* responded to expulsion laws implemented during the Repression of La Escalera. The migration orders cast free people of color, native and foreign-born in precarious positions. Exiles sought legal and illegal means to return to Cuba. As mothers, fathers, spouses, children, and friends, they forged a community inseparable from Cuba. Their quest for home would endure ten years before *libres de color* could return safely.

### ***Amnesty***

On May 22, 1854, Spain initiated amnesty for “all who had taken part in conspiracies in Cuba.”<sup>88</sup> As a result, *espulsados* renewed their efforts to return to home. For instance, José de los Angeles Inocencio, sentenced to permanent exile, and living in Veracruz, Mexico, requested permission to return to Cuba in May of 1857.<sup>89</sup> While

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<sup>86</sup> Ángel Cabalino to Ministro de la Gobernación del Reino, Madrid, July 13, 1847, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4627, Exp. 9.

<sup>87</sup> Felipe Valdés García to Presidente del Consejo de Ministros, Madrid, 31 March 1854, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4641, Exp. 1, No. 2; Ministro de Estado, Ultramar, to Ministerio de la Guerra, Madrid, 13 December 1854, AHN-UGC, Leg. 4641, Exp.1, No. 5.

<sup>88</sup> Real Order, “Concediendo amnistía general a todos los que tomaron parte en conspiraciones en la Isla de Cuba,” Madrid, 22 May 1854, ANC-AP, Leg. 122, Exp. 48.

police officials confirmed that he had obtained a passport to the Yucatan, like many of the hundreds of *libres de color* who had left Cuba voluntarily in spring of 1844, they discovered that Inocencio had violated his expulsion mandate. Shortly after arriving in Mexico, he attempted to return Cuba. He was captured, jailed, and finally deported to Veracruz. More alarmingly, variations of his name - José Inocencio and José Inocente Nuñez - appeared in a recent report by the Secret Police. When questioned, Inocencio's family maintained his innocence in any suspicious affairs. Authorities continued to investigate Inocencio over the next several months, attempting to clarify his potential threat to society.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, not surprisingly, those who presented themselves as skilled artisans experienced the least difficulty. *Habaneros* Francisca Santa Cruz, a seamstress, and Pedro de la Guardia, a tailor requested to return from exile in Veracruz, Mexico in August of 1857.<sup>91</sup> Officials approved their passage to the island.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> José de los Ángeles Inocencio to Cuba Captain General, 23 de May 1857, Veracruz, ANC-AP, Leg. 50, Exp. 17; José Muriel, el Coronel 2 Jefe de S.M., Gobernación to Capitán General Superentendiende Delegada De Hacienda, Havana, 25 July 1857, ANC-AP, Leg. 50, Exp. 17.

<sup>90</sup> José Muriel, el Coronel 2nd Jefe de S.M., Gobernación to Capitán General Superentendiende Delegada De Hacienda, Havana, 25 July 1857, 31 July 1857, 17 September 1857, 4 November 1857, 20 October 1857, "Expediente sobre interesar el moreno José de los Ángeles Inocencio, residente en Veracruz, se le permite regresar a esta Isla de donde se le expulsó por los sucesos políticos del año de 1844," ANC-AP, Leg. 50, Exp. 17.

<sup>91</sup> Pedro de la Guardia to Captain General of Cuba, Veracruz, 20 August 1857, José del Carmen Arrisola; to Cuba Captain General, Veracruz, 20 August 1857; Francisca Santa Cruz to Captain General of Cuba, Veracruz, 21 August 1857, "Documentos que se refieren a la solicitud de Pedro de la Guardia, José del Carmen Arrisola, y Francisca Santa Cruz para que se les permita regresar a la isla comprendidos en la amnistía por delitos políticos," ANC-AP, Leg. 50, Exp. 21.

<sup>92</sup> Gefe de Gobierno de Policía to Pablo de Urrutia, Spanish Consul in Veracruz, 9 Nov. 1857, Havana, "Documentos que se refieren a la solicitud de Pedro de la Guardia, José del Carmen Arrisola, y Francisca Santa Cruz para que se les permita regresar a la isla comprendidos en la amnistía por delitos políticos," ANC-AP, Leg. 50, Exp. 21.

Finally, on December 12, 1857, the Spanish Crown declared a general amnesty for all “...who had taken part, directly or indirectly in conspiracies, rebellions or foreign invasions with the goal of promoting disturbances or committing any other type of political crime in the overseas provinces...”<sup>93</sup> Articles Two and Four of the decree ordered the immediate release of political prisoners jailed in Spain or Spanish territories in North Africa, as well those being held in the Americas, respectively.<sup>94</sup> However, Article Three restricted the residency of individuals returning to Cuba under the amnesty order. They could reside only in Spain or a foreign territory. Residence in Cuba or Puerto Rico was forbidden without written permission from the Captain General of the island.<sup>95</sup> Given that approximately 500 *libres de color* had been sentenced to eight to ten years prison, typically in jails outside of Cuba, numerous free people of color requested authorization to resettle in Cuba or reside in the Caribbean region.<sup>96</sup>

For instance, in 1861, *moreno libre* José Claudio Pieda returned to Cuba from Asturias in Northern Spain, where he had been sentenced to imprisonment for seventeen years and prohibited from returning to Cuba or Puerto Rico.<sup>97</sup> Like numerous others, upon his arrival in Havana, he was detained, questioned, and investigated. A review of the Military Commission trial records from 1844 revealed that Pieda had been indicted

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<sup>93</sup> Royal Order, Madrid, 12 December 1857, ANC-AP, Leg. 50, Exp. 23.

<sup>94</sup> Articles 2 and 4, Real Order, Madrid, 12 December 1857, ANC-AP. 50, Exp. 23.

<sup>95</sup> Article 3, Real Order, Madrid, 12 December 1857, ANC-AP, Leg. 50, Exp. 23.

<sup>96</sup> Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 229.

<sup>97</sup> José Claudio Pieda to Senor Fiscal, Real Carcel de Havana , 28 September 1861, ANC-AP, Leg. 122, Exp. 72; Fiscal of the King to the Senior Fiscal, Havana, 6 October 1861, ANC-AP, Leg. 122, Exp. 72.



for taking part in the planning of a slave rebellion on three sugar plantations, La Merced, La Isabel, and El Fundador, in Macuniges in the Matanzas district. Under the terms of Article One of the amnesty, however, officials excused his actions, calling them “racial crimes,” and not “truly political” activities. In addition to the amnesty provisions, they also appeared willing to grant Piedad’s request because he had completed his jail term.<sup>98</sup> In other words, he did not appear to pose a threat to Cuba. The sizeable number of Cubans of color in exile and their efforts to return home prior to and during the amnesty order suggests that many *libres de color* sought permission to return to Cuba.

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The social and political aims of Cuba’s slave society dictated boundaries of race designed to maintain white control over a sizeable African-descended population, particularly a free sector of color that comprised fifteen percent of the island’s inhabitants.<sup>99</sup> In practice, however, these aims proved problematic. After decades of debate over the threat from *libres de color* – their status as free people of color in the midst of a large slave sector and their ability to lead and join with slaves and Creole dissidents in rebellion against slavery and colonial rule – spurred authorities to consider expulsion as a primary means to relieve this potential danger to the colony. Yet, colonial officials acknowledged that free people of color filled vital roles in society. As skilled artisans, sailors, and militiamen, they provided services that Spaniards and Creoles were

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<sup>98</sup> Fiscal of the King to the Senior Fiscal, Havana, 6 October 1861, ANC-AP, Leg. 122, Exp. 72.

<sup>99</sup> Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 89-90.

reluctant to perform. Consequently, while authorities preferred to remove *libres de color* from the island, to do so would jeopardize economic and political stability colonial Cuban leaders fought to protect.

In the wake of the Conspiracy of La Escalera, island authorities gained a new opportunity to reduce the threat from *libres de color*. Leopoldo O'Donnell's administration used a three-pronged approach to accomplish its goal. Seventy-one rounds of trials sentenced over eight hundred free men of color to imprisonment overseas or banishment from the island. Foreign-born *libres de colors* faced expulsion due to new anti-immigrant laws. Finally, O'Donnell opened the floodgates for exile by offering free men and women of African descent passports to a variety of foreign countries. The arrests, tortures, executions, convictions, confiscation of property, and general harassment *libres de color* had endured since the start of the repression of La Escalera provided them ample incentive to leave Cuba. In turn, O'Donnell marked those who left as co-conspirators and established new laws prohibiting their return to the island.

The expulsions gave rise to new spatial contours between colonial Cuba, *libres de color*, and the Atlantic World. Formerly contained to the island, Cuban authorities found themselves reacting to *libres de color's* claims of attachment to their Cuban homeland and community on legal and clandestine levels. Immigrant artisans asserted the legitimacy of their connection to Cuba through claims of property, skills, marriage records, and through personal and employment references. Exiles, particularly those located in Mexico, submitted group petitions to return or had contacts in Cuba request return on their behalf. Prisoners overseas asked for term reductions and pardons from

banishment sentences. Eager to dismiss *libres de color* upon physical departure, officials underestimated their attachment to Cuba in exile.

Free men and women of African descent stretched and broke colonial expectations of their codes of conduct in exile. In spite of displacement to foreign territories, they continued to undercut and challenge colonial attempts to control them. The persistent efforts of free people of color to return finally gave way to a general amnesty for everyone connected to a political crime, rebellion, or conspiracy. While there is insufficient evidence to know how many *libres de color* returned to Cuba under the 1857 amnesty, the examples discussed in this chapter indicate that free people of color pursued a variety of means to assert and reclaim their lives in Cuba. Whether foreign-born, imprisoned overseas, or expelled to foreign territories, free people of African descent claimed Cuba as home. In doing so from exile, they maneuvered through the spatial, racial, political, and social confines of post-La Escalera Cuba.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Redefining Service: The Militia of Color in Cuba

In June of 1844, Marcelino Aremey Antillero's military career came to an end. During his twenty-two years of service in Havana's *moreno* militia company, he had "enjoyed the benefits that accompanied the position."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he became a decorated soldier. Traditionally, the militia of color, as a colonial corporate body, symbolized privilege and prestige within the free population of African descent. As a result, thousands of men like Aremey participated in the militia. Social benefits and acknowledgment of their importance as a critical defense force for the Spanish empire helped shape the racial and cultural identities of *libres de color*. The Repression of La Escalera, however, radically shifted positive representations of militia service.

