Tricks of the Slave Trade

Cuba and the Small-Scale Dynamics of the Spanish Transatlantic Trade in Human Beings

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Abstract

Around 1808, Spaniards' ability to outfit and successfully complete slaving expeditions to Africa paled in comparison to the skill of French and British slavers. In the wake of British Abolitionism and the Cuban sugar revolution, however, some Spaniards learned the tricks of the slave trade and by 1835 had brought over 300,000 captives to Cuba and Puerto Rico (most went to Cuba). This article presents evidence on the process through which some Spaniards successfully became slave traders, highlighting the transition from early trial ventures around 1809–15 to the mastering of the trade by 1830. It pays particular attention to the operations and perspectives of the Havana-based firm Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano and to the slave trading activities on the Pongo River by the crewmen of the Spanish ship *La Gaceta*. Although scholars have an increasingly solid perception of the magnitude and consequences of the Cuba-based trade in human beings in the nineteenth century, the small-scale dynamics of this process, ultimately inseparable from long-term developments, remain elusive. This article adds further nuance to our knowledge of the post-1808 surge in the Spanish transatlantic slave trade.

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Keywords

Transatlantic Slave Trade – second slavery – Cuba – Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano – Pongo River (Guinea)

Based on fresh archival research and nuanced, long-term interpretations of slave-voyage data available in the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, Alex Borucki, David Eltis, and David Wheat assert that the slave trade remained “of central importance during all four centuries of Spanish colonialism in the New World” (Borucki, Eltis & Wheat 2015:436).¹ If we observe all Castilian New World territories (viceroyalties, provinces, captaincy-generals), Spanish America emerges as “the most important political entity in the Americas after Brazil to receive slaves.” Between 1520 and 1810, 1,506,000 captives were brought to Spanish America directly from Africa, with another 566,000 people introduced from non-Spanish enclaves in the Caribbean and Brazil. Taking into account intra-American traffic, “the Spanish areas received 80 percent more slaves than did the French Americas, and, most strikingly, more than the whole of the British Caribbean” (Borucki, Eltis & Wheat 2015:445–46). In the case of Cuba, however, the bulk of the slave trading activity took place over a relatively short period of time, mainly between 1810 and 1860. The timing of this process generated two important, interdependent challenges for would-be slave traders in this Spanish island.

First, aspiring slave traders had to learn how to effectively trade in human beings relatively fast, as Spaniards’ ability to outfit and successfully complete slaving expeditions to Africa paled in comparison to the skills of experienced French and British slavers. For most of the early modern period, Spain had remained actively involved in the transatlantic slave trade by proxy, as Portuguese, British, and French slave traders supplied captives to Spanish territories. Spaniards rarely got directly involved in the transatlantic trade (Torres Ramírez 1973). As a consequence, the institutional, legal, business, and maritime practices of the slave trade between Africa and the Americas did not exist among Spaniards.²

¹ *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, www.slavevoyages.org (hereafter TSD).

² Between 1530 and 1600, plantations in Spanish Santo Domingo drew thousands of slaves from West Africa, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Black Sea area. Spaniards and other subjects of the Crown of Castile were directly involved in the transatlantic slave trade over this period, but the social and institutional memory of the trade

Second, the most important slave traders to Cuba operated in the era of an international effort for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. Great Britain abolished the slave trade in the early spring of 1807 and began a naval campaign for its actual suppression in 1808. This happened just as Spaniards had finally managed to break into the business. Following unsuccessful efforts to revive direct trade with African slavers from 1765 to the early 1780s, Spanish slave traders managed to bring captives directly from Africa to the Americas in significant numbers after 1808. Between 1810 and 1835, over 300,000 enslaved people arrived in the remaining Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico (most went to Cuba), their forced labor fueling what became a major experiment with sugar planting and capitalism in the Spanish Caribbean (Borucki, Eltis & Wheat 2015:450; Torres Ramírez 1973:53–118).

Combining successful slave trading ventures with plantation expansion and mechanization, Spaniards, both peninsular and *criollos* (people of Spanish ancestors born in the Americas), positioned themselves at the cutting edge of the “second slavery,” the last and renewed cycle of transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States (Tomich 2004:56–71). How did Spanish merchants and investors with no direct experience in the slave trade manage to become successful outfitters of Atlantic-scope slaving expeditions? What was the role of maritime workers in this process? In what ways did British-led abolition and suppression alter the logistics of the trade?

This article presents evidence on the process through which some Spaniards successfully became slave traders, launching slave voyages out of Cuba on a regular basis in a context of economic and legal change. An apprenticeship of sorts, this process left behind some documentary evidence allowing us to see the transition from early trial ventures around 1809–15 to the mastering of the trade by the 1830s. Drawing mainly—though not exclusively—on a cluster of primary sources from the National Archives in Havana concerning the early operations of the firm Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano, the following pages add further nuance to our knowledge of the post-1808 surge in the Spanish transatlantic slave trade.³ For although scholars have an increasingly solid perception

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collapsed along with the early Spanish plantation economy in the Caribbean. See Ratekin, 1954; Del Río Moreno & López y Sebastián 1991; Rodríguez Morel 1992.

3 Archivo Histórico Nacional de Cuba—Havana—(hereafter ANC), Junta de Fomento de la Isla de Cuba (hereafter JF), leg. 74, No. 2836, “Observaciones de la Compañía de Cuesta Manzanal y Hermano, referentes al Comercio de Negros,” November 23, 1809 (hereafter Observaciones), ff. 16^r–22^r.

of the magnitude and consequences of the Cuba-based, Spanish slave trade in the nineteenth century, its “small-scale dynamics” remain elusive.⁴

Study of the intersections between large and small-scale dynamics has the potential to illuminate the practices underpinning the transatlantic slave trade as a long-term process without the risk of a monolithic perception. In a study on the French slave trade, historian Robert Harms argues that “transatlantic slave trade” is an expression that denotes a “monolithic phenomenon” rather than a “kaleidoscope of diverse national and local endeavors that was constantly changing over time” (Harms 2002: xiv). Historians lump together, argues Harms, dozens of thousands of individual slave voyages, giving them “uniform characteristics” that might have never existed. As he tracks down the itineraries of a single slave ship, Harms aims to demonstrate that there existed “no overarching global context to the voyage, only a series of intersecting local contexts” in which interests from different people in different places encountered each other (Harms 2002: xix).

The perspective and methodology deployed by Harms captures the experience of single voyages and simultaneous cohorts of slave traders operating in different places. In the following pages, I deploy a similar approach, paying close attention to specific investors, vessels and local contexts. Nevertheless, I utilize instances drawn from the Cuban case to highlight the process through which individual generations relied and elaborated on pre-existing trends, practices, and knowledge, while modifying or creating new conditions for those who would come after. Spaniards intending to trade in slaves across the ocean around 1808 had to actively seek and develop the knowledge, skills, financial instruments, and institutional arrangements that could potentially guarantee the success of such long-distance trading ventures. In short, they had to learn the tricks of the trade from scratch. This learning process required risk taking, risk management, and conversations among Spanish investors, Spanish authorities, foreign slave traders, and slave ship personnel.⁵

These short-term activities, however, were bound up with the long-term development of the plantation complex and the trade in human beings in the Atlantic (Curtin 1990; Eltis & Richardson 2010). In light of findings by scholars

4 I borrow the notion of “small-scale dynamics” in connection with “big picture” processes from Scott (2000). Scott’s article pays particular attention to the ways in which historians incorporate slaves’ actions and experiences in their interpretative narratives. I find her insight useful for the study of enslavement processes. See also Bosma & Cutty-Machado 2012; Putnam 2006; Scott & Hébrard 2012.

