Manuel Barcia

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Between the 1760s and the 1840s, Cuba became the principal sugar producer for the global markets and the largest importer of slaves in the Western Hemisphere. At first sight, these changes might appear to be curious, since they occurred around the same time that abolitionism was gaining ground. The historiography of the nineteenth-century Atlantic has approached this seeming contradiction from various vantage points. Some scholars have argued that the decline of slavery in certain areas of the Atlantic made room for its rise in other regions. Others, who have focused primarily on antislavery movements, have examined the retooling of expanding Atlantic networks of communication and commerce toward abolitionist ends. Within this latter historiographic body, the Haitian Revolution and British abolitionism have occupied a privileged ground. By focusing on West Africa as a starting point for antislavery struggles in Cuba, Manuel Barcia’s The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825 inserts a new chapter in the historiography of nineteenth-century abolitionism.

A nuanced analysis of a little explored slave uprising that took place in the Cuban countryside near Matanzas, the book constitutes a call for in-depth research on the continuities between political transformations taking place in West Africa and slave unrest in Cuba during the nineteenth century. The historiography of pre-1868 Cuba has focused primarily on the Aponte Rebellion and the conspiracy of La Escalera as the main uprisings organized by slaves and free people of color. For historians, the attractiveness of these two events stems, partially, from their reverberations and make-up: they involved a range of participants (such as English abolitionists and Haitian revolutionaries) whose entanglements in Atlantic antislavery networks could be located within the historical record. However, Barcia argues, in Cuba there were at least forty plots or rebellions, most of them organized by slaves who had been born in Africa, that occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century and that have received little scholarly attention. Analyzing them would help us better understand the ways in which political processes in West Africa shaped the Atlantic.

According to Barcia, the 1825 rebellion began when a group of slaves (who lived and worked on the coffee plantations in the area of Guamacaro) sought to exact revenge against white planters and overseers. The records of the Military Commission (the institution responsible for judging the rebels), which is the main source for the account, seem to remain silent on the nature of the rebels’ desire for revenge or on the existence of other goals. The sources also remain unclear about how carefully organized the uprising was. Barcia thus opens an
interesting avenue for further research on the motivations underscoring the slave uprisings that occurred in Cuba during this time. Were there common threads running through them? In what ways were they politically minded?

Barcia is particularly interested in the “Africanization” of slave revolts in Cuba in the first half of the nineteenth century. Drawing on ethnic terminology employed by the local planters, he argues that the 1825 rebels were Ganga, Mandingo, Lucumí, and Carabalí, and that they surmounted ethnic and linguistic differences after sharing the same experience of the Middle Passage (many arriving on the same boats). Using information provided by notarial records, he concludes that many of the slaves working on the local coffee plantations were related through kinship ties that went back to Africa. He suggests that evidence for the continuities between the rebels’ past in Africa and their condition in Cuba were the language that the rebels used to describe their actions as “war,” their country marks, their inability to speak Spanish, and their military tactics. The record that Barcia works with remains, however, thin on how the meaning of the rebels’ birthplace might have informed their behavior in the Caribbean. He sometimes assumes continuity and a unified “African-ness” even though he describes interethnic collaborations that had occurred during and after the Middle Passage. This simply shows the difficulty of tracing West African influences in the Caribbean drawing on a sparse record that remains heavily mediated by the voices of the colonial authorities. Given the limitations of the Cuban and Spanish archives, it might be interesting to consider whether additional archival/oral history material from or on West Africa could provide further insights into the nature of political mobilization among Afro-descendants in the Caribbean. For instance, one issue that such material might shed further light on is the extent to which the ethnic descriptors that Cuban planters used corresponded with ethnic self-identifications in West Africa. Barcia’s work thus opens conversations between Africanist and Caribbeanist historiography that could give new impetus to Atlanticist historiography.

Another contribution of the book is its careful consideration of the rebellion’s long-term effects. There appear to be continuities between this uprising and La Escalera (1844), a larger-scale antislavery conspiracy, also emanating from Matanzas. The memory of 1825 might have lingered with some of the local inhabitants and at least one surviving rebel participated in both. The 1825 events also shaped planters’ surveillance strategies, which expanded to include more materially limiting lodgings for enslaved laborers and a regionally specific slave code. Barcia attributes these policies to the planters’ reactions to the 1825 rebellion per se. One question worth considering is whether the planters’ perception of the 1825 rebellion was not in fact colored by their fears of the repetition of the Haitian Revolution in Cuba; as such, the new policies might have
been part of a broader reaction to Haiti, rather than a response to this particular rebellion alone.

Barcia injects new energy into current debates about the position of Africa in the nineteenth-century Atlantic, while providing a nuanced description of an event in the trajectory of the Cuban plantation system that, up till now, has remained little studied. The book constitutes an excellent resource for those interested in the world of nineteenth-century Atlantic slavery and abolition and anyone teaching or taking courses on related topics.

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