Decades of colonial contention over the dangers of arming black and mulatto men in a slave society came to a head in 1844. In order to secure the island, Captain General Leopoldo O'Donnell dismantled all *moreno* and *pardo* militia units and requested additional reinforcement troops from Spain to support white troops on the island.<sup>2</sup> The disbandment of the militia of color enabled colonial authorities to neutralize a perceived

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco de Paula Aremey to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 24 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49818.

<sup>2</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3, fol. 1-2; Deschamps Chapeaux, *Los batallones de pardos y morenos libres*, 90; Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 62; Paquette, *Sugar is made with*, 240; Klein, "Colored Militia of Cuba," 18.

threat, unravel a social institution, and displace thousands of free men of color.

O'Donnell's order ended the island's two-century old military presence on the island.<sup>3</sup>

In 1854, Juan de la Pezuela, Cuba's Captain General, reestablished the militia of color.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to the Pezuela's expectations, however, few free men of African descent showed interest in joining the new militia. And when authorities resorted to forced enlistment, hundreds of draftees and their parents wrote to colonial authorities protesting conscription in the previously voluntary units. Included among the letters requesting an exemption from serving in the new units was a petition from Francisco de Paula Aremey, the son of Marcelino Aremey Antillero.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the son of a distinguished militiaman had little interest in enlisting in the military suggested that many in the free community of color had reinterpreted the significance of military service after the Repression of La Escalera.

Using the exemption requests and desertions recorded between 1858-1861, this chapter demonstrates that the ten-year disbandment of the militia of color irreparably weakened the prestige factors formally associated with this institution, so much so that officials resorted to conscription to fill the ranks. Furthermore, I show how the restrictive realities of race and gender did not deter free men and women of African descent from protesting what they considered an assault on their rights as legally free individuals in

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<sup>3</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3, fol. 1-2; Deschamps Chapeaux, *Los batallones de pardos y morenos libres*, 90; Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 62; Paquette, *Sugar is made with Blood*, 240; Klein, "Colored Militia of Cuba," 18.

<sup>4</sup> Estorch, *Apuntes para la historia*, 160; Knight, "Cuba", 304.

<sup>5</sup> Francisco de Paula Aremey to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 24 October 1859, ANC-GSC,

Cuba's slave society. Through this process of collective protest *libres de color* maintained a racial unity beyond one predicated by the militia. Moreover, my analysis posits that due to their simultaneously vital yet threatening position as defenders of the Spanish empire, the restrictive measures of the repression of La Escalera did not destroy the ability of free families of color to protest the new reforms. In so doing, *libres de color* used forged a space to maneuver within colonial Cuban society.

### ***A Contentious Military Tradition***

Calling *libres de color* to military service proved to be an undertaking riddled with tension for both the Spanish empire and free people of color. During the institution's longstanding existence, the Spanish Crown had frequently pointed out the militia of color's importance to imperial order, characterizing their defense services as vital, efficient, self-sacrificing, and devoted.<sup>6</sup> *Pardo* and *moreno* had fought European troops and buccaneers near Cuban shores, as well as in battles abroad in Mexico, Louisiana, and Florida, in almost double the proportion to whites on the island.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, other colonial officials considered arming men of African descent to be an eminent danger to the empire. In spite of the militia's rapid expansion, political events, particularly the Seven Years' War (1756-63), the fall of Havana to British troops in 1762, and the capital's subsequent shift back to Spanish rule after Spain surrendered Florida in

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Leg. 1268, Exp. 49818.

<sup>6</sup> Kuethe, "The Status of the Free Pardo," 110; Klein, "Colored Militia," 22.

<sup>7</sup> Klein, "Colored Militia of Cuba," 19-20, 25; Pardos y Morenos, *Justo Sentimiento*, ANC-CM, Leg. 60, Exp. 2, folio 208.

1763, stimulated reforms to militias of color throughout Spanish America. Although the Spanish King and many of his advisors advocated the continued use of *libres de color* for defense purposes, high-ranking officials argued to the contrary.

Bourbon military reformers of the 1760s, and onward, expressed great opposition to arming men of African descent.<sup>8</sup> Colonial officials, such as Viceroy Revillagigedo (1789-1794), blamed the loss of Havana on the general incompetence of the colonial militias. Moreover, with the advent of a protracted slave revolt in neighboring Saint Domingue (Haiti) from 1791-1804, he took measures to disband the bulk of militia of color companies in New Spain (Mexico).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Francisco Antonio Crespo's 1784 plan to reorganize New Spain's army denounced *castas* (persons of mixed racial ancestry) for their detrimental influence on Mexican culture.<sup>10</sup> Francisco Arango y Parreño, a major force in the growth of the Cuban slave trade, also cautioned the use of militias of color. Although he praised these men for their service to the Crown, he advocated dissolving their companies in the 1790s to prevent a Haitian-style rebellion. Arango claimed that veteran militiamen living in the countryside might not aid authorities in suppressing uprisings, or they might even lead a revolt.<sup>11</sup>

Fears of rebellion, solidified by the success of the Haitian Revolution at the beginning of the nineteenth century, caused slaveholders and colonial authorities to

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<sup>8</sup> Kuethe, "The Development of the Cuban Military as a Sociopolitical Elite, 1763-83," 696.

<sup>9</sup> Vinson, "Race and Badge," 491; Archer, "Pardos, Indians, and the Army of New Spain," 235.

<sup>10</sup> Archer, "Pardos, Indians, and the Army of New Spain," 234.

<sup>11</sup> Francisco Arango y Parreño, *De la factoría a la Colonia* (Havana: Publicaciones de la Secretaría de Educación, 1936), 88-91.

revisit their reservations about arming *libres de color*.<sup>12</sup> For instance, in 1808, Cuban Captain General Someruelos advised recruiting free men of color from the Trinidad militia, but cautioned against instructing them to use weapons.<sup>13</sup> *Fuero militar* privileges became a primary target as Cuban authorities prosecuted black and mulatto militiamen without regard to military regulations.<sup>14</sup> For instance, in 1807, Felipe Aristiga, a soldier in the Havana *moreno* battalion, was arrested for an unspecified crime. The typical sentence for a soldier was to serve time in a military prison, but in Aristiga's case, his sentence called for several months of public service, which typically required the offender to work with slaves repairing roads.<sup>15</sup>

Rebellions led by militiamen of color in 1812, 1835, and 1839 cemented Cuban planters and officials' worst fears regarding armed men of African descent. In 1812, José Antonio Aponte, a *moreno* militiaman and leader of the plot, allied with fellow soldiers, skilled artisans, and slaves who gathered recruits, ammunition, arms, and complicit supporters.<sup>16</sup> During the 1820s, Félix Varela, a priest and supporter of the abolition of slavery, warned that Cuba's militiamen of color should be viewed as "a potential enemy," claiming that "the best soldier is the most barbaric when he has someone to lead him."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Childs, "The Aponte Rebellion," 238.

<sup>13</sup> Someruelos to Señor Comandante de las Armas en Trinidad, Havana, 29 March 1808, AGI-Cuba, Leg. 1667.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of *fuero militar* privileges, see Chapter One.

<sup>15</sup> Childs, "The Aponte Rebellion," 242.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Aponte Conspiracy, see Franco, *La conspiración de Aponte*; <sup>16</sup> Childs, "The Aponte Rebellion."



By the 1830s, Spain garrisoned Cuba with a professional, peninsular army of more than 15,000 men.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, in 1835, Juan Nepomuceno Prieto, a retired militia officer and a leader of the *Lucumí cabildo* and Hermengildo Jáurequi planned the *Lucumí* Conspiracy.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, in 1839, Captain León Monzón, sub-lieutenant José del Monte del Pino, sergeant José Dabares, and Pilar Borrego, a survivor from the Aponte Conspiracy, led a rebellion in eastern Cuba.<sup>20</sup> While authorities suppressed each scheme immediately, the uprisings also jolted them into confronting the danger of arming *libres de color*.<sup>21</sup> White support for and the prestige and privilege associated with the militia of color began to falter. The uprisings that ignited the repression of La Escalera provided

### ***Dismantling and Reestablishing the Militia of Color***

In the aftermath of the 1843 slave revolts, the colonial government, led by Captain General Leopoldo O'Donnell, took action to disarm free men of color and neutralize colonial dissent. Initial efforts in the spring of 1844 included deporting foreign-born militiamen like Simo Jerodes, a native of Santo Domingo, who had served

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<sup>17</sup> Varela, "Memoria que demuestra la necesidad de extinguir la esclavitud," 4: 12; Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Klein, "Colored Militia of Cuba," 23.

<sup>19</sup> Miguel Tacón, Cuba Captain General to Juan Batista Velasquez, Captain Pedaneo, Havana, 12-13 July 1835, ANC-CM, Leg. 11, Exp. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Deschamps Chapeaux, *Los batallones*, 83-84.

<sup>21</sup> Howard, *Changing History*, 73-75, 78; Matt Childs, "The Aponte Rebellion," 213, 214.

in Havana's *moreno* battalion.<sup>22</sup> By the summer of 1844, however, O'Donnell took a more direct approach to achieving this goal. On June, 15, 1844 decree, he disbanded the militias of color throughout the island.<sup>23</sup> Despite years of debate surrounding the use of black and mulatto soldiers, including uprisings involving black and mulatto militiamen in 1812 and in the 1830s, authorities had never acted to completely dismantle the militia of color. The dissolution of black and mulatto battalions, combined with the general onslaught of repressive measures, jolted the island's free community of color.