5 On the idea of “conversation” in the development of trading skills and economic networks see Graden 2011; Hancock 1998 and 2009.

of these topics, the notion “transatlantic slave trade” takes on its full potential precisely because we are increasingly aware of its kaleidoscopic nature, its constant mutations, and its multiple dimensions. The trade in African captives took place across oceans (Atlantic and Indian), across the desert (the Sahara) and over hundreds of years (Christopher, Pybus & Rediker 2007). These complex developments could be characterized, in the terminology of Norbert Elias, as sociohistorical processes with no absolute beginnings that existed within evolving networks of interdependence stretching across space and time. Long-term perspectives and the search for overarching contexts do not in and of themselves lead to monolithic perceptions. The challenge is to more effectively describe the dynamics of the transatlantic slave trade by using notions that capture its “process-character” and account for both its planned and unplanned trends (Elias 2012:241; Elias 2006:249, 253–54. See also Elias 2003).

This article takes on this challenge through a staggered narrative of the Cuban, Spanish-sponsored transatlantic trade in human beings, bringing into view four interdependent moments. First, the transformations of the Cuban economy in the late 1700s and early nineteenth century, and the place of the slave trade in the conversations that took place as part of these transformations. Second, the learning-by-doing approach developed by investors planning to establish a continuing engagement with the trade in the 1810s in order to both propel and take advantage of the changing political economy. Third, some of the outcomes of and challenges to that learning process, including the fate of the early slave voyages as well as British, Haitian, and insurgent antislavery and anti-Spanish maritime attacks. And fourth, the operations by Cuba-based and local slavers on the West African Pongo River in the early 1830s, a time by which Spaniards had mastered the trade, albeit in ways that differed from its practice in the era prior to British-led abolition and suppression.

Cuban Transformations

Between roughly 1762 and 1820, the economy, demography, and material life of Cuba underwent important transformations. The British occupation of Havana in 1762, during the Seven Years War, is often credited to have sparked change. Although lasting less than a year, over the course of the occupation Spanish merchants and modest planters enjoyed unprecedented access to free trade in goods and human beings. Slave traders brought around four thousand slaves to the island, where commerce and sugarcane planting accelerated. By the 1770s, some royal bureaucrats in Spain and would-be planters in Cuba seem to have shared similar ideas on the question of export agriculture: Cuba had

the potential to become a plantation colony in the model of French Saint-Domingue, successfully growing sugarcane and exporting sugar for the benefit of king and nation. Moving from the prevalent small-scale farming and cattle raising Cuban landscape to large-scale sugar planting required—among other measures—the deregulation of the slave trade, replicating what the British had done during the occupation of Havana. The new Cuba would need a reliable, cheap, and constant supply of slaves. Direct access to the African markets in captives was a crucial step to be taken.⁶

Very few Spaniards in the Peninsula and on the island, however, had the knowledge and practical experience to carry out slave trading on a transatlantic scale.⁷ Spain had tried to revive direct engagement with the trade but things turned out to be more difficult than expected. Spain's newly established *Compañía Gaditana de Negros* operated slave voyages from 1765 to 1779, but the finances of the enterprise were disastrous and its operations relied on French and British firms and their crews to actually purchase captives in Africa or the Caribbean (Torres Ramírez 1973:53–109, 167–69; Franco 1980:24–88). In 1778, Spain unsuccessfully tried to directly trade in slaves in the Bight of Biafra. Spaniards sent to occupy islands recently ceded by Portugal proved unable to deal with the weather and local political conditions (Fernández Duro 1973:199–201; García Cantús 2006). In 1784, Spaniards had to yield to British expertise and contracted with the Liverpool slaving firm Baker & Dawson to carry slaves to the Caribbean. Finally, although criollos brought slaves to Cuba between 1789 and 1794, this trade was carried out by mariners whose vessels and sailing abilities allowed them to operate mainly from other Caribbean islands and North American ports. Their activities came to an end when a hurricane destroyed their fleet in August 1794.⁸

By the late 1780s, Spanish high bureaucrats realized that in order to bypass foreign middlemen and bring slaves from Africa to the Caribbean, Spaniards would first need to serve an apprenticeship with the British. In the wake of recent failed experiments, Spain arranged for Spanish sailors to work on board the slave ships from the Baker & Dawson firm, among the largest of the slave trading companies operating out of Liverpool. Once these sailors became experienced in the trade, Spanish investors hoped to rely on their skills,

6 Bergad, Iglesias García & Barcia 1995; Ferrer 2014:17–43; Franco: 1980, 89–122; Funes Monzote 2008:83–126; García Rodríguez 2007; Gonzalez-Ripoll & Álvarez Cuartero 2009; Knight 1970:3–24; Moreno Friginals 1978: vol. I, 39–102, vol. II, 98–130; Van Norman 2013:7–62.

7 Archivo General de Indias—Seville—(hereafter AGI), Santa Fe, 1167, Joseph de Villanueva Pico to the King, ca. July 1754, especially items 6 and 15.

8 Borucki, Eltis & Wheat 2015:450; Johnson 1999; Schneider 2015; Torres Ramírez 1973:106.

firmly establishing Spain as a slave trading power. This plan failed (Borucki, Eltis & Wheat 2015:450; Torres Ramírez 1973). Nevertheless, Spanish bureaucrats seeking to no longer depend on foreign slave traders and Spanish investors aspiring to profit from the trade in human beings, continued to believe that entering into this business required a careful learning process from foreign, seasoned slavers. Spaniards should try to learn through emulation by mixing Spanish crews with foreign sailors in slaving voyages to Africa.⁹

Besides the lack of practical experience, Spanish trade regulations also seemed to hinder slave-trading aspirations. Spain had traditionally granted monopoly contracts to foreign slavers for the supply of captives to the New World. The emerging Cuban planter elite effectively lobbied the Spanish government to move against tradition, decreeing the unrestricted slave trade to the Spanish Caribbean. In 1789, the slave trade from Africa to the Caribbean was opened to Spanish subjects and foreign merchants for two years. In 1791, acting as a proxy for Havana's city council in Madrid, the patrician Francisco de Arango y Parreño lobbied for the extension of this measure for another eight years.¹⁰ This new open trade policy worked and captives poured in from the neighboring islands and the west coast of Africa.

