Claudia Varella & Manuel Barcia, *Wage-Earning Slaves: Coartación in Nineteenth-Century Cuba*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. xvi + 218 pp. (Cloth US\$85.00)

Coartación, a process by which enslaved people in Latin America purchased their own freedom, has long been viewed by scholars and students alike as something extraordinary, at least when compared to Anglo slavery. It has also been ascribed a certain homogeneity, whether situated in Brazil, Cuba, or elsewhere, and its operation has been perceived as regular, juridical, and linear, with an individual passing from enslaved to coartado to free. Claudia Varella and Manuel Barcia's masterful examination of coartación in nineteenth-century Cuba upends those assumptions.

Coartación, which had its roots on the Iberian Peninsula and was largely uncoded, seldom occurred. When it did in the absence of a slave-based plantation economy, it posed no threat to the larger institution of slavery. Yet in Cuba, the emergence of just such an economy following the destruction of that in neighboring Saint-Domingue would bring about systemization in both law and practice. Enslaved people who made an initial down payment on a set price were considered coartados, and had the right to earn wages and change owners. Coartados occupied a liminal space between slavery and freedom. In theory, their stay in that space was defined, and dependent only upon the time it took to earn or otherwise obtain the funds necessary to complete their self-purchase. Based on an exhaustive examination of Cuba's voluminous colonial archival record, *Wage-Earning Slaves* describes a much more complicated existence, offering a nuanced investigation of what it meant to be between free and enslaved, sometimes moving forward, sometimes moving backward, often-times remaining in situ.

In the early chapters, Varella and Barcia explore the changes to coartación in the wake of the transformation of Cuba's economy. They note that sugar's massive demand for labor and capital required not just an overhaul and expansion of Cuba's slave trade, but also of the operation of coartación. Codifying what had been custom was not without benefit for owners, as an enslaved person's wages were in part owed to their owner, while simultaneously encouraging the owner to place any obstacle possible in the path of a slave working toward freedom and, thus, continuing to generate income.

Attention then turns to an examination of the state, coartación, and its function on the plantations of rural Cuba as sugar production continued to drive the Cuban economy. Chapter 3 explores the state's role in a process long understood to be worked out between owner and slave. As Cuba's enslaved population grew, so too did the number of coartados. Síndicos, appointed by

the island's municipal governments, theoretically represented coartados when conflict with owners ensued, and the process seemed to be rife with conflict. People pursuing coartación had a vested interest in seeing their economic value set low. Owners did not. Moreover, in times of tight labor markets, owners resented the right of coartados to hire out, and attempted to abridge it. In the middle of the century, the price of slaves rose dramatically, and even with technological innovation, sugar production continued to demand massive amounts of labor. The result was an increase in the number of owners hiring out enslaved persons to rural Cuba, some of whom were in the process of coartación, a phenomenon explored in Chapter 4. As scholars have long viewed coartación as an urban practice, Varella and Barcia's contribution here is especially significant.

Chapters 5 and 6 expand on the discussion of coartación and the labor market. Perhaps more than anything else, the urban market for slave rental demonstrates the difficulty of moving forward in the process of coartación. Coartados or would-be coartados in conflict with owners found themselves in the legal custody of the state without the rights of a coartado; they were, again, classed as slaves. And as the state hired them out, they frequently disappeared into the larger enslaved population without access to the records and resources that delineated their special status.

In their final chapter, Varella and Barcia explore the place of coartación within the gradual process of emancipation. In a shifting legal climate, coartados lost out. No longer could rural coartados change owners, and as slavery came to an end, coartados, still on their road to freedom were no longer set apart with specific rights, but, instead, signed contracts of indenture. Yet, even in the face of sweeping change, individuals, particularly in the cities, were able to leverage their status as coartados to improve their social position, and they became wage earners rather than wage-earning slaves.

Wage-Earning Slaves, the definitive study of coartación in Cuba, is essential reading for scholars and students alike of slavery in Cuba, and of manumission more generally.

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