Former servicemen's reactions to the militia's dissolution were also unique. Thus far, there is little evidence that they protested the order. Previous reactions to the dismantling of militias of color in other parts of Spanish America, such as in eighteenth-century Mexico, resulted in petitions to reinstate the institution.<sup>24</sup> The stark silence in Cuba, however, may well be attributed to the extensive repression. Plagued by expulsion sentences, occupational bans, and coerced emigration left *libres de color* little time to contemplate collapsed military careers.<sup>25</sup> By the close of the "Year of the Lash" in 1844, officials declared confidently that, in spite of the dissolution of the militias of color, they would "not lack soldiers nor officers with good service records."<sup>26</sup> In the interim, *libres*

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<sup>22</sup> Simo Jerodes to Cuba Captain General, Santo Domingo, 6 May 1844, ANC-GG, Leg 286, No. 13907.

<sup>23</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell to Ministro de Estado, Havana, 15 June 1844, ANC-AP, Leg. 42, Exp. 3, Fol. 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*, 214.

<sup>25</sup> For sentencing see Cuba, *Colección de los fallos*. For forced emigration, see "Sobre la salida de la isla de los negros y mulatos libres," hereafter AHN-UGC, Leg. 4620, Exp. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Spain. Superintendencia General, *Informe Fiscal sobre fomento de la población blanca*, 80.

*de color* concerned themselves with managing economic destabilization and physical displacement.

In spite of efforts to expand the island's police force and the presence of peninsular forces, however, authorities considered Cuba's defense insufficient.<sup>27</sup> To remedy the situation, on May 24, 1854, Marques Juan de la Pezuela, Cuban Captain General (1853-54) reauthorized the militia of color on the island. Based on several factors, including Cuba's tropical climate, the pressures of war in Europe, and men of color's previously loyal service to Spain, Pezuela called for the establishment of two voluntary companies of color – one *moreno* and one *pardo* – which would be active for two years. These new volunteers were to receive “the same advantages and obligations” of their white counterparts in the army.<sup>28</sup> A year later, José Gutiérrez de la Concha, Cuba's new Captain General, expanded the institution to sixteen island-wide companies, comprising eight battalions each for *morenos* and *pardos*. The bulk, six companies, were formed in Havana.<sup>29</sup>

Because of the potential threat from militiamen of color, *pardo* and *moreno* units and their officers reported to white superiors.<sup>30</sup> Pezuela's reestablishment of the militia of color resurrected debates from the first half of the nineteenth century. Leaders and intellectuals on the island saw the move as more than the reorganization of a defunct

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<sup>27</sup> Klein, “Colored Militia of Cuba,” 25.

<sup>28</sup> Juan de la Pezuela, Captain General of Cuba to Secretaria Militar, Havana, May 24, 1854, in Estorch, *Apuntes para la historia*, Document 16, 160.

<sup>29</sup> Captain General of Cuba to El Brigador Gefe, Joaquín Morales de Brada, Delegada de Hacienda, Havana, 22 October 1855, “Expediente sobre la reforma de la milicia de color,” ANC-GSC, Leg. 1371, Exp. 53440, fol. 1-2.

institution to cover scarce troops and fatigued soldiers. Those in favor of the slave trade interpreted this as a move toward the abolition of slavery. Meanwhile, annexationists considered it a threat to strengthening the Africanization of the island.<sup>31</sup> Thus, as in previous times, despite the reasons for resurrecting the militia, distrust of armed men of color continued.

However, unlike in the past, free men of color were reluctant to join the new units. Consequently, enlistment dragged in the reestablished militia companies. Military leaders determined that if the numbers remained low, the units of color would cease to be voluntary, requiring the forced participation of free men of African descent between the ages of 20 and 30.<sup>32</sup> Officials spent the bulk of 1858 recruiting for the militia. But in spite of promises that enlistees would receive all the privileges of their white counterparts, government efforts proved insufficient to fill the ranks. A year later, Cuban authorities determined that the new militia companies had not received adequate volunteers and instituted compulsory service.

Forced enlistment of free people of color had been unprecedented in Cuba, but it was not new to the historical formation of militias in the New World. For instance, in Peru in 1779, upon realizing the lack of *morenos* and *pardos* in the militia, officials ordered that they enroll immediately or be enslaved.<sup>33</sup> As their Peruvian counterparts

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<sup>30</sup> Klein, "Colored Militia of Cuba," 24.

<sup>31</sup> Estorch, *Apuntes para la historia*, 33-35.

<sup>32</sup> Captain General of Cuba to El Brigador Gefe, Joaquín Morales de Brada, Delegada de Hacienda, Havana, 22 October 1855, "Expediente sobre la reforma de la milicia de color", ANC-GSC, Leg. 1371, Exp. 53440, fol. 3.

discovered, militia participation in Cuba had ceased to be a privileged, voluntary activity. They were now obligated to serve.<sup>34</sup> Authorities undertook an investigation to determine the extent of the enlistment deficiencies. In early August of 1859, they reported that in the district of Havana, there were a total of 332 (196 *pardos* and 136 *morenos*) men serving in the militia.<sup>35</sup> The results were undeniable low. Armed with their data, officials implemented a preliminary forced enlistment lottery system (*sorteo*) that resulted in over 1000 draftees in the Havana province alone - more than tripling the number of militiamen for that area.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Protest***

In protest, draftees of color and their families flooded colonial authorities with exemption requests. Exemption rules from the new *Reglamento para las milicias disciplinadas de color* were published in local newspapers. In early August 1859, in the Havana newspaper, *La Gaceta*, the Cuban Captain General announced the militia *sorteo*. It targeted young male *libres de color*, particularly unemployed men between the ages of eighteen and thirty. His announcement called attention to the upcoming dates, August 15-30, for requesting service exemptions.<sup>37</sup> The main exemption clauses, Articles 15, 22,

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<sup>33</sup> Leon G. Campbell, "Black Power in Colonial Peru: The 1779 Tax Rebellion of Lambayeque," *Phylon* 33, no. 2 (1972) : 143.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "Estado del contingente que debe dar la jurisdicción de la Habana a las secciones de Milicias de Color," Havana, 7 July 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49801, fol.7.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., fol. 18.

23, and 24, outlined thirteen valid reasons *libres de color* could use to bypass service.<sup>38</sup> These exemptions and their widespread dissemination would prove to be the undoing of the reestablished militia.

From Cuban archival holdings, I collected a total of 485 exemption claims enumerated in reports and individual letters from the western provinces of Havana, Santa Clara, Cienfuegos and Matanzas between August 1859 and November 1860. This sizeable number of petitions highlights the free population of color's expectations of service, their familiarity with militia regulations, and their ability to act on exemption guidelines. Historically, militiamen secured benefits by initiating petitions, in collaboration with legal counsel. Their knowledge of the legal system benefited militiamen and their families throughout the island, as soldiers often shared legal resources and information.<sup>39</sup> In the case of exemption requests, applicants typically had to produce written documentation, such as birth certificates or references. In addition, officials would often question the applicant's family and neighbors to determine the validity of their claim. *Libres de color* rose to the challenge. Of the 485 documented exemption claims reviewed for this study, officials approved 445 (91 percent).

But why did so few free people of color respond favorably to the reestablished militia of color? The memory of the repression and the unilateral disbanding of the militia required that *morenos* and *pardos* approach the resurrected units with caution.

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<sup>37</sup> Cuba Captain General to *La Gaceta*, Havana, 4 August 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49801, fol. 30-31.

<sup>38</sup> Leopoldo O'Donnell, *Reglamento para las milicias disciplinadas de color de la Isla de Cuba*, (Madrid, 1858), ANC-GSC, Leg. 1189, Exp. 46571; *Aurora*, 2 August 1859; "Expediente para el reemplazo de las milicias de color por el sistema de sorteo," ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49805, fol. 1-2.

The free community of color viewed the new militia with due skepticism, recognizing that the prestige and status attributed previously to armed service would be difficult to restore. When officials met their reluctance to serve with force, draftees and parents responded en masse.

As soon as officials issued the dates for exemption hearings in mid-August of 1859, *libres de color* submitted their petitions. Some of the earliest letters requesting relief from service, sent in August and September of 1859 and reflecting the bulk of those to come, were based on family hardship, poor health, and age ineligibility. Some, like *pardo* León Boamar of Havana, cited the exemption rules published in *La Gaceta* to help legitimize his claim (and perhaps to highlight his literacy level) based on a chronic health problem.<sup>40</sup> *Morena libre*, Margarita Chacón, another *habanera*, appealed on behalf of her family. Her son, Nicolás, had been drafted, but his income as a skilled carpenter supported herself, a widow, and his two younger siblings.<sup>41</sup> Petitions also arrived from other western provinces. For example, former slave Francisco Perez de Alejos, identified as being “*de nación lucumí*” from Santa Clara and Manuel Silvestre Congo from Cienfuegos, both *morenos*, requested to be excluded from the militia because they were over the age of thirty.<sup>42</sup> Of the 485 requests made from the data available, 213 or 45.8

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<sup>39</sup> Vinson, “Race and Badge” 484.

<sup>40</sup> Leon Boamar to Alcalde de Primer Distrito, Havana, 20 September 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49825.

<sup>41</sup> Margarita Chacón to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 20 August 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49800, fol. 1.

<sup>42</sup> “*De nación lucumí*” indicates his African ethnicity. His “*nación*” refers to ethnic affiliation. “*Lucumí*” is the descriptor, which, in Cuba, indicates Yoruba (West Africa in modern-day Nigeria) ancestry. “Documentos justificaciones de las escenciones verificados en el sorteo para el reemplazo de

percent of libres *de color* listed poor health as the main reason for their exemption request. Forty-two requests or 8.81 percent cited the need to support their family as the basis for exemption. Finally twenty-nine or 6.23 percent listed inappropriate age, typically being over the draft age of 30, as the reason not to participate in the militia of color. Since the bulk of listings, 357, came from exemption committee's official reports to Cuba's Captain General, very little detailed personal information could be extrapolated.