The forced labor of the thousands of captives entering Cuba was instrumental to the expansion of the sugar plantation business. As a sugar revolution began to crystallize in Cuba, a major slave uprising took place in neighboring Saint-Domingue. With the outbreak of what we now call the Haitian Revolution in 1791, sugar prices skyrocketed in the Atlantic markets. Cuban planters and associated merchants pocketed unprecedented amounts of money. The first Cuban "dance of the millions" had begun and all economic activities having to do with sugar production accelerated (Ferrer 2014:18–46; Moreno Friginals 1978: vol. I, 95–102). Between 1792 and 1806, the number of sugar mills in the vicinity of Havana multiplied from 237 to 416. By 1804, their productivity had also substantially increased. Trade with other countries thrived, especially with the United States, where port town merchants from Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, and New England revived their connections with Cuba (Moreno Friginals 1978: vol. III, 68, 43–44; Salvucci 2005).

Although the slave trade was open to Spanish subjects and Spanish authorities encouraged Spaniards to participate in this business, during the 1790s and early 1800s foreigners—mostly British, American, and French—dominated the

9 ANC, JF, leg. 74, No. 2836, "El Rey," Madrid, April 30, 1804, f. 2^v.

10 Francisco de Arango y Parreño, "Representación manifestando las ventajas de una absoluta libertad en la introducción de negros, y solicitando se amplíe a ocho la prórroga concedida por dos años," Aranjuez, May 10, 1791, Arango y Parreño 1952: vol. I, 97–102.

trade to Cuba (Murray 1980:9–21). In 1806, out of the sixty-two slave ships that officially arrived in Havana, fifty-eight sailed under the flag of the United States, and the remaining four were Danish (Franco 1980:114). Cuba-based slave traders Francisco Hernández and Magin Tarafa claimed that prior to 1807 Havana merchants had little incentive to carry out the trade on their own as they could always rely on foreign slave ships.¹¹ Besides, those who tried seem to have done very poorly.

Among the profiteers from the post-Haitian Revolution Cuban boom of 1792–93, some reinvested newly-gained capital in the slave trade. Arango y Parreño himself invested in slaving voyages. Cuba-based businessmen and seamen, however, did not possess the know-how necessary for success. The first expeditions failed. Spaniards, it seems, still had much to learn from foreign slave traders. Cuba had relied on foreigners for too long and it remained difficult for most aspiring Spanish slave traders to successfully complete slaving expeditions out of the island on a regular basis. This state of affairs, however, was soon to change. Historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals maintained that some British slave traders, as it became evident that Great Britain was soon to abolish the slave trade, taught Spaniards the basics of the enterprise and sold to them the connections and logistical arrangements on the African coast (Moreno Fraginals 1978: vol. 1, 262–63).

This exchange between British and Spanish might have been accelerated by the coincidence of several circumstances. In the years 1807 and 1808, the Cuban sugar barons faced a crossroads. International conditions seemed to be at odds with the world of slavery they sought to recreate and expand. Great Britain abolished the slave trade, beginning suppression operations in 1808. Clashing with the British over maritime interests, the United States enacted an embargo policy in 1807, bringing American trade with Cuba to a sudden halt. In Europe, French revolutionary forces under the orders of Napoleon Bonaparte occupied the Iberian peninsula in the Spring of 1808, usurping the Spanish Crown and disrupting trade and communications between Spain and its overseas territories. Finally, Spain's authorization for foreign merchants to bring slaves to its territories were to expire in April 1810. Everything seemed to conspire against the plans of the Cuban rising sugar elites. The supply of African slaves—the cornerstone of their economic edifice—was deeply threatened.

11 ANC, JF, leg. 74, No. 2836, "Informe de Don Francisco Hernández y Don Magin Tarafa sobre el comercio de negros su fecha 7 de febrero de 1810," Havana, February 7, 1810 (hereafter Informe), f. 36^r.

In October 1809, members of the board of the *Real Consulado de Comercio*—the corporate body established in 1794 for the advancement of planters' interests—expressed their anxious desire to finally figure out how best to guarantee a reliable, long-term engagement with the transatlantic slave trade. If they were to continue to receive forced workers from Africa, there was no alternative for the Cuban planters but to establish direct, transatlantic trade links. In order to find out what steps should be taken to establish a Cuba-based Spanish slave trade, the Consulado requested an opinion on the subject from the firm Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano, a young but rising star in Havana's commercial constellation.

The crisis of 1807–8 had sparked corporate and individual action among Havana merchants and planters. When the Consulado inquired about the slave trade, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano was in the midst of executing a plan for the training of slave ship personnel with the goal of consolidating a slave trading business of transatlantic scope. The Consulado asked whether Havana merchants were capable of and willing to directly trade in slaves from Africa, what specific trade goods such traffic demanded, and what concessions to facilitate it should be requested from the Crown. Carefully crafted and rich in details, the answer provided by the firm took the form of a document under the title "Observations by the Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano Company regarding the Trade in Blacks."¹² The Observations and accompanying documents afford a glimpse into the origins of the Spanish slave trade underpinning the second slavery in Cuba. The document conveys a specific perception, one based on Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano's evolving practical experience in the matter as well as on their designs for a thriving Spanish slave trade protected by the monarchy. Furthermore, this document and related papers provide evidence of the process through which a specific generation of investors successfully mutated their original merchant enterprise into a slave-trading business in connection with other commercial, sugar planting, and financial operations.

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¹² Observaciones.

Learning-by-Doing

Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano realized the profit potential of the transatlantic slave trade as much as their lack of skill in it. Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano, as well as other firms and individual investors in Havana, clearly knew that, like any other trade, the “odious commerce” required building skills through practice and the accumulation of knowledge that could be passed on from one generation of slave traders to another. They planned to learn from foreign traders—or from the few Spaniards who had already learned from foreign traders—and to eventually consolidate their know-how and establish an exclusively Spanish slave trade (*la trata por solo españoles*). The Spanish slave trade out of Cuba, as envisioned by Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano, would reach Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, Benin, Calabar, Angola, and Mozambique. Aspiring to reach beyond the Atlantic, the company was aware that in Mozambique the economic dynamics of the Indian Ocean would require its agents to purchase captives with silver rather than merchandise.¹³ This enterprise, however, emerged within the landscape of the Spanish Atlantic commercial world.

The brothers Pedro and Santiago de la Cuesta y Manzanal were born in the San Lorenzo Valley, Astorga, in northwestern Spain. Pedro was born on August 4, 1768. His brother Santiago seems to have been ten years younger. Pedro moved to Salamanca in the early 1780s, where he settled and established links with the port of Cádiz, a thriving center of Spanish, European, and transatlantic trade. He later moved to Cádiz, and by 1790 became an established, though somewhat modest merchant. In 1790 Pedro took advantage of the recent policies opening up Spanish-American ports to free trade. On board the Spanish brig *San Antonio & Santa Rosalía*, and along with a foreign goods consignment under his name, Pedro travelled to Havana, where he planned to sell the goods and later return to the Peninsula. Sponsored by José de Castro Ferrer, a Cádiz merchant with business connections in Cuba and the owner of transatlantic merchant and privateering vessels, Pedro set sail for Havana, apparently in the company of his little brother Santiago.¹⁴

The peninsular migrants had a successful initial run in the thriving Cuba of the late 1700s. Instead of going back, they decided to stay. At the turn of the

13 Observaciones, f. 21^v.

14 AGI, Contratación, 5534, N. 2, R. 4, “Cargador Pedro de la Cuesta y Manzanal,” 1790. On José de Castro Ferrer, see Archivo General de Simancas—Simancas—, Secretaría del Despacho de Guerra, leg. 6979, 37 (1799); AGI, Estado, 4, N. 15 (1799); Archivo Histórico Nacional—Madrid—(hereafter AHN), Consejo de Indias, 21449, exp. 3 (1805–6).

century, the Cuesta Manzanal brothers achieved a solid economic position, as proven by their connection with the Prussian naturalist and traveler Alexander von Humboldt, who visited Cuba in 1801 and stayed with them. Humboldt, who invariably stayed with people of means during his New World sojourns, lodged with the Cuestas and later recalled them as members of one the most important trading firms in the Americas (Humboldt 1827:30). Santiago married Concepción González Larrinaga, from an established sugar planting Havana family, in 1806. It was around this time that the merchant firm was created (Moreno Friginals 1978: vol. 1, 266–67; Paniagua Pérez, 2009:192–94).

