Aisha K. Finch

Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841–1844.

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For more than a century, students of Cuban history have known of the existence in Havana of thousands of pages of official documents generated in 1844 by a Spanish military commission charged to investigate what Cuban planters and officials came to believe was a vast revolutionary conspiracy centered in the slave and free colored populations of Cuba's western plantation heartland. Transcriptions of a substantial part of that testimony went to Great Britain to substantiate Spanish claims that one of the principals in the plot was Britain's former consul to Cuba, the Scots abolitionist David Turnbull. Those drawn into the government dragnet as prime movers of the plot included Cuba's most celebrated free person of color, the poet Plácido (Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés), who suffered execution by firing squad. As investigations widened, authorities unleashed such a ferocious wave of repression that the conspiracy eventually became known as *La Escalera* ("the ladder") after the implement to which thousands of persons of color were tied down prostrate to be scourged repeatedly for testimony by the lash.

Restiveness permeated all ranks of Cuban society in the early 1840s, from the plantocratic elite at the top of the social pyramid to the enslaved field hands at the bottom, the majority of whom were African-born. The conspicuous presence in Cuba of British abolitionists and U.S. annexationists heightened the concerns of prospering white Creoles about Cuba's future. Onto the scene in 1843 came a new captain-general who intended to spare no rod in reestablishing order to secure to Spain one of the wealthiest colonies in the world. A scholarly debate has long existed in Cuba about the reality of the conspiracy, with some Doubting Thomases preferring to call *La Escalera* not a revolutionary conspiracy at all but rather a contrived and bloody process, heaped to the ceiling with extorted false testimony, which resulted in record-setting punishments of innocent persons of color. No serious scholar, however, has denied the momentousness of *La Escalera* to the history of race, slavery, and imperial rule in colonial Cuba. After spending more time poring over the voluminous military commission records on *La Escalera* in Havana than any non-Cuban historian, Aisha Finch concludes that *La Escalera* represented "one of the most significant and widespread movements ever undertaken against Cuba's colonial regime" (p. 229). Though not neglecting the international and urban dimensions of *La Escalera*, she focuses on the genesis in the Havana-Matanzas-Cárdenas triangle of a decentralized and Africanized rural movement, roused into motion in part by two of the largest slave

revolts in Cuban history in 1843, and the role of women of color, free and slave, within it.

In the 1830s, Cuba imported record numbers of African slaves, and Finch begins her important book by describing the wide ethnic variety of Africans pulled into the island's booming economy. In Chapter 2, she describes patterns of quotidian life that generated an unremarked political culture with night-time networking, mostly by male slaves, conducive to future mobilizations of rebellious slaves on more than one plantation. Chapter 3 argues that the slave revolts of March and November 1843 in Matanzas province erupted not as precursors of *La Escalera* but as preceding manifestations of a resistance stream that eventually grew into something much larger. Chapter 4 explores the links between rural and urban fomenters of violence, especially mobile free persons of color and male slaves who had the ability to hire themselves out; here, Finch finds the official evidence against Plácido compelling. Chapter 5 spares no effort in squeezing from the evidence examples of female rebelliousness. Chapter 6 underscores the role of the *contramayorales* (drivers) and other privileged slaves in heading clusters of unrest. The book concludes by examining the role of African religious practices in inspiring slave rebelliousness in 1843–44.

Although occasionally peppered by flights of romanticism and by jargony, obfuscatory prose drawn from fashionable theory, Finch's book provides impressive evidence that the conspiracy of *La Escalera* consisted of a series of distinct yet overlapping movements whose core elements of slaves and free persons of color aimed at ending slavery and overthrowing white rule. Yet the Cuban economy recovered quickly. More than 100,000 African slaves entered Cuba in the 1850s. Factors of class, color, status, gender, and ethnicity continued to work against collective solidarity of the oppressed. A postscript: In 1859 middle-aged millionaire planter Esteban Santa Cruz de Oviedo, whose African-born concubine Polonia had betrayed to him the existence of an impending slave insurrection sixteen years before, became famous for his "diamond wedding." His May–December marriage to a teenage beauty in New York City had transatlantic social circles buzzing, for he funded a display of Tiffany-jeweled wealth the likes of which the royalty of Europe would have been hard-pressed to match. In Cuba, sugar was made with blood. So too was blood made from sugar.

Robert L. Paquette

Alexander Hamilton Institute, Clinton NY 13323, U.S.A.

bob@theahi.org