Individual letters from Havana (71), Santa Clara (15), Matanzas (13), and Cienfuegos (9), totaling 108, provided more detail. This information revealed a slightly different and reordered basis for exemption. Using the Havana correspondence since it provides the largest letter sample, individuals cited the following top three reasons for their petition: family, 53.52 percent (38), age 32.39 percent (23), and health 12.67 percent (9). Another factor that stands out among the Havana letters is that 19.04 percent – almost one fifth – of the petitions came from women. All of these women, like Margarita Chacón mentioned previously, requested exemption because their sons provided the sole source of financial support for the family. The combined personal petitions and reports highlight the multiple strategies the free community of color employed to protest, circumvent, and undermine forced enlistment.

The most varied and well-documented of the exemption requests were those based on poor health. Health reasons ranged from chronic physical ailments to mental instability. Prudencio Zara, for instance, suffered from chronic pain in his chest and

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milicias de la sistema verificado el primero de septiembre,” Santa Clara, 27 August 1859, ANC-GSC 1267, Exp. 49799, fol. 64; Juan Amierra y Díaz, Teniente de Gobierno de Cienfuegos to Gobierno Superior Civil,



lungs. His condition was so extreme that he could not do any kind of physical activity.<sup>43</sup> Several men requested exemption because they suffered from epilepsy. Militia doctors determined that José Claro Uribe, a single, thirty year old *pardo*, was unable to serve because of his epileptic attacks.<sup>44</sup> *Pardo* Marcelino Lamadrón from Matanzas produced verification from doctors and black and white skilled artisans that he had persistent seizures.<sup>45</sup> Twenty-four year old Florencio Quesada, a *moreno*, asked to be exempted because of he was prone to “bouts of insanity.”<sup>46</sup> Some records declared men, like *pardos* Baltazar Benítez, José Hernández, and Federico Mato y Palacio “useless” without noting the reason, although from the sample data, this typically meant that their physical limitations were obvious.<sup>47</sup>

Police investigated health claims thoroughly and medical conditions had to be certified by military physicians. Doctors declared *moreno* shoemaker Francisco Betancourt unfit for service because he suffered from a chronic liver condition.<sup>48</sup> Santiago Ramos, conscripted twice for Havana’s new *pardo* militia company, had to

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Cienfuegos, 20 August 1859, “Cuaderno de las exclusiones y escenciones del servicio de Milicia de Color,” ANC-GSC, 1267, Exp. 49798, fol. 12-16.

<sup>43</sup> Prudencio Zara to Gobernador General, Havana, 13 February 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49838.

<sup>44</sup> José Claro Uribe to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 26 October 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49844.

<sup>45</sup> Marcelino Lamadrón to Sr. Alcalde de primera, Matanzas, 25 August 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49804, fol. 1-5.

<sup>46</sup> Florencio Quesada to Captain General Gobierno Superior Civil, Havana, 27 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49820.

<sup>47</sup> Commandant’s report; Teniente Coronel, Blanes to Gobernador, Matanzas, 16-17 August 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49805, fol. 17-19.

prove both times that he was unfit for service. His second request, made in 1860, explained that the previous year military doctors had diagnosed him with having an enlarged heart.<sup>49</sup> Even exemptions based on insufficient height, had to be certified. Military doctors, like José Ramon Cabello, verified *pardo* and *moreno* claims that they lacked the required stature to serve in the militia.<sup>50</sup> Those denied exemptions were mainly due to insufficient proof. For instance, Juan Rodríguez's claim that he had been in an accident that had left him unfit for armed service was denied because physicians declared that he met all the physical requirements for militia service.<sup>51</sup>

When their physical condition proved insufficient to secure an exemption, free people of color pointed to family obligations as a key reason for declining to serve. For instance, *pardo* Joaquin Pirson of Matanzas and *morenos* Juan Velches of Cienfuegos and Pió Cabrera of Santa Clara, as the only sons in their respective families, maintained their aged mothers, while *moreno* Gabriel Benítez of Santa Clara supported his seventy year-old father.<sup>52</sup> Other common situations included sustaining siblings, a wife and

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<sup>48</sup> Francisco Betancourt to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 18 October 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49855.

<sup>49</sup> Santiago Ramos to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 5 November 1860, ANC, GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49810.

<sup>50</sup> Certificate for Roman Arondo signed by Dr. José Ramon Cabello, Havana, 9 January 1861, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49856.

<sup>51</sup> Medical Certificate for Juan Rodríguez, Havana, 25 March 1861, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49857.

<sup>52</sup> Report; Teniente Coronel, Blanes to Gobernador, Matanzas, 16-17 August 1859, "Oficina abierto el juicio de escepciones para alistamiento de las mismas milicias," ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, No. 49805, Exp. 19; Juan Amierra y Díaz, Teniente de Gobierno de Cienfuegos to Gobierno Superior Civil, Cienfuegos, 20 August 1859, "Cuaderno de las exclusiones y exenciones del servicio de Milicia de Color," ANC-GSC, 1267, Exp. 49798, fol. 12-16; "Documentos justificaciones de las escenciones verificados en el sorteo para el reemplazo de milicias de la sistema verificado el primero de septiembre," Santa Clara, 31 August 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49799, fol. 116; "Documentos justificaciones de las escenciones

children, or extended family. Juan Fardio petitioned because he supported his sixty year-old mother and five younger siblings in Cienfuegos. Felipe José Bernal, a tobacco worker, declared that he had a wife and three young children to maintain. José Isidoro Valdez explained that he had to take care of his sick grandmother and two orphaned cousins.<sup>53</sup> The occupational bans promulgated a decade earlier and the general racial constraints on employment made supporting a family difficult. The fact that only officers, as opposed to volunteers or draftees, received a regular salary and that soldiers had to provide for many of their personal effects, including shoes, shirts, towels, and blankets, combined to make forced military service a financial hardship.<sup>54</sup> Given the obstacles, it was not uncommon for the parents of draftees to petition on their son's behalf.

Parental petitions comprised twenty (4.30 percent) of the total claims. The majority of these letters, eighteen, came from Havana mothers. Most of the women who wrote to request their son's exemption were widows, over the age of 50, and unable to work, such as *morenas* Rita Pérez, Margarita Chacón, and *parda* Antonia López. Perez stated that she was sick and that her only son, Cayetano Martínez, a 21 year-old mason, took care of her. Chacón explained that her son, Nicolás, a 28 year-old carpenter,

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verificados en el sorteo para el reemplazo de milicias de la sistema verificado el primero de septiembre," Santa Clara, 30 August 1859, ANC-GSC 1267, Exp. 49799, fol. 77.

<sup>53</sup> Felipe José Bernal to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 3 October 1859, ANC-GSC, 1268, Exp. 49834; Juan Amierra y Díaz, Teniente de Gobierno de Cienfuegos to Gobierno Superior Civil, Cienfuegos, 20 August 1859, "Cuaderno de las exclusiones y exenciones del servicio de Milicia de Color," ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49798, fol. 12-16; José Isidoro Valdés to Gobierno Político de Havana, Havana, 26 October 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49821.

<sup>54</sup> O'Donnell, *Reglamento para las milicias disciplinadas de color*, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1189, Exp. 46571, fol.15-16.

provided the main source of financial support for her and his siblings, José Matildé, age 13, and Jimeona, age 12. López's son, Abraham Martínez, maintained her, his younger brother, and an orphaned five year old.<sup>55</sup> Letters were not limited to native born *habaneras*. African-born Ursula Vivana, *nación congo*, also requested an exemption for her son, *pardo* Antonio Vazquez. Citing the exemption rules listed in *La Gaceta*, she, too, claimed exclusion on the basis that Antonio was her only son and her only source of family support.<sup>56</sup>

Requests based on family hardship also required proof. If the applicant neglected to produce evidence, they were subject to investigation. *Pardo* Emilio Navarro claimed that after the death of his mother in 1856, he was the only adult left to care for his two sisters, Antonia, age six and Dolores, age ten. Officials approved his request after Navarro produced his mother's death certificate.<sup>57</sup> Ana Consnegra, a 52 year-old *parda*, stated that she and her five young children were supported by her son, 19 year-old Antonio Demetrio Ignacio Diaz. She referred to the exemption rules printed in *La Gaceta* and presented her son's birth and baptismal records, and a certificate attesting to

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<sup>55</sup> Rita Pérez to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 20 September 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49800; Margarita Chacón to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 20 August 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49800, fol. 1; Antonia López to Gobernador Político, Havana, 10 November 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49815.

<sup>56</sup> Ursula Vivana to Gob. Político, Havana, 11 October 1859, "Documentos referentes a varias instancias suscritas por las Madres de varios individuos de Color que en suerte les ha tocado entrar en el servicio de la Milicia, haciendo constar que son muy pobres y que su único sostén son sus hijos, suplicando que en consideración a lo que manifiesta sean dados de baja en dicho servicio," ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, No. 49806, fol. 257.

<sup>57</sup> Emilio Navarro to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 6 October 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49849.

her good character.”<sup>58</sup> While Lorenza Reyes, *morena libre*, bent the truth, she too garnered an exemption for her son, Francisco Ramos. Reyes claimed that she was a widow and could no longer work as a seamstress. Ramos’s income as a tobacco worker supported her. Further investigation, however, determined that she was not a widow, although her husband, Ambrosio Ramos, he could no longer work. Officials ultimately approved her request.<sup>59</sup>

Age ineligibility represented the third largest category for exemption requests. A total of 36 requests out of 485, or 7.42 percent, mention age as a major factor in their petition. In Havana, 22 requests comprised 30.98 percent of the total 71 petitions. The majority of petitioners, 33, were over the maximum draft age of 30. And, like other claims, they had to produce evidence. For instance, forty-three year old *pardo* José de los Angeles Acosta included his baptismal record from the Iglesia Parroquial de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe in Havana as proof of his ineligibility. *Moreno* Ciriaco García, also from Havana, submitted his birth record as evidence that he was thirty-three years old. Thirty-six year old José Enrique, a *pardo* from Matanzas, and thirty-nine year old Francisco Pérez de Alejos, a *moreno* from Santa Clara, did likewise.<sup>60</sup> Other men, like Francisco de Paula Aremey, used their familial militia ties to bolster their exemption

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<sup>58</sup> Ana Consuegra to Gobernador Político, Havana, 26 September 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49802.