As success materialized in the merchant sector, the brothers became eager to further expand their interests and potentially profit from the slave trade. In 1803, one of the Cuesta y Manzanal brothers—it remains unclear which one—had tried to convince local merchants to invest in a slave trading company. The plan did not come to fruition. Most potential investors seem to have feared the risks of the slave trade and the lack of guarantees for such ventures from the Crown and local insurers. The 1809 report to the Consulado recalls that the slave trade had been historically “looked upon with indifference” by Spanish merchants in spite of its relevance for the Spanish “colonial system.” In order to jumpstart direct trade with Africa, merchants would have to leave behind the old habits of avoiding risk and remaining always on the safe side. It was the crisis of 1807–8 that allowed Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano to finally put together a slave trading venture.¹⁵

Directly and dramatically affected by the alterations in international circumstances of the previous two years, by July 1809 planters and merchants in Havana were desperate. Commerce had slowed down and the flow of slaves on what few foreign vessels still arrived in Cuba was not substantial enough to meet demand. Prices of African slaves rose up to 450 pesos per person while sugar prices plummeted. Establishing a reliable system of trade in human beings from Africa was crucial for the future of the Cuban sugar enterprise. Under these circumstances, and apparently not without difficulty, the necessary capital was finally pulled together. The fear of economic risk was shaken off and slave voyages began to be outfitted in Cuba.

In 1809, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano dispatched three ships to Africa. The brigantine *Guillermo*, which departed on July 15, was loaded with sugar and carried 16,000 pesos in letters of credit from British firms. The ship set sail for London, where it loaded the necessary merchandise to barter for human beings and then proceeded to the west coast of Africa, where it would secure the slaves

15 Observaciones, f. 17^{r-v}.

before sailing back to Havana. The American frigate *Margarita*, purchased and renamed the *Ciudad de Zaragoza* in Havana, set sail for Loango on September 11. The frigate *Junta Central*, a joint venture with the firm Vidal Servant & Canellas, departed for Calabar and Angola on November 4. The outfitting of these voyages cost well over 100,000 pesos.¹⁶ Each ship had the double mission to successfully complete a slave voyage while taking full account of the experience and creating a written record that could be used as a “guide” for all “new enterprises.” Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano realized that “the sea was the gateway to wealth” (Braudel 1982:361) and therefore knew how important it was to rely on duly trained seagoing personnel. The company asserted that if investors took steps to orient the labor skills of sailors and officers toward mastering the technical aspects of the slave trade, Spaniards themselves could carry out the trade to great profit.

The voyage of the *Junta Central*, which had orders to sail directly to Africa, was governed by a set of written instructions given to the captain and officers by the outfitters (similar instructions were given to the officers on board the *Ciudad de Zaragoza*). The document reveals that the expedition was to be overseen by a “director,” whose powers would override those of the captain. Juan de Ainciburo, the director of this voyage, was allegedly an experienced slave trader on the coast of Africa who might have worked for foreign slavers before. His role, besides guaranteeing a successful purchase of captives, was to simultaneously be an example and an instructor to two young apprentices of the slave trade: Antonio de Ruedas, the ship’s supercargo, and José de Obispo, who seems to have had no officer rank on board. Ruedas had been individually instructed to “observe” Ainciburo in action and to “acquire the knowledge he does not have of this traffic.”¹⁷

Ainciburo was expected to instruct his pupils in the specifics of a slaving voyage. As the outfitters put it succinctly, Ainciburo had to provide the apprentices with “the most exact ideas on this traffic.”¹⁸ The Havana outfitters expected Ruedas and Obispo to lead more voyages in the future, envisioning the 1809 ventures as the first step in a long-term engagement with the trade. While making money was clearly a goal, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano planned the 1809 voyages as the necessary step to overcome all the “difficulties,” “obstacles,” and

16 Observaciones, ff. 18^{r-v}.

17 ANC, JF, leg. 74, No. 2836, “Instrucción dada al Capitán y oficiales de la fragata nombrada la Junta Central que zarpó de este puerto el 4 de noviembre de 1809 para la costa de Angola y Calabar a la adquisición de negros” (hereafter Instrucción), Havana, November 2, 1809, f. 29^r.

18 Instrucción, f. 29^{r-v}.

“setbacks” caused by any learning process (*aprendizaje*). The firm also hoped to set an example for other merchants and investors in Cuba.¹⁹

Spanish merchants, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano suggested, had to shake off their fears if they were to succeed in the slave trade. The Observations noted that although merchants knew perfectly well the kind of profits to be made in this business, they had always feared “the risks of a new project.” Moreover, merchants feared the risks of the “learning” process itself and its expenses. As it articulated a discourse integrating the practical problems of the trade with the challenges posed by Cuba’s evolving political economy, the firm stated that the Crown would have to do its part as well, enacting the necessary reforms to guarantee the success and continuity of the trade. If the Consulado was interested in promoting Cuba’s direct engagement with the slave trade from Africa, its members had to be ready to back the political reforms that would foster an economy with the ability to take on the demands and risks entailed by this transatlantic activity.

First, it would be necessary to stimulate further trade with the United States, the United Kingdom, or other islands (the would-be slavers must have had Jamaica in mind). British or Anglo-American merchants were in a position to supply goods for the trade, which Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano alleged were extremely scarce in Havana and sold at very high prices. The Observations claimed that outfitting the *Junta Central* had been a very difficult task and that now Havana’s merchandise stock was exhausted. Establishing trade with places like London or Liverpool would remedy this situation.²⁰ In spite of the lack of merchandise the outfitters claimed characterized Havana, the *Junta Central* did manage to set sail with considerable amounts of goods on board, including cloth, hats, iron cauldrons, pipes, swords, shaving blades, mirrors, firewater, pottery, flint, ammunition, and gunpowder.²¹

Second, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano alerted the Consulado on the need of special insurance for slave voyages. The Middle Passage entailed unspeakable suffering and horrible death among the captives. A risk from the vantage point of the investors in the slave trade, the illness or death of the slaves was not covered by the Compañía de Seguros de La Habana, which had little experience in this trade and apparently no intention of becoming fully involved. The Compañía, incorporated in 1795, might have shown hesitation in this regard

