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The literature on women’s condition, gender relations, marriage, “race” and sexuality in slave society in the colonial Americas is both abundant and sophisticated, with anthropologists and historians paying special attention to the more valuable Spanish dominions such as the Virreinato del Peru and Nueva España. Sarah Franklin instead focuses on Cuba, examining the way in which women experienced and supported the island’s development into Spain’s most valuable colony as the mainland dominions were conquering their independence. As she writes, “Women in nineteenth-century Cuba lived under a hierarchical structure employed to create and maintain slave society. Those at the top of that structure recognized that ... Cuban slave society required a rigid social hierarchy based on race, gender, and legal status, and they employed patriarchy to that end” (p. 1).

She argues that the complement to patriarchy—that is, social class and race hierarchy—was marianismo, a notion that refers to the cultural norm of virginity before marriage and chastity thereafter, at least for elite women in order to be respected as socially honorable because they were sexually virtuous. Endogamous marriage by class and race was expected to underwrite the stability of Cuban slave society through time. Already in 1776, Carlos III, the modernizing Bourbon king, had decreed class endogamy in his Pragmática Sanción para evitar el abuso de contraer matrimonios desiguales (Decree to avoid the abuse of unequal marriages), thereby depriving the Church of one of its chief prerogatives. Franklin suggests that this state interference in marriage choice had to do with a méscaille by Carlos III’s brother. It is more likely, however, that it was intended to curtail undesirable French influences on marriage and the family. The marriage decree was, in effect, extended to the colonies in 1803 where it was to be applied to all inhabitants, independent of whether they were demonstrably White. It is worth noting, moreover, that in the legal documents that resulted from the marriage decree (e.g. applications for marriage permits in cases of paternal opposition for reasons of racial and social inequality) the dichotomy between domestic virtue and public morals was often blurred when the authorities rejected a supposedly unequal marriage because it might “harm the Republic” (Martinez Alier 1974: 100, 108).

A family’s honor rested on its women’s sexual virtue. Yet the staunchly hierarchical social order of Cuban slave society was manifest also in the low moral regard in which women of color were held. The low rate of interracial marriages and marriage between slaves and free colored people coupled with the
significant number of *pardos* (mulattoes) are some indications of the frequency of hypergamous concubinage and/or the sexual use and abuse of nonwhite women by white men (Martinez Alier 1974: 82 ff.). The popular proverb of the period, *no hay tamarindos dulces ni mulatas señoritas* (there are no sweet tamarind fruits nor mulatto virgins) is as crude as it is explicit as a reflection of the prejudice regarding colored women’s sexual virtue. Consequently, there were two kinds of women in Cuba: *las hijas de familia* (daughters of families), whose function in life was to be virtuous so as to marry properly and bear children for the family, and the women of color who were thought to lack both an honorable family and sexual virtue. Franklin refers to some cases of adultery and of divorce of white women as contradictions of the patriarchal logic but she does not pay due attention to this double moral standard as regards women of color. Neither does she examine Cuban slave society’s complex and subtle system of sociocultural classification, an outcome of the fundamental role genealogical thinking played in an open and dynamic society which was made up of the descendants of generations of mixtures—these “mixtures” being the outcome of the intersection of class, “race,” gender, sexuality, and legal status.

The epistemological support of Franklin’s portrayal of women’s role and experience in nineteenth-century Cuban slave society is patriarchy, its organizing principle. I presume that this instrumental use of patriarchy is why she has not enquired into the concrete intersections between class, “race,” legal status, gender, and sexuality in the making of Cuban slave society. As is surely well known, it was Afro-American feminists who introduced the concept of inter*sectional*ity into feminist theory in their critique of white feminists’ color blindness and their endeavor to make their specific experience of exploitation and discrimination visible (see Combahee River Collective Statement 1977, Cremshaw 1989, hooks 1981). Their studies over the past three decades remind me of Roger Bastide’s surprise at the association between race and sex in UNESCO-sponsored enquiries into race relations between Black and White in São Paolo, Brazil, and among elite African university students in Paris: “In the course of a great number of interviews the question ‘race’ always provoked the answer ‘sex’” (1950:235–247).

One fundamental point to be made regarding systems of sociosymbolic classification has been summed up by French anthropologist Jean Pouillon who pointed out that “we do not classify because there are things to classify but when we classify we choose [or, I would add, invent] elements to do so” (1998:189). As Franklin has shown convincingly, Cuban nineteenth-century slave society became an extraordinarily unequal economic and political structure. The multiple challenges by people who did not obey the mandates of hierarchy (e.g., eloping for the purpose of marriage, joining slave uprisings, or
emancipating slaves during the first War of Independence of 1868) are just a few instances of the contradictory nature of Cuban society which, despite slavery, shared the basic values of modern society.

Nineteenth-century scientific racism was used to reconcile humanism with on-the-ground inequality and lack of freedom, pointing to benefits for the slaves and/or shortcomings inherent in its victims. This is what we now call naturalizing socio-political inequality. But if sociopolitical inequality of the slave society was innate and hence hereditary, then the control of women’s bodies and sexuality (to produce socioracially appropriate reproduction by means of proper marriage) was necessary for the elites to assure their honor and social status through the generations. And women were by nature destined to be wives and mothers. People of color were left with two alternatives — either to abide by these values (often with little success), or rebel against them.

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References