<sup>59</sup> Lorenza Reyes to Gobernador Político, Havana, 22 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49813.

<sup>60</sup> José de los Angeles Acosta to Gobernador Político, Havana, 21 September 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49806, fol. 237; Ciriaco García to Presidente del Ayuntamiento, Havana 12 September 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49811; Report; Teniente Coronel, Blanes to Gobernador, Matanzas 16-17 August 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49805, fol. 19; Francisco Pérez de Alejos to Cuba Captain General, Santa Clara, 27 August 1859, “Documentos justificaciones de las escenciones verificados en el

request. In addition to claiming ineligibility because he was 40, he reminded the Captain General that he was the son of Marcelino Aremey Antillero, a decorated militiaman from the Havana's *moreno* militia who had served for twenty years, retiring when the militia of color was dismantled in 1844. His father was now deceased and Aremey cared for his widowed mother.<sup>61</sup> Men petitioning because they were too young for service included eighteen year-old *moreno* Regino Ordar. He claimed that since his father had recently died, and as the only son, he had to support his mother. His petition included not only his baptismal records, but the newly established *cédula de libres de color*, or identification papers the government required free people of color to carry.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Rafael Vicasio Morales, *nación gangá*, and José de la Caridad Perez, contested their draft notices because they were both only seventeen.<sup>63</sup> In general, petitioners used whatever means to strengthen their case. Whether they were too young or old, they not only backed up their claim with the requisite documentation, but they also sought to insure favorable decisions by supplementing their plea with references and evidence of family status and generational military affiliation.

In addition to petitions based on health, family, and age, some *libres de color* took advantage of other exemption rules. These included employment, substitution and even

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sorteo para el reemplazo de milicias de la sistema verificado el primero de septiembre,” ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49799, fol. 64.

<sup>61</sup> Francisco de Paula Aremey to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 24 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49818.

<sup>62</sup> Regino Ordar to Ayuntamiento, Havana, 5 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49827.

<sup>63</sup> “Documentos justificaciones de las escenciones verificados en el sorteo para el reemplazo de milicias de la sistema verificado el primero de septiembre,” Santa Clara, 20 August 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49799, fol. 58, 99-101.

mistaken identity. Numerous free people of color were granted exemption from military service because they served their city as firemen. Registered firefighters, like Domingo Lima and Máximo Valdés, had no difficulty avoiding military service.<sup>64</sup> Nor did José Antonio Peña, a *pardo* from Havana, who requested an exemption for his work as a cathedral musician. He explained that for the past eight years, he had worked at the Havana Cathedral and produced a copy of the royal decree that created four positions for musician-soldiers who, like firemen, were excluded from military service.<sup>65</sup> Others seeking occupational exemptions, however, had greater difficulty in securing approvals. For instance, Pedro Pablo de Rojas, a teacher, requested an exemption for his twenty-one year old son, Ramon, who apprenticed with him. Authorities denied his request.<sup>66</sup> Francisco Javier Pita met the same fate. He wrote that he had not yet completed his apprenticeship as a shoemaker, but after investigating his case, officials discovered that he was not registered as an apprentice of any area.<sup>67</sup>

Article fifteen of the exemption rules stipulated that draftees could substitute or change numbers with another person.<sup>68</sup> Examples of successful substitution requests

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<sup>64</sup> General Subgobernador del Cuerpo to Primera Comandancia de Batallón de Honrados Bomberos de la Havana, 23 September 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49802.

<sup>65</sup> José Antonio Peña to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 1 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49809.

<sup>66</sup> Pedro Pablo de Rojas to Gobernador, Havana, 22 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49816.

<sup>67</sup> Francisco Javier Pita to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 27 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49843.

<sup>68</sup> O'Donnell, *Reglamento para las milicias disciplinadas de color*, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1189, Exp. 46571, fol. 9.

came from José de la Rosa Valdes, Secundino de la Hoz, and José Guadalupe Caro, all from Havana's fourth district, and all for the *pardo* militia. When José de la Rosa Valdes' *sorteo* number was called, his work in the countryside prohibited him from leaving, so he contacted Rafael Gomez. Gomez was already serving his military assignment and agreed to extend his tenure in Valdes' place. Naturally, Valdes gave him a glowing reference, saying that he had known Gomez for eight years, and that he was quite fit for duty.<sup>69</sup> Secundino de la Hoz recommended Rafael Parra to serve in his place, initially because de la Hoz had been ill. De la Hoz explained that his condition had improved, but he had to support his family, which included five young children.<sup>70</sup> José Guadalupe Caro gave a straight-forward reason for requesting a substitution: because the exemption rules stipulated this choice. Officials approved his request to substitute Ramon Córdoba for his military obligation.<sup>71</sup> While exemptions by substitution were an uncommon option for free men of color, in some respects, it may have been easier than claims based on health. Substitutions did not require documentation, only the corroboration of a willing substitute. Still, given the climate of forced enlistment, locating a willing stand-in could prove more difficult than producing written evidence of ailments or family obligations.

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<sup>69</sup> José de la Rosa Valdés to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 27 October 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49839.

<sup>70</sup> Secundino de la Hoz to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 8 November 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49840.

<sup>71</sup> José Guadalupe Caro to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 24 October 1860, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49842.



Claims of mistaken identity also surfaced. Typically, they were due to common names and inaccurate recording of color. For example, *moreno libre* Magdeleno García claimed that he had been drafted in error. The roster called for someone with his name who was a *pardo*. He softened his stance on a full exemption, requesting that he would willingly serve when his draft number for the *moreno* militia was called.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, José Marcos Mora, a twenty-eight year old tobacco washer protested because he had been drafted mistakenly into the *pardo* militia. He explained that while he and the actual draftee had the same name, the accompanying documentation proved that he was a white man, and not a man of color.<sup>73</sup> These instances reveal the way military service, particularly the conscripted variety, hardened colonial Cuba's color and racial boundaries.

Finally, hundreds more free men of African descent fled the army after being drafted. Doctor José Ramon Cabello's report of desertions stated that out of 538 healthy draftees, 147 had disserted. The bulk of men listed as deserting the militia comprised 137 *morenos*.<sup>74</sup> The forced enlistment seemed particularly slanted toward increasing the number of *moreno* soldiers. Within one month after officials initiated the draft, Havana

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<sup>72</sup> Magdeleno García to Cuba Captain General, Havana, 17 October 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49832.

<sup>73</sup> José Marcos Mora to Gobernador Militar, Havana, 24 October 1859, Havana, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1268, Exp. 49822.

<sup>74</sup> Enlistment Committee to Cuba Captain Gen, 20 Sept 1859, Havana, ANC-GSC, Leg.. 1267, Exp. 49802, fol. 164-165; 177-183.

*pardo* enlistment doubled, increasing from one hundred to two hundred, while *moreno* draftees quintupled, rising from 136 to 703.<sup>75</sup>

In spite of difficulties in recruitment and retention, officials continued their plan to amplify the army with mulatto and black troops. Battalions of color were not limited to the island. As Spain struggled to stabilize a “second empire” after 1850, officials considered sending *moreno* and *pardo* troops from Cuba overseas to fight in Spain’s war with Morocco.<sup>76</sup> The project favored men of color to fight in North Africa because of the presumption that European soldiers could not handle the region’s summer heat. In addition, authorities returned to claims of African-descended militiamen’s proven loyalty as “good soldiers...valiant in the face of the enemy.” The debate pointed out their worthiness in prior battles abroad in Florida, Mexico, and Central America in the opening decades of the nineteenth century and their active and important service in the armed forces.<sup>77</sup> Still, with the difficulties in recruiting troops of color for service in Cuba, much less for duty off the island, officials began to rethink forced enlistment and the value of the militia of color in general.

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<sup>75</sup> *Pardos* increased from 196 to 300. *Morenos* increased from 136 to 703. See Table 2. “Estado del contingente que debe dar la jurisdicción de la Habana a las secciones de Milicias de Color,” Havana, 7 July 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49801, fol.7. “Estado del contingente que debe dar la jurisdicción de la Habana a las secciones de Milicias de Color,” Havana, 29 July 1859, ANC-GSC, Leg. 1267, Exp. 49801, fol.18.

<sup>76</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 110.

<sup>77</sup> “Documento acerca del proyecto de Don Martín de Arredondo y Oléa de formar un batallón de voluntarios de pardos y morenos libres que pasasen a tomar parte en la guerra de Afrecha, recaudación de recursos al efecto y ofrecimientos de servicios,” Havana, 24 February 1860, ANC-AP, Leg. 53, Exp. 1, fol. 4-5.