19 Observaciones, f. 18^v; Instrucción, ff. 29^v, 31^r.

20 Observaciones, f. 19^r.

21 ANC, JF, leg. 74, No. 2836, “Nota de las mercancías que lleva a la Costa de Angola para la permuta de negros, y rancho para su retorno la Fragata nombrada la Junta Central (alias) el Baruch su capitán Don José Famadas,” f. 25^{r-v}.

due to their failure in an early expedition. The schooner *Sagunto*, a slave ship that had sailed to Africa in 1802, was co-owned by the Compañía but had been captured by the British near the Pongo River, on the coast of Guinea. Captain Joaquín Savater and the rest of the crew had to seek refuge among the Portuguese in Cape Verde, where they were taken on board a Portuguese ship in exchange for their labor as seamen.²² Although the insurance company offered policies for merchandise and ships, in the early period of the Cuba-based slave trade it did not extend coverage to the returning human cargoes. In order to make sure such insurance would be made available, the Observations suggested with tact, the Spanish governor of the island should pressure the insurance company to become instrumental to slave trade transactions out of Cuba, extending insurance to all phases of slave expeditions.²³

Third, investors hoping to become thriving slave traders, the Observations suggested, should also request special tax breaks from the Spanish Crown. Merchandise brought to Cuba for the exclusive purpose of being redirected to Africa for the purchase of slaves should not be taxed. The value of the human cargo brought to the island should also be considered duty free. A similar concession to planters was also needed. Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano suggested that the purchase of supplies and tools for the sugar mills, as well as the sale of sugar, should all be exempted from paying taxes. This meant that, at least for a period of time, the Spanish authorities should allow the introduction of Cuban produce into the Peninsula without any tariffs. Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano predicted that this would in turn stimulate not only trade between the colony and the metropolis but perhaps even a healthy and “interesting” competition in the slave trade itself from Spanish merchants based in peninsular port towns.²⁴

Finally, a potential slave uprising on the island was perhaps the most delicate risk the emerging slave-holding elites pondered in the early 1800s. In the wake of the Haitian Revolution, Cuban slavers came up with theories predicting how Cuban slave society could be as prosperous as Saint-Domingue had been and still keep the risk of a major slave rebellion at bay. The Observations point to solving gender imbalance among the enslaved workforce as the right course of action to stimulate slave acquiescence. Gender imbalance had to be solved at the very place of enslavement. In order to disperse the “fear” incited by

22 ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 494, No. 18690, “Consultas dirigidas al Ministro de Estado y de Hacienda por el Intendente Don Alejandro Ramírez” (hereafter Consultas), item 28.

23 Observaciones, f. 19^v–20^r.

24 Observaciones, ff. 19^v–20^r.

the presence of large numbers of male slaves, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano recommended incentivizing slave traders to increase the trade in female slaves by granting them six pesos per female captive (between the ages of nine and eleven) brought to the island. This would increase the presence of young women who would give birth to a creole generation “addicted to the home” and therefore, predicted the Observations, unwilling to strike for freedom.²⁵ The enslaved themselves proved the theory wrong. Some slaves rose up, some took steps toward securing their own freedom or obtaining freedom for their loved ones and ultimately slave action accelerated the end of slavery itself (Scott 1985). From the point of view of the slave traders, however, Cuba-based slaving operations were successfully carried out for several decades. But this was not without its challenges.

Outcomes and Challenges

The Observations, written just a few weeks after the last of the 1809 slave voyages had begun, account for a plan but not for its outcome. From other sources, however, we can infer that, from the vantage point of the investors, the 1809 expeditions to Africa succeeded. The *Ciudad de Zaragoza* seems to have completed her mission and actually continued to ply her trade in the Atlantic. In July 1812, a French corsair, the *General Morla*, intercepted this slave ship returning from Africa to Cuba with 323 captives on board.²⁶ The *Junta Central* returned on October 31, 1810, bringing back 333 captives. It had originally embarked 385 captives, mainly at Calabar.²⁷ Out of the three 1809 voyages, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano might have envisioned this one as the most relevant in terms of its pedagogical potential. The *Junta Central* took a little less than a year to complete the mission. Over the course of the expedition, Ruedas apparently became ready for his first command. Indeed, the same ship set sail again for Africa, under Captain Ruedas, on April 6, 1811. Ruedas presided over the embarkation of 307 captives, 40 of whom died during the Middle Passage.²⁸

Cuba-based slave traders succeeded in bringing to the island thousands of slaves in the years 1809 and 1810. Early in 1810, slave-trade investors Francisco Hernández and Majin Tarafa—who competed with Cuesta Manzanal &

25 Observaciones, f. 21^r.

26 *Postscript to the Royal Gazette* (Kingston) 34 (27), June 27–July 4, 1812.

27 ANC, JF, 86, doc. 3506. TSD, voyage 14534.

28 ANC, JF, 85, doc. 3497. TSD, voyage 41579.

Hermano—reported a surge in slaving expeditions, claiming that in recent months (beginning in early 1809) over thirty slave ships had left Havana, bound for Africa, in spite of all the difficulties for outfitting such voyages.²⁹ Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano successfully and simultaneously completed its first slave voyages and the training of personnel for future ventures. Dr. Marial Iglesias Utset, who is compiling a database on slave ship voyages out of Cuba from sources at the National Archives in Havana, has found evidence regarding several slaving voyages outfitted by Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano between December 1809 and March 1815. These expeditions had varying degrees of success as British naval forces took some of the ships and brought them to Sierra Leone for adjudication. From insurance documentation we also learn that in 1816 the firm outfitted the *Carmen*. By the early 1820s, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano had developed the ability to purchase slaves by the hundreds. One record mentions a single group of 1,600 slaves purchased in 1819 and waiting to be transported to Cuba. Finally, the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* records another voyage outfitted by Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano in 1822.³⁰

As slavery remained part and parcel of the developments of capitalism in the nineteenth century, the success of the early slave trade enterprises and the growth of plantation slavery are inseparable from the consolidation and transformation of the instruments of capitalism in Cuba.³¹ Insurance, for long an important component of long-haul overseas exchange, is a case in point. When the Real Consulado met on Monday, February 19, 1810, the information and perspective provided by Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano was very well received. On the issue of insurance for slave voyages, which the commercial firm had expressed in clear yet calculated fashion, members of the Consulado agreed that it was crucial to make insurance at low premiums available for this sort of expeditions.³²

The Compañía de Seguros de La Habana would not avoid its fate for too long. After all, it had been conceived during the “dance of the millions,” to the tune of slave money. After its initial doubts on extending insurance to slave traders, the Compañía became entangled with the transatlantic trade in human beings (Murray 1980:72). Between 1808 and 1818, the Compañía covered damages suffered by merchant firms and individual investors in Havana whose

29 Informe, f. 36^v.

30 Marial Iglesias Utset, personal communication, October 2012. TSD, voyage 2353. Consultas. AGI, Ultramar, 35, N. 15, file on Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano.

31 For interpretations on the interdependence of slavery and capitalism see Miller 1988; Tomich 2004; Williams 1994; Zeuske 2015.

