Alejandro de la Fuente & Ariela J. Gross, *Becoming Free, Becoming Black: Race, Freedom, and Law in Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xiv + 281 pp. (Cloth US\$ 24.95)

This comparative and cultural history of law examines two central but antithetical dimensions of the legal regimes of the slaveholding empires of the Atlantic—first, the invention of racial discrimination based on the equivalence between “Black” and “Slave” that was capable of maintaining all people of African descent, whatever their status, indefinitely in a circumstance of dependence, and second, the transformation of the right of any slaveholder to alienate his property (by manumission) into a more or less assured “right” for enslaved persons to obtain their freedom. In *Slave and Citizen* (1946), Frank Tannenbaum relied on the latter as a key to his comparative reading of two societies of the Americas—the Iberian empires, heirs of a long tradition of Mediterranean slavery, that early wrote into their law the reversibility of the condition of slavery despite the principle of *parum sequitur ventrem*, and by contrast, the Protestant Northern European empires that drastically limited manumission, making the color line an uncrossable frontier.

Becoming Free, Becoming Black demonstrates brilliantly that Tannenbaum’s dichotomy is less stark than it might appear. To this end, the book is rooted in the long histories of three territories—Cuba, Virginia, and Louisiana—permitting a contrast of four iterations of empire: Spain, France, Great Britain, and, for the last century of the survey, the United States. Each colonial space is in itself a chapter of comparative history to the extent that imperial authorities succeeded each other and mingled their laws. Even the most stable among them, Cuba, was not spared upheavals generated by the others.

Alejandro de la Fuente and Ariela Gross provide a clear chronological organization, distinguishing the first codifications of slavery and blackness between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, then the second during the Age of Revolutions, which put in play a debate about emancipation alongside the fear of insurrection, and finally, the hardening of an institution the future of which was less and less certain during the nineteenth century until a series of successive emancipations.

The book’s central thesis takes clear shape in the first two chapters. Despite the title in which “Becoming Free” precedes “Becoming Black,” it is with this second process that the authors establish what will be their decisive conclusion. To be considered (and designed) as “Black” early on limited the effects of becoming free. With some differences in timing, in Virginia, as in Louisiana and in Cuba, the law created blackness as a stigma more frequently than it opened the possibilities of freedom. Even in Cuba, where an important community of

freed Africans existed from the time of the first experiences of transatlantic slavery (sixteenth century), racial stigmatization blocked the dynamics of liberty. The reversibility of slavery, a legacy inherited from Mediterranean Spain, did not survive in the Atlantic world.

Comparative studies encourage fascinating debates, and that is the case here. Virginia is an excellent location for examining the invention of African slavery, given the coexistence there of White indentured servants and Native and African enslaved people, and its early debate over the legitimacy of slavery generated by the influence of Quakers. The choice of Cuba is less evident as an illustration of complex Iberian conceptions of race and freedom. Particularly in the period of the Iberian Union (1580–1640), it was to Portugal that Spain left the thankless task of reinventing slavery, first in the Atlantic islands and then in Brazil. And, in the Portuguese colonies more than in Cuba, manumissions were never strongly restricted. As for Louisiana, it inherited a legal framework developed mainly in the French Caribbean, particularly in Saint-Domingue. There, the right of manumission was formally controlled and limited, but informal freedom (*liberté de savane*) was always negotiated behind the backs of the authorities.

These observations reflect the way de la Fuente and Gross have adopted an ambitious and penetrating approach to their subject. They also encourage an important re-engagement with the questions that Tannenbaum posed nearly 75 years ago. Each reader will bring their field and archives to this new framing of the puzzle of slavery, freedom, and race in the Americas. The foundation is laid for a renewed discussion and for other comparisons from one colony to another. *Becoming Free, Becoming Black* is not only the best synthesis of the complex developments of juridical structures in the slave societies of the Atlantic world. It is a generous study which, chapter after chapter, opens up questions that will be debated for a long time to come.

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