### ***Rethinking the Militia of Color***

In 1865, the *Consejo de Administración* (Administrative Council) submitted a plan to alter the militia requirements. In particular, the Council wanted to change the lottery system back to voluntary enlistment. Based on recommendations from military officials, the *Consejo* presented numerous reasons for shifting militia service back to voluntary participation. While they claimed that there was simply no “great need” for the militia of color, council members concurred on the desire for military service to be recast as honorable. The massive resistance to conscription illuminated the negative sentiments the free community of color now maintained surrounding the current regulations for military service. The *Consejo* reasoned that making the troops voluntary would also facilitate faster background checks, thus helping to raise the status of the troops and create an “honorable force.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, officials acknowledged that *libres de color* worked primarily as skilled artisans and agricultural laborers – the jobs that Cuban whites were reluctant to fill. They recognized that because forced enlistment interfered with supporting their families, free *morenos* and *pardos* were resistant to serve, in spite of the benefits and privileges that accompanied militia participation. They proposed that on-duty militiamen have specific service hours so that they could keep their regular jobs. The Council also recommended only accepting men who lived in or near the home city of their battalion, so that they would be close to their homes and families, and could attend to their

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<sup>78</sup> Virgil de Quiñones, Consejo Presente to La Sección de Gobierno, Havana, 11 and 21 September 1865, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Consejo de la Administración de la Isla de Cuba (hereafter ANC-CA), Leg. 9, Exp. 740.

personal affairs.<sup>79</sup>

Ultimately, however, fears of arming thousands of men of color formed the core of the *Consejos*' decision to alter *pardo* and *moreno* military requirements. While the council acknowledged the advantages of militias of color for offsetting the scarcity of men in the regular army and their quick mobilization in times of imperial defense, the Council also highlighted the potential danger of militiamen of color. They claimed that, in spite of demonstrated loyalty, servicemen of African descent could very easily shift their allegiance to the empire. The *Consejo* called for the "pan-Latin extinction" of black and mulatto militia units, declaring that militias of color were "more harmful than useful" and a financial drain.<sup>80</sup> Dismantling these units would enable the Crown to re-channel funds previously earmarked for the militia of color.<sup>81</sup> By the end of September 1865, the committee voted in full agreement of the reforms to minimize and, ultimately, to dissolve the militia once and for all.<sup>82</sup>

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Through participation in colonial Cuba's militia, free men of African descent garnered honor, prestige, and respect within their own communities and among colonial authorities. While military service, on the one hand, hardened racial and color

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<sup>79</sup> Virgil de Quiñones, *Consejero Presente* to La Sección de Gobierno, Havana, 11 and 21 September 1865, ANC-CA, Leg. 9, Exp. 740.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*; Militias of color also existed in Puerto Rico.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*.

boundaries, the segregated nature of the companies and militiamen's strong ties to the community also reinforced racial unity. Some officials acknowledged and prized militiamen of African-descent for their centuries of loyal service under arduous conditions. Nevertheless, fears of violent racial confrontation in the island's slave society and from the surrounding Caribbean heightened fears of social and political upheaval at the hands of soldiers of color. The discovery of the Conspiracy of La Escalera in 1843, that linked some free people of color, slaves, Creoles, and British abolitionists, unleashed an unprecedented attempt to extinguish the power of *libres de color* on the island.

Among the numerous methods colonial authorities used to rid Cuba of the threat of armed black dissent, disbanding the militia of color proved the most comprehensive. While ample evidence exists that *pardos* and *morenos* fought legislation that expelled the foreign-born, encouraged emigration, and denied their entry from abroad, information on their initial reaction to dismantling the militia is speculative. Evidence of their response is delayed until, after struggling for a decade to return home, stabilize their financial base, or both, *libres de color* witnessed the recreation of the militia in 1853.

Authorities, who anticipated an easy recruitment of black and mulatto men, overestimated how free men of color would respond towards renewed military service. Instead of volunteering in large numbers, free men of color showed little of their former interest in militia duty. The memory of the repression, particularly in the island's western provinces, remained vivid. Ten years of constructing a revised version of honor and prestige without armed service strengthened racial solidarity and opposition to the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

military. Despite the *fuero militar* that placed militiamen of color on equal footing with white servicemen, the majority of *libres de color* rejected military service.

Consequently, officials used compulsory enlistment. Conscription efforts from 1858 to 1860, however, proved difficult. The wide dissemination of military exemption rules combined with the legal sophistication of the free community of color enabled hundreds to escape service. Their protest of forced enlistment demonstrated their efforts to redefine militia duty for their own benefit. Furthermore, the actions of these men and women encouraged authorities rethink the militia of color. After lengthy discussion, authorities agreed to convert militia participation to its original voluntary corps, with the goal of, ultimately, phasing out militias of color in the Spanish Caribbean.

## CONCLUSION

The overall focus of this dissertation has been to explore the impact of the Repression on La Escalera on *libres de color* and their response to over two decades of legal, social, occupational, and political reforms and restrictions. Situated between the repression of 1844 and the start of the Ten Years' War in 1868, this study has examined the interim years to unveil the spaces within which free people of color negotiated the complex interplay of race and freedom in nineteenth-century Cuba and the Atlantic World. Although circumscribed by colonial Cuban society and its preoccupations over slavery and empire, free people of color demonstrated their adaptability and resiliency as they confronted unprecedented challenges to their position and rights in the island's social hierarchy.

The strategies *libres de color* employed in the aftermath of the 1844 repression had their roots in the first half of the nineteenth century. Accordingly, Chapter One discussed the essential roles that made free men and women of African descent vital to the functioning of the colony. Their importance, however, was tainted because of their racial ancestry, free status, and increasing population in nineteenth-century Cuba. Despite being relegated to positions that Spaniards and Creoles considered lowly, free men and women of color devised ways to recast their contributions as honorable.

Public announcements illuminated the skills valued within the free community of color. Newspaper listings broadcast free *pardas* and *morenas* skills in 'the art of

midwifery.’<sup>1</sup> Petitions to establish schools of color demonstrated their commitment as teachers to uphold the ‘honorable . . . conservation [of] family decency.’<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, free militiamen of color, who had proven themselves indispensable for defending Cuban shores, published declarations asserting their abilities as skilled craftsmen of “the highest level of perfection.”<sup>3</sup> These examples demonstrated that *libres de color*, particularly the highly skilled, knew the value of their labor. Many used their positions to maneuver within the laws and customs that bound them in Cuba’s slave society.

Simultaneously, colonial authorities viewed free people of color with suspicion. Officials and Creole leaders perceived the participation and numerical growth of free people of color in certain arenas to have eroded honorable job opportunities for white men and women, marred Cuba’s reputation as a medically progressive and civilized society, and jeopardized island security by arming men of color. Ever sensitive to issues of international image and social stability, island officials and elites debated ways to reduce and eliminate competition from free people of color. Immigration projects surged, but none proved sufficient to wrest manual and skilled labor completely from the hands of the free sector of color.

The tensions of maintaining slavery and security in Cuba mounted throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Revolts by slaves, free *libres de color*, slaves, Creole dissidents, and sometimes through their combined efforts, prompted colonial authorities to tighten controls over the colony. Evidence that the African descended population had

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<sup>1</sup> *Diario de la Habana*, August 11, 1828.

<sup>2</sup> ANC-AP, Leg. 19, Exp. 925, quoted in Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera*, 129.



become a majority in 1841 combined with the series of slave uprisings in 1843 brought concerns to a head. Chapter Two examined the methods colonial authorities employed to suppress the rebellion. Stimulated by pressures over the slave trade, abolition, rebellion, and independence, the extreme tactics island rulers and elites pursued resulted in a situation some scholars have called “sanguinary” and tantamount to “an ethnic cleansing.”<sup>4</sup>

Government correspondence, consulate reports, international newspapers, visitors accounts, personal letters vividly described the brutality of the Repression of La Escalera. The measures used by colonial authorities demonstrated the need to wield power and exposed their sense of urgency to maintain colonial boundaries in the turbulent Atlantic World. Plagued by international criticism, colonial Cuba crafted an image of imperial strength and moral justification for their bloody assault. For his management of the situation, O’Donnell garnered praise for restoring tranquility to the island.

More importantly, this section showed how free women and men of African descent initially responded and negotiated the spectacle of terror. Undoubtedly, the Repression of La Escalera had a traumatic impact on Cuba’s free population of color. Free blacks and island travelers wrote about the horrors of the repression, of torture and death. They initiated appeals to colonial authorities demanding to know the status of loved ones who had been arrested and petitioning for the return of confiscated property. Thus, free people of color faced the repression the best ways they knew how, armed with

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<sup>3</sup> Mónico et al., *Justo sentimiento*, 208, ANC-CM, Leg. 60, Exp. 2, folio 208.

tested strategies acquired before 1844. Chapters Three, Four and Five focused on how they rallied to begin the task of reclaiming their lives in three main areas effected by the repression.

Chapter Three explored the impact of the repression on the occupational choices of free women and men of color. New legislation sought to regain order by restricting the economic opportunities of people of African descent. Simultaneously, the government implemented measures to infuse Creoles and Spaniards into areas with sparse white representation. Island elites, who asserted that colonial progress hung in the balance, galvanized officials' approach.

In the post-1844 period, both women and men came under heavy fire. Women charged with connection to the Conspiracy of La Escalera were frequently stripped of their jobs as midwives or domestic laborers, and sent to labor in the hospitals and away from their families. Although some successfully appealed for leniency or full reinstatement, most were left to suffer the consequences of their sentences. Men of color experienced a similar fate as authorities implemented harsher licensing practices for skilled artisans, although they, too, petitioned to continue their livelihoods. Men working in agriculture endured a series of immigrant worker programs designed to eliminate the influence of free men of color on slaves and immigrants working in slave-like conditions. In terms of occupation, the vital quality of *libres de color's* dual position suffered a tremendous blow. Not all would recover their economic outlets, but many fought for fair treatment based on previous experiences navigating colonial Cuban society. The charged

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph C. Dorsey, *Slave Traffic in the Age of Abolition: Puerto Rico, West Africa, and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean, 1815-1859* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 187.

issues of race and labor to sustain the slave colony would continue to plague Cuba in the ensuing decades.