32 ANC, JF, leg. 74, No. 2836, minutes of the meeting of February 10, 1810, f. 52^r.

maritime expeditions, including slave voyages, had been disrupted by British forces and anti-Spanish privateers. In 1816, Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano lost the schooner *Carmen*, which had sailed under the orders of captain Manuel Rodríguez de los Santos. The *Carmen* made it to Africa, but it was taken by the British. The insurance company covered the loss.³³

The insurance industry itself expanded and became more specialized as Cuba's economy grew in size and complexity. The Compañía de Seguros Marítimos de La Habana, founded in 1838, was incorporated to cater to the needs of overseas traders, eventually expanding into foreign currency, mortgage, money lending, and stock trading (all in connection with railroad enterprises).³⁴ As sugar plantations spread over the island, new insurance companies like La Protectora and La Providencia emerged to provide life insurance to planters who wished to insure their slaves. These companies might have followed the model of American insurance companies like the Baltimore Life Insurance or New York Life Insurance, which insured the lives of slaves in the U.S. South (Moreno Friginals 1978: vol. II, 23–25).

Speculation in futures, banking, and state finance also thrived on slave money. The Cuesta y Manzanal family married into Bonifacio González Larrinaga's family. This man speculated in sugar futures and had originally invested in the Havana insurance company. By 1820, Santiago de la Cuesta y Manzanal had joined the upper echelons of the elite in Havana, as confirmed by his membership in the American Order of Isabel la Católica.³⁵ In 1836, Santiago, who had by then become a titled noble (count of La Reunión), was the third richest man in Cuba. A director of the Banco Real de Fernando VII (created in 1832), the Spaniard's Cuban standing was very solid. He enjoyed his reputation as loyal vassal and capitalist leader, facilitating loans to the government, overseeing public funds, and collecting taxes for the Crown.³⁶ Some of his relatives were involved in the foundation of the New York Sugar Exchange. The union between the Cuesta y Manzanal group with the Pérez de Urria family made up what is thought to have been the greatest fortune in the Spanish world at the time (Moreno Friginals 1978: vol. I, 265–69).

33 Consultas, "Relación de las pérdidas que ha sufrido la compañía de seguros de la Habana, por las depredaciones cometidas por los buques ingleses e insurgentes o piratas desde 15 de Febrero de 1815 hasta 29 de Noviembre de 1817," Havana, November 29, 1817 (hereafter Relación), entry dated December 16, 1816.

34 *Bases y reglamento de la Compañía de Seguros Marítimos de La Habana*. 1857. Habana: Imprenta y Librería de A. Graupera.

35 AHN, Estado, 6317, exp. 66, f. 2^r.

36 Pérez de la Riva 1963:233, 263; AHN, Estado, 6320, exp. 19, 1838, f. 2^r.

As they consolidated their empire, Cuban slave traders faced several challenges. Historians have recently paid much attention to the actions against slavery—ranging from conspiracy to outright warfare—that plagued the Cuban plantation landscape as early as the times of the Haitian Revolution, making things on the island much more complicated than Arango y Parreño's generation seems to have anticipated.³⁷ But Cuban slavers also faced challenges beyond their island home. On the open sea and off the coasts of Cuba and Africa, slave traders had to deal with naval forces enforcing Great Britain's abolition of the trade. In 1809, just as the Cuba-based slave trade had begun to take off, British forces captured nine Cuban slave ships. Many more would be captured in the years to come and, after 1817, slave ships were taken before Courts of Mixed Commission, the international tribunals set up for the adjudication of captured slave ships.³⁸

Besides the British, the early nineteenth-century Spanish slave trade found yet another group of challengers. The leaders of postrevolutionary Haiti, Henry Christophe, Alexandre Pétion, and Jean Pierre Boyer fought the slave trade as Haitians captured slave ships and liberated slaves on a regular basis. In 1819, for example, a Haitian warship adeptly named the *Wilberforce*—presumably after British abolitionist leader William Wilberforce—took a Spanish slave ship bound for Cuba and liberated all the captives on board (Franco 1980:154–56). Maritime moves against slave traders seem to have been congruent with a larger Haitian set of policies that shaped the actual possibilities of freedom in the Caribbean. As Ada Ferrer has shown, Haitian leaders—especially Alexandre Pétion—were willing and able to offer “freedom and citizenship on Haitian soil for foreign persons of color who otherwise would have lived in slavery” (Ferrer 2012:57).

Privateers operating out of revolutionary and outlaw enclaves like Cartagena de Indias, Matagorda, Barataria, and Saint Thomas attacked Spanish commercial and slave trading ships bound for Cuba. Out of Cartagena, which declared independence from Spain in 1811, operated dozens of privateer ships manned mostly by multinational crews in which French Caribbean sailors were prevalent (Pérez Morales 2012). In 1813 alone, privateers flying the colors of Cartagena captured at least 41 Spanish vessels.³⁹ Merchants and planters took action, outfitting ships to attack Cartagena privateers. In 1814, the Cuban elite collected 12,000 pesos to finance an expedition against the corsairs. To the dismay of

37 Barcia 2012; Childs 2006; Ferrer 2014; Scott 1985.

38 See also Relación. Franco 1980:139–40; Murray 1980:67–68.

39 *El mensajero de Cartagena de Indias* (Cartagena), Semester 1, No. 3, February 25, 1814.

Spanish authorities and merchants in Cuba, privateer attacks by ships outfitted in Cartagena continued into late 1815. They were later followed by attacks from privateers with letters of marque from revolutionaries in Mexico and Argentina.⁴⁰

Finally, the most global of threats to Cuba's rising slave empire came from international diplomacy. Great Britain pressured Spain to sign a treaty stipulating that Spaniards would abolish the slave trade, which they did in 1820. Because of the now widely accepted illegal nature of the trade, tracking down evidence on Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano after this date seems particularly difficult.⁴¹ However, further research could show in what ways this firm and other Cuban slavers adapted to the new challenges after 1820 for the trade continued to illegally thrive for another generation (Franco 1980; Zeuske 2015). If we turn our attention to the Pongo River, which rose to become an important site of illegal slave trading on the coast of present-day Guinea, we can begin to see the local dynamics of the sale and purchase of human beings in the context of British suppression of the trade. An extant record from a Cuban seaman offers some insight into this illicit period of the slave trade and its locales—the “hidden Atlantic” in Michael Zeuske's expression (Zeuske 2015). The same record, moreover, shows the continuing process of learning-by-doing, revealing some of the ways in which professional knowledge and skills were relayed among seagoing personnel. In short, the document confirms that what investors in Havana had conceived earlier in the century was effectively put into practice in spite of the relatively constant challenges.

40 ANC, Asuntos Políticos, leg. 215, No. 11, “Documento que se refiere a la correspondencia del Capitán General al gobernador de Santiago de Cuba, fecha Habana 20 de noviembre de 1813, aprobando lo realizado por el Teniente Gobernador de Baracoa ante la amenaza de los corsarios de Cartagena;” No. 18, “Documento que se refiere a la correspondencia del Capitán General al gobernador de Santiago de Cuba, fecha Habana 24 de noviembre de 1813, relativa a que por la marina se han habilitado buques para perseguir los corsarios de Cartagena;” Asuntos Políticos, leg. 15, No. 16, “Real orden, fecha Madrid 18 abril 1814, para que la Diputación Provincial proporcione al Comandante General de Marina los arbitrios necesarios para perseguir y exterminar los corsarios;” *Postscript to the Royal Gazette* (Kingston) 36 (1), December 25, 1813-January 1, 1814.