Concerns, raised in the opening section, regarding the negative influences of the rapidly increasing free population of color fueled the colonial administration's plan to rid the island of its rebellious elements as discussed in Chapter Four. A plan to make this a reality banished hundreds of free blacks and mulattoes charged by the Military Commission, ordered all foreign-born *libres de color* to be deported, and forced over a thousand others to emigrate "voluntarily." All three groups petitioned either to stay on the island or return home. Indeed, their pleas represented among the most numerous of the documented methods free people of color used to challenge the government's repressive measures. Appeals by skilled artisans fared the best, despite concerns over competitiveness with whites, upholding their essential role in the colony. Those in exile, however, nourished the threatening component of this equation.

Defying the anticipated conduct, *libres de color* requested relief from the Spanish crown. In response to suspicions that exile communities had established interregional networks, and that some had the potential to work with foreign powers to overtake the island, colonial officials blocked efforts to return. *Libres de color*, however, did not acquiesce, demonstrating their ability to navigate the spatial and political boundaries of post-La Escalera Cuba. The goal of returning home legally or illegally persisted and Spanish officials authorized a general amnesty for those in exile in 1857.

Chapter Five focused on the ways *libres de color* responded to the government's call for compulsory military service in the 1850s. The militia of color, unilaterally dissolved in June of 1844, was reestablished a decade later as a fundamental component

of the island's defense and Spanish force abroad. Again, free people of color acted defied expectations. Although militia service had, in many ways, been a source of racial identity and unity among free people of color, the abrupt dismantling of this longstanding institution had belied the significance of military duty. The apathetic response of free black and mulatto men towards joining the new militia units illustrated how the honor and benefits associated formerly with service no longer held the same importance. They demonstrated this shift by protesting the ensuing forced enlistment. Hundreds declined militia duty, some by formal petition under the exemptions regulations, others by desertion. The potency of their disdain for the draft manifested itself in debates about the status of the militia that would, ultimately, phase out mandatory service, and *pardo* and *moreno* participation in general.

In many ways, the brutal public executions and coercive policies eroded the material and social gains of *libres de color*. Free blacks and mulattos, however, challenged and adapted to their situation in ways that exhibited their continued importance to Cuba's slave society. Efforts to dislocate free people of color from the skilled employment sector proved the most effective, although not without protest. When the repression made removing hundreds of free people of color from the island a reality, *libres de color* expressed their attachment to the island in ways that officials had not anticipated. Even when colonial officials acted in ways that seemed to be mutually beneficial for the colony and *libres de color*, as the reestablishment of the militia of color proposed to do, this, too, was subject to negotiation from *pardo* and *moreno* militiamen and their families. In spite of these obstacles, by the mid 1860s, the free sector of color had reemerged in significant ways.

Foremost, the free population of color increased at an unprecedented rate. Census data in the early 1860s reveals that the total free population of color had increased by thirty-three percent, from 149,226 to 225,843 since La Escalera.<sup>5</sup> The last comparable growth spurt occurred between 1792 and 1817.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, European immigration increased the white population, reducing the proportion of *libres de color* in Cuba. These efforts, however, attest to Cuba's inability to sustain a majority white sector without the aid of migration program. Meanwhile, the renewed growth of the free population of color highlighted the persistent balanced gender dynamics.

Furthermore, the free sector of color experienced a marked rise in education levels. The number of registered students almost tripled, increasing from 486 to 1,256.<sup>7</sup> A survey taken in 1861 revealed that free women and men of color comprised 26,780 or ten percent of the total 269,237 literate population.<sup>8</sup> For instance, seven of the eight adults in Dominga Laquer y Barbosa's family in Havana, were listed as literate.<sup>9</sup> The growing concern and demand for general primary instruction in Cuba prompted educational reform. The 1863 *Plan de Estudios*, initiated by Captain General José Gutiérrez de la Concha in the 1850s, formally recognized the increasing need for schools

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<sup>5</sup> Kiple, *Blacks in Colonial Cuba*, 62-64, 95-97. As this article does not discuss *emancipados*, per Kiple's analysis, I have shifted the 6,650 *emancipados* to the male slave category and reduced the free male population of color for Havana.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Huerta Martínez, *La enseñanza primaria en Cuba en el siglo XIX (1812-1868)*, (Sevilla: Diputación Provincial de Sevilla), 1992, 170-171.

<sup>8</sup> Ramón de la Sagra, "Estados anexos a la memoria sobre el estado de la instrucción elemental en la Isla de Cuba, AGI-Indiferente 1533, Expediente 7, No. 1-11, Cuba, 1861, 275-343.

of color. Article 182 facilitated the establishment of more schools based on the size of the population.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, issues of slavery and freedom took center stage in Cuba and in the Atlantic World. Colonial Cuba remained in turmoil over race and agricultural labor. Proponents of slavery pointed to uprisings in neighboring Jamaica as proof that *libres de color* would not provide the dependable labor force needed to sustain the island's sugar industry.<sup>11</sup> Abolitionists and slave interests concurred that a thorough whitening of the island had to take place before pursuing slave emancipation. With the abolition of slavery at the end of the Civil War in the United States, however, Cuba found itself under greater pressures, particularly from their northern neighbor and Britain, to end the slave trade and slavery.<sup>12</sup> Apprehension set in that America's example might cause disruptions in Cuban slavery, unraveling black "obedience and respect" for whites.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Spain's bid for a "second empire" in the Caribbean attracted resistance from within and without.<sup>14</sup> Cuba's treasury financed the four-year war (1861-64) to recolonize the Dominican Republic. The endeavor ended in failure. The Spanish Crown's decision to increase

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<sup>9</sup> "Cédula de inscripción que en cumplimiento de la Real orden de 2 de diciembre de 1859." Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Miscelánea (hereafter ANC-Misc.), Leg. 3782, Exp. AN.

<sup>10</sup> Alejandro Ávila Fernández and Ángel Huerta Martínez, *La formación de maestros de primeras letras en Sevilla y Cuba durante el siglo XIX*. (Sevilla: Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación Universidad de Sevilla, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 102, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba*, 38; quoted in Martínez-Alier, 31

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 3. For a detailed historiographical discussion of the Spain's second empire see Joseph M. Fradera, "Quiembra imperial y reorganización policia en las Antillas españolas, 1818-1868," *Recerques* 9 (1997): 289-318.

taxes on Cuban planters to cover war expenses contributed to separatist rumblings in Cuba, particularly in the eastern part of the island.<sup>15</sup>

By 1868, the political links between Spain and its Caribbean territories collapsed. In Spain, a series of coups left those in power opposed to colonial reforms recommended by the *Junta de Información* regarding slavery, labor, and white immigration. Instead, the *Junta* instituted new taxes and tariffs on foreign goods. A new wave of repression ensued that exiled opponents, censored publications, and increased military authority.<sup>16</sup> In September of 1868, Francisco Serrano y Dominguez, a key figure within the Hispano-Cuban elite, emerged as Spain's leader.<sup>17</sup> A month later, Spain's Caribbean colonies initiated separatist rebellions. Puerto Rico's insurgency, known as the *Grito de Lares*, emerged in the interior coffee regions as part of an island-wide battle to gain independence. The armed struggle by landowners, workers, and slaves to end slavery, peninsular economic monopolies, and colonial rule lasted three days before coming being suppressed by the colonial government.<sup>18</sup>

Cuba also rebelled against Spain's repressive actions. In particular, eastern slaveholders, bypassed by the prosperity of the sugar boom in prior decades, resented the economic monopoly of Spanish and western slaveholders.<sup>19</sup> Free people of color and

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<sup>15</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 108,109.

<sup>16</sup> Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 126

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>19</sup> Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 120-121, Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 127.

slaves, encouraged to join the rebellion did so, forcing the separatist leadership to declare the abolition of slavery and burdensome apprenticeships on the eastern part of the island. Although Royalist forces halted rebel advancement toward the western provinces, the fact that people of color had joined the uprising and that the rebel leaders instituted the abolition of slavery raised western planter's worst fears.<sup>20</sup> In an effort to combat eastern Cuba's multiracial army, colonial officials resurrected visions of a Haitian-style revolt that would lead to a racial war on the island. To counter these images, the east's rebel republic installed free men of color as local level public officers and mobilized enslaved laborers. Ever aware of the potential danger of emancipating slaves who later might not join the army on their own, eastern leaders mobilized enslaved laborers and called for an end to slavery that would be gradual and indemnified.<sup>21</sup>

Ada Ferrer has commented that *libres de color* and slaves' familiarity with and willingness to engage insurgent language, conventions, and assertions, were unleashed by their participation in the Ten Year's War.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the language of separatism helped incorporate men of African descent into the rebel cause. *Libres de color*, however, were not strangers to its core ideals of freedom, citizenship, and nationhood. The memory of the Repression of La Escalera served as a reminder to free women and men of African descent of their tenuous position as free individuals of color in a slave society, and of the battles yet to be waged to secure their rights.

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<sup>20</sup> Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 127.

<sup>21</sup> Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, 8.



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The Conspiracy of La Escalera agitated pre-existing tensions surrounding rebellion, labor, immigration, and military service in colonial Cuba. In the repression that followed, authorities carried out a methodical plan to control and harden racial boundaries to the detriment of people of African descent. In response, *libres de color* employed a variety of approaches for countering the impact of the violence, legal restrictions, social prohibitions, and institutional reforms generated by O'Donnell and subsequent captains-general. In doing so, free men and women of color revealed the range of their essential role in colonial society as well as the danger they posed to the island from within and without. Their status as free people of color in a slave regime complicated Cuba's ascendancy onto the nineteenth-century world stage. International pressures to abolish the slave trade and slavery, and the realities of slave rebellion, linked free people of color to segments of the slave population, liberal Creoles, and foreign powers. Mounting pressures triggered a spectacle of violence that reverberated across time and space. By investigating *libres de color* in the aftermath of the Repression of the Conspiracy of La Escalera, I have illuminated three key points about the impact of the repression on this sector and how the ordeal shifted social, economic, and political relations on the island.

First, I have demonstrated how free people of color maneuvered the constraints of race and freedom in nineteenth-century colonial Cuba and beyond, unearthing proof that the repression did not fully suppress their influence. By tracking the public display of

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<sup>22</sup> Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba*, 42.

power and the crippling aftershocks that targeted free people of color on the island, I expose the dynamics of the repression on free people of color by the colonial system. Evidence suggests that a small percentage of those actually caught up in the repression managed to successfully maneuver the system to protect and restore balance to a world ravaged by destruction, death, and deportation. The free individuals of African descent who did delivered the evidence to support the overarching argument of this study: that the repression did not completely diminish the ability of free people of color to challenge colonial decisions and decision-makers. Illegal and legal options figured into free women and men's arsenal to circumvent the effects of the repression. Unauthorized activities included secret meetings among exiles. These gatherings fostered networks set in motion by clandestine travel between Cuba and port cities in the circum-Caribbean. Their efforts facilitated the exchange of information, financial assistance, and, according to island officials, the staging ground for a bid for black rule of the island.

Engaging the legal system, however, remained a proven way to appeal for justice, and free people of color did so repeatedly and in multiple areas after the repression. Where they could, women and men fought for everything from the right to work to just treatment from whites. Newly widowed *pardas* sought to regain confiscated property. Sisters attempted to secure the release of jailed siblings. Incarcerated fathers implored friends to care for their families, left destitute by prolonged imprisonment. New militiamen defied expectations by seeking exemption from forced military duty. Furthermore, neither nationality nor geography confined their efforts. Foreign-born free men of color staked their claim to the island through occupation, marriage, and personal references. From exile, *libres de color* appealed to the highest Spanish colonial courts in

multiple countries and on both sides of the Atlantic. Free individuals of African descent, their petitions, government reports, and informants traversed Cuba, Mexico, the United States, Spain, and North Africa in an effort to reconfigure the displacement of free people of color outside the Spanish Caribbean and its potential danger to the island.

Acknowledging the struggles of *libres de color* between 1844 and 1868, the success and the failures, refocuses the lens of the Conspiracy of La Escalera to include the dynamics of its impact on the free community of color that it targeted.

Second, I explored how free black and mulatto women and men reconstructed dominant meanings of race, gender, labor, service, and nationality to fit their own interpretations. Stripped of hard-fought gains, to be sure, free people of color persisted in challenging the slave regime. In doing so, they reshaped established norms of constructing identity in the colony. As this study had demonstrated, much of their community strength and influence diminished after 1844. The presence of free men and women of color in the urban labor pool, while fundamental to the stability of the island, generated intense debates over prestige, status, and race.

Spanish cultural traditions transported to the Caribbean equated honor with whiteness, a formula that secured white prosperity and dominance over the island. Meanwhile, free people of color frequently constructed a counter-image. Teachers, such as María Faustina Peñalver and Gabriel Dovoteo Barba, reframed notions of honor associated with occupation. The fact that there were few teachers of color in a small profession dominated by whites gave the work of blacks and mulattos prestige on both the technical and racial levels. By establishing primary schools and disseminating

knowledge, *libres de color* extended personal status and accomplishment to the community of African descent.

To reassure the white sector of their benign intentions, *libres de color* emphasized their ability to provide workers of color trained to fill the demands of whites, as laundresses and seamstresses. In these obviously lower status positions of washing and sewing, free *pardas* and *morenas* found themselves capable of moving more freely in the streets than their white counterparts, both before and after La Escalera. The ideals of race and gender that dictated that Spanish women remain at home thrust free women of color into the public view, rearranging the image of women in the streets. The quest to uphold these ideals intensified after 1844. Accordingly, midwives of color found themselves under increasing attack from the medical establishment. *Parteras* of color handled the lives of the whites who would inherit the wealth of Cuba. In addition, *pardas* and *morenas* delivered slaves, the valuable property and labor that would ensure Cuba's prosperity. Hard pressed to find European women to fill these roles, at least to secure low mortality for the white sector, frustrated efforts to change the racial composition of midwifery until 1844.

Perhaps free women of color, especially those in the upper levels of their communities or those who married whites or Creoles, sought life further away from the public sphere. Nevertheless, the fact that there had been a thirty-four percent decrease in the number of women of color who listed their occupation as exclusively as "housewife" between 1846 and 1861 reveals that women of color remained in the public view.<sup>23</sup> The

realities of slave society dictated that free people of African descent make the best of their situation.

Similarly, men of color constituted a strong occupational and defense cluster riddled by colonial debate. Contrary to what Creoles asserted, black and mulatto men never formed the majority of skilled artisans, with the exception of a few areas, such as carpentry. Nevertheless, the public work presence of free men of color added a dimension of suspicion to their activities. In addition, *pardo* and *moreno* militiamen faced heightened scrutiny as defenders of the Spanish empire. Supported and opposed almost evenly by colonial officials and military authorities, and securing virtually the same rights as white soldiers, militiamen of color embodied the fear of organized rebellion led by armed and trained men of African descent. Indeed, they had demonstrated just that in uprisings prior to 1844. Moreover, some located upward social mobility and military affiliation within the African-descended community, often coupled with a skilled trade. Furthermore, the constant flow of foreign free immigrants of color heightened colonial anxieties over the influx of rumors, real or imagined, that might threaten island security and prosperity. Seamen of color, in particular, with their routine exposure to people and information, represented Cuban fears of an imported rebellion and anti-slavery propaganda. The combination of labor and military service placed free blacks and mulattos in constant motion and in the public view. Moreover, the relative freedom of movement of free people of color and their access to *libres de color* outside of Cuba, intensified the suspicions of authorities, planters, and intellectuals.

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<sup>23</sup> Havana figures for housewives of color in 1846 totaled 5,192 ( 29 % of the total 18,031). By 1861, they had dropped to 3,411 (12% of total 28,792) – For 1846 data, see Cuba, Comisión de estadística,

Finally, I have demonstrated how examining the aftermath of the repression can shed light on aspects of slave societies not readily visible prior to the rebellion. Historians of rebellions have illuminated important aspects of slave regimes that produced these ruptures. Still, life in the aftermath of suppressed revolts has not been given as much weight as the events leading up to the rebellion. Exploring post-rebellion slave societies enables us to understand why or why not subsequent uprisings occurred. Indeed, slave revolts in Cuba did not end with the La Escalera Repression. Archives document uprisings in 1853, 1854, and 1858, albeit, not on the scale of the 1843 rebellions.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, the reality of revolts, organized or spontaneous, influenced the volatile conditions of the slave regime. Indeed, as Eugene Genovese has commented, “these harsh battles enabled the masses to glimpse their long-term strength and to prepare themselves, however haltingly, for the many struggles ahead.”<sup>25</sup>

My aim, then, has been to explore how they prepared themselves. How did *libres de color* adjust to the repression’s “sad consequences.”<sup>26</sup> Once the initial wave of terror ended, what happened in the subsequent years? In seeking answers to these questions, this dissertation has filled a void in the historical literature by unearthing the voices of La

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*Cuadro*; For 1861, see Casanovas, *Bread, or Bullets!*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> “Causa de la conspiración de negros,” 23 May 1853, ANC-AP, Leg. 48, Exp. 22; “Comunicación acerca del pardo José de la Cruz Mendoza fue comprendido en la causa de conspiración contra la raza blanca,” 30 June 1853, ANC-AP, Leg. 122, Exp. 44; “Sobre los rumores de sublevación de la gente de color en la jurisdicción de Las Nuevitas, decretada por la Junta Rebelde de Nueva York,” Puerto Príncipe, 1 January 1854, ANC-AP, Leg. 220; “Contra pardos libres Felipe Uribe y Juliana Oquendo sospechosos de complicidad en un plan de conspiración,” Havana, 7 December 1858, ANC-AP, Leg. 223, Exp. 18;

<sup>25</sup> Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, 119.

<sup>26</sup> Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*, 67.

Escalera survivors and their descendents. Moreover, this study has provided the opportunity to explore Cuban slave society from the perspective of free individuals of African descent. In so doing, it has illuminated the negotiation process that often took place between those who dominated the colonial system and those subjugated by it.

The array of historical studies on Cuban race relations and rebellions for the pre-1844 period reveal the progress of free people of color as they rose in social status within their own communities, accumulated wealth, and sought to influence the world around them. Similarly, the post-1868 studies demonstrate the force with which free people of color turned their attention to helping end slavery and colonial rule. I posit that the interim period, 1844 to 1868, nurtured a political consciousness put into practice in the subsequent small-scale uprisings and multiple wars for independence. Prior knowledge of the colonial system empowered *libres de color* with an understanding of how to maneuver through the slave regime, which they implemented in the wake of the Repression of La Escalera. While free women and men of color could not have predicted the force and breadth of the repression, their previous experience enabled them to adjust their strategies to the situation. It is clear that the repression marked a turning point in race relations on the island, hardening color lines and diminishing previous avenues for the social advancement of *libres de color*.<sup>27</sup> The divisions of race, particularly in terms of labor, migration, and defense, raised colonial concerns to critical levels. Efforts to maintain control over these aspects were disseminated unevenly. Even after authorities regained control, their insistence that complete order had returned to the island were

exaggerated. Contrary to official reports, Cuban authorities projected a desired reality, both locally and internationally, to maintain a strong colonial image in the face of foreign criticism of the repression.

Examining the years following the repression has redefined La Escalera beyond its infamy as a conspiracy. Addressing its consequences for *libres de color* between 1844 and 1868 has added breadth and depth to a previously unexplored topic. By investigating the ways in which free men and women of color responded to the policies and practices of Cuban and Spanish colonial elites after 1844, I have demonstrated that the repression did not diminish their ability to negotiate slave society. Rather, my analysis of their strategies to navigate the aftermath of the repression has highlighted the active roles they played in reshaping the meaning of race and freedom in colonial Cuba's slave regime. Although with varying rates of success and under harsher conditions, *libres de color* continued to maneuver through a system that created, sustained, and bound them.

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<sup>27</sup> Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 4, 15; Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour*, 32.



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## **Vita**

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