41 For a useful periodization of the slave trade to Cuba between 1795 and 1837, see Meriño Fuentes & Perera Díaz 2014:17–31.

The Pongo River

By 1830, slave ship captains with Castilian, Catalan, and Basque names were common in the traffic between Cuba and the Upper Guinea region. Captains Fernández, Carbonell, Famadas, Funes, Goyarrola and others had gained the necessary skills to effectively trade in human beings directly from Africa. Trips to Africa and back became standard practice for sailors and officers operating out of Cuba. A skilled seaman by the name R.B. Estrada, who later claimed never to have engaged in this “odious trade” before, nevertheless agreed to serve as pilot on board the slave ship *La Gaceta*, property of Francisco Soler, in 1833. The ship was bound for the Pongo River. Estrada wrote an account of his trip to Africa, which he described as a crossing to the Cape Verde islands and the coast of Senegal. A useful, first-hand testimony of the experiences of slave-ship personnel, Estrada’s manuscript is now kept at the National Library in Havana.⁴²

La Gaceta’s captain was Juan Bautista de Escurra. According to Estrada, Escurra was a Frenchman from Nantes who passed as a Spaniard. Estrada claimed to have known for a fact the Escurra was a “Norman French,” suggesting the continuing involvement of foreigners in these illegal operations. The crew included a boatswain, six sailors, a cook, and a cabin’s boy. The ship sailed from Matanzas on August 14, 1833. In the first leg of the trip, *La Gaceta* sailed to New York carrying a few passengers and a coffee cargo. Once the coffee was sold in New York, the proceeds were used to buy the goods needed to carry out transactions in West Africa: 200 English rifles, gunpowder, cloth, Virginia tobacco, and other assorted goods. Meant to be exchanged for human beings, Cuban white rum (*aguardiente*) had also been originally loaded onto the ship by the outfitter.

After New York, the next stop was the Cape Verde islands, a Portuguese archipelago off the Senegambia coast. After 1820, these islands became strategic nodes in the slave trade to Cuba. Slave ships stopped there for provisions and fresh crews. Above all, however, the islands offered a safe haven from the British and a place where, with Portuguese complicity, slave traders forged documents to disguise their transatlantic activities as coastal trading (Zeuske 2015:135–45).

42 The following paragraphs are based on a transcription of Estrada’s account by Orlando García Martínez and Michael Zeuske. I thank professor Zeuske for sharing this source with me. The original document is kept at Biblioteca Nacional José Martí—Havana—, Colección Cubana, Manuscritos, Bachiller, No. 417 “Estrada, R.B., Geografía. Relación de un viaje a las islas de Cabo Verde, y algunos puntos del y Río Pongo.” Transcription available in García Martínez & Zeuske 2013:149–61.

After a passage of one month and twelve days, *La Gaceta* arrived on Boa Vista (one of the Cape Verde islands) on November 13, 1833. Around seven days later the seamen on board *La Gaceta* came into view of the Pongo River estuary, where slavers operated in secret points beyond the mangrove. Up the many distributaries emptying out into the ocean, numerous trading posts for transatlantic trade in merchandise and human beings existed dating back at least to the late 1700s. The best evidence available indicates three early slave trading operations on the Pongo between 1797 and 1799. Over the next few decades, French, British, Americans, Spanish, and Portuguese operated regularly in this area, with the largest number of expeditions on record occurring between 1801 and 1810 and between 1831 and 1845. Expeditions from Cuba were particularly common in the 1830s and early 1840s.⁴³

Estrada described with some detail—though not with much technical precision—the basic maneuvers to enter the Pongo and reach what he called a slave *factoría* or trading post. Because of the international prohibition of the slave trade, however, posts on the Pongo must have been substantially different from the old *factorías*, as those seen by Estrada were located inland and had no durable fortifications protecting them. With several mouths and internal waterways, the Pongo estuary had to be carefully navigated by pilots aiming to go inland. They had to enter through the northernmost mouth, called Mudbar by the locals. Unlike the other openings, no sandbars blocked this entry. Instead, it was protected by a mud bar on which ships were less likely to run aground. Once the mud bar was crossed, the rising tide took care of the rest, pulling the ship up the river. Flanked by mangrove forest, pilots had to carefully avoid being pulled into the side channels, so abundant, big, and intricate that Estrada likened them to “the streets of an irregular city.” Given that this was Estrada’s first trip to Africa, he must have learned about local conditions on site, most likely from the captain and other sailors who had already visited this place.⁴⁴ *La Gaceta*, indeed, had been to Africa at least once, in 1820, and likely

43 TSD, voyages 25808, 83032, 82701, 81076, 82702, 83321, 82249, 80639, 80719, 80351, 82906, 37281, 25448, 83480, 25435, 25437, 37107, 25470, 36837, 25476, 36825, 25461, 25460, 83767, 81834, 25458, 37144, 25530, 36829, 25459, 25456, 36947, 25455, 25451, 37238, 25546, 25591, 25516, 25568, 81074, 25545, 25495, 25500, 80722, 25549, 36903, 25474, 25478, 25543, 25526, 37136, 25586, 36924, 7501, 25518, 7557, 37167, 37141, 7585, 40751, 46924, 7566, 7565, 7672, 7609, 34077, 2320, 2730, 2350, 2824, 941, 34665, 2864, 2425, 2406, 2427, 2411, 34679, 2458, 2460, 2462, 2463, 1368, 2461, 1479, 2538, 1698, 1713, 2606, 1869, 2078, 2270, 3460, 3509, 3615, 4971. Corry 1807:92–93. Mouser 2010 is a robust historiographical essay on the Pongo River.

44 Estrada’s description of the estuary and the maneuvers to enter the river coincide with

with some of the same personnel now on board. Back in 1820, the British had seized the vessel, then carrying 82 captives. In 1836, once again, *La Gaceta* was captured by the British and taken to the Court of Mixed Commission in Sierra Leone, its hull containing over 200 captives.⁴⁵

In Estrada's experience we can see at work, though in an oblique fashion, the dynamic of information transmission envisioned earlier in the century by aspiring slave traders based in Cuba. A continual learning process rather than a static arrangement, this dynamic guaranteed the relay of the trade between different cohorts of officers and sailors. This process was underpinned by conversations between veterans and novices, a dynamic of communication which allowed seagoing personnel to depart Cuba, arrive at the right spot in Africa, engage the local slave traders, gather the human cargo, and finally return to Cuba. Estrada participated in this process and learned from people who had in turn learned from other colleagues.

On November 19, 1833, *La Gaceta* reached a Pongo River trading post. On arrival, scores of canoes coming out of the channels in the mangrove surrounded the ship, followed by boats carrying the local leaders who soon clambered up the ship's sides. At this point, the slave ship became a site of diplomacy, negotiation, and ceremony. The local "king," named Mungo Yanyi according to Estrada's account, came on board along with the consignee of the Cuban slaver, an American by the name Paul Faber. Educated at Liverpool, Mungo Yanyi spoke perfect English and sported Europeans clothes. Following a ceremonial meal, Yanyi and the newly arrived traders proceeded to negotiations and soon reached a deal. Yanyi and his associates would take the merchandise and in exchange deliver the equivalent value in human beings no later than forty-five days after the deal.

Mungo (most often spelled mongo) was not a given name, as Estrada seems to have assumed, but rather a title. Mongo, a word for king in the Mandingo language, referred to local strongmen (some were petty kings, some slave traders, some both) specializing in commerce and the trade in human beings. Some were Europeans, others African and many seemed to have been of mixed ancestry, conversant in several cultural traditions. Perhaps best described as "Atlantic Creoles," these individuals inherited the tradition of renegade servants who had left European monopoly companies to establish their own slaving businesses as early as the late 1600s. Their itineraries spanned the Atlantic world, as did

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the details provided in a guide for navigators published in several editions throughout the 1800s. See Imray & Son 1854:158–59.

45 TSD, voyage 2491.

their friends and enemies (Berlin 1996; Thornton 1998:65–66; Zeuske 2015:131–35). Francisco Félix de Souza, known as Cha-Cha, Theophilus Conneau (who went by Theodore Canot), John Ormond, and Pedro Blanco Fernández de Trava were among the most notorious mongos (Conneau 1976; Franco 1980:178–202).

These agents brokered encounters between different economic spheres. Beyond the areas dominated by the logics of bullion currency, investors found that opportunity cost was low “whatever values merchants imputed in currencies of account to the goods they sold or to the transportation costs connected with their ventures” (Miller 1998:686). The value of the goods—as expressed in pesos by the Spanish traders—was a malleable convention. In the Pongo River, Estrada and his colleagues, as seems to have been standard procedure, doubled the price of the merchandise before the negotiations started. While the rifles had cost four pesos and two reales in New York, on the Pongo River they were now valued at eight pesos and four reales each. The same happened with the rest of the merchandise. Watered down under the cover of darkness, the white rum more than doubled in size and value. These tricks rendered the price of each captive at fifty pesos, a bargain from the point of view of slave traders in Cuba.

The next step in the weeks-long transaction was to “open the trade.” Opening the trade meant allowing local merchants to come into the ship and unload the merchandise. After this, *La Gaceta* went downriver and all the way back to the Cape Verde islands, where, on the island of San Vicente, the crew was to wait the forty-five day term previously agreed. In San Vicente they also waited out the disease—most likely yellow fever—everybody on board seems to have caught while on the Pongo. Yanyi and his associates, however, did not comply with the terms of the deal. Waiting for longer than they anticipated meant that Estrada and his colleagues would be at a higher risk of being intercepted and captured by British vessels. While they waited, the British indeed captured two Spanish slave ships belonging to Pedro Martínez, a Havana-based slave trader. *La Gaceta*, now in a delicate phase of her voyage, had to carefully test the waters before going up river again to load the captives. Having avoided the British and completed the transaction, *La Gaceta* set sail again, bound for Matanzas with hundreds of captives on board, on March 1, 1834.

Estrada's account seems to have been considered for publication in the Cuban journal *La Siempreviva*, edited by lawyer and scholar Antonio Bachiller y Morales. The piece, however, was censored. The opening statements of the account were mildly critical of the slave trade and Estrada had been too open about the details of this illegal expedition. Yet the author made use of certain dehumanizing expressions to refer to the captives, words current among slavers, officers, and most likely common seamen involved in the trade in

human beings. Some tactics of the trade differed from an earlier era, to be sure, but Estrada referred to the enslaved as *bultos* and *bultos de Africa* (bundles and African bundles) and spoke simply of *cargamento* (cargo) when describing captives taken on board *La Gaceta*. In this regard, slave trade agents continued to utilize old tactics for the commodification of humans (Smallwood 2007). Estrada's account reveals, if only partially, how Spaniards, both peninsular and islanders, had mastered the tricks of the slave trade and its lingo, becoming enmeshed in the trade's Atlantic-scope processes and practically and ideologically conversant in its everyday dynamics.

Conclusions

At the turn of the nineteenth century, aspiring slave traders in Cuba were located at a specific segment in a long-term process comparable to a spiral staircase.⁴⁶ From their vantage point they could see the success of foreign slave traders who had supplied Spanish territories for generations, as well as their own shortcomings in earlier stages and the challenges they would face as they planned to move in the direction of a full-scale plantation society with a constant supply of forced labor from overseas. There was also much they could not see, or chose not to see. Traversing the twists and turns of the way required adopting and modifying the practices of the slave trade through learning and conversation. It also required rearranging local political and economic institutions, figuring out ways to deal with British abolition and suppression and taming their own fear that slaves could rise up against masters.

While global, long-term perceptions of the aggregate consequences of the demand for slaves from Spanish territories are very helpful (Borucki, Eltis & Wheat 2015), the development of the ability to successfully carry out slave voyages by specific generations of Spaniards underpinned this socio-historical process and still requires further evaluation. This article has paid attention to the Cuban-based Spanish slave trade in the early 1800s, shedding light on the interdependencies of colonial policy, private initiative, technical skill, and changing legal and economic circumstances. This approach identifies spaces of tension and conversation where people negotiated and built a Spanish-sponsored, transatlantic slave trade and a "second slavery" in the Caribbean.

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46 I borrow the metaphor of the spiral staircase to express a "multidimensional model" for the understanding of sociohistorical processes from Elias 2006:263.

Furthermore, attention to the small-scale dynamics of the transatlantic slave trade out of Cuba throws into sharp relief the process by which interest groups successfully channeled politics, maritime labor, and capital in order to achieve specific goals.

Francisco de Arango y Parreño—who went on to become a quintessential Cuban sugar baron—had recognized back in 1789 that investors in Havana had little “knowledge” or “capital” to facilitate their direct involvement in all the phases of the transatlantic slave trade, from financing and outfitting slave ships to carrying out slaving expeditions to Africa and back.⁴⁷ Twenty years later, dozens of slave ships sailed out of Cuba bound for Africa. Through a consciously designed and relatively quick processes of learning, risk-taking, political lobbying and ideological reflection, Cuban-based investors developed the ability to trade in human beings without relying on foreign traders but certainly following in their steps. In spite of the various local, regional, and global challenges, these developments contributed to the transformation of the island into an empire of plantation slavery that evolved in tandem with finance, industry, and politics.

Five major Spanish firms/partnerships in Cuba came to dominate not just the slave trade but also much of the Cuban international commerce, local and state finances, insurance operations, sugarcane planting, and the political landscape. These groups accumulated capital, land, slaves, nobility titles and influence, intermarried or married aristocratic and rich counterparts overseas, and established links with high finance in Spain, Great Britain, and the United States. While the Cuesta y Manzanal family and the Cuesta Manzanal & Hermano firm may be seen as emblematic of this history, some of the documents they left behind can do much more for historians than serve as examples. Put into dialogue with other records, they reveal the complex ways in which a generation poised between change and continuity managed to transform the traditional dynamics of politics and trade in order to profit from long-established practices of dispossession and exploitation.

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