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## *Gradations of Suffering and Privation*

*Evelyn Powell Jennings*

Few foreigners have studied the island of Cuba in greater detail or with greater impact than Alexander von Humboldt. He arrived in Cuba for the first time in December of 1800 and spent the next three months researching the island and its people at a moment of deep structural change. When Humboldt arrived Cuba was being transformed by a revolution in plantation production that brought an influx of enslaved people from Africa to produce export commodities like sugar and coffee. Welcomed by the Havana planter elite, Humboldt spent several months exploring parts of Western Cuba, visiting plantations, and gathering data. His friends in high places, most notably, Francisco de Arango y Parreño, continued to collect data for Humboldt while he traveled in South America and when he returned to Europe. Conferring with high government officials and scientists he compiled and evaluated statistics on the island's changing population both urban and rural, on imports and exports, and on government revenues and colonial policy. The efforts and resources of his many contacts allowed Humboldt to include statistics up to 1820 in his published writings on the island's political economy, demography, geography, and climate.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps most striking and enduring were his observations on the institution of slavery on the island. As he stated in the final chapter of his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, "The Nature of Slavery," his goal was to "bring the facts to light and clarify the concepts by means of comparisons and statistical overviews." As a vocal opponent of slavery who witnessed the "torments and debasements of human nature" perpetrated within the slave system

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1. Luis Martínez Fernández, "Introduction," in Alexander von Humboldt, 2001, *The Island of Cuba*. Princeton: Marcus Weiner Publishers, 5. In the text of the *Political Essay* Humboldt mentions having visited "only the vicinity of Havana, the beautiful valley of Güines, and the coast between Batabanó and Trinidad." 78. On Humboldt's relationship with Arango y Parreño see Frank Argote-Freyre, "Humboldt and Arango y Parreño: A Dialogue," in *The Island of Cuba*, 273-280.

he felt a duty to bring information on the difficult lives of slaves to “the attention of those who can ameliorate them.”<sup>2</sup> The statistics he gathered have formed part of the foundation of virtually every major scholarly effort to describe nineteenth century Cuban slavery. In addition, his comparative framework for interpreting the institution has structured the debates about the nature of enslavement in Cuba to the present day.

Humboldt was not unique in employing either quantitative or comparative methods to the study of slavery in Cuba or elsewhere in the Americas. What made his contribution singular were the comprehensiveness and the perspicacity of his observations on the nature of slavery in Cuba. This paper seeks to trace the impact of Humboldt’s “Essay” on the historiography of nineteenth century Cuban slavery. The foundational texts in the field have relied and continued to rely on his data, observations, and interpretations. His work was at the heart of the field of comparative slavery studies as pioneered by Frank Tannenbaum’s *Slave and Citizen*<sup>3</sup> in the 1940s, which advanced the notion that the slave regime in Cuba favored the pursuit of freedom to a degree unknown elsewhere in the Americas. Questions arising from Humboldt’s assertion of the relative openness of Cuban slavery oriented research for decades in the twentieth century and have recently resurfaced in studies of slavery in Cuba and other Spanish-American colonies.

Humboldt opens the *Essay* with the observation that the political importance of Cuba lies in “the geographical position of the city and harbor of Havana.”<sup>4</sup> From the late sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century colonial Cuba’s economy and society were based on Havana’s role as the Caribbean hub of Spanish imperial trade and service, the embarkation point for the treasure fleets’ return voyage to Spain. Enslaved people, mostly Africans and their descendents, worked in all aspects of the imperial service economy from the 1500s onward but they never accounted for a majority of Cuba’s population. It was not until the 1700s that revolutionary warfare in the Caribbean had the effect of reorienting both colonial policy and private entrepreneurship more sharply toward plantation agriculture and slave ownership.

Humboldt noted that before the British occupation of Havana in 1762 during the Seven Years’ War, Cuba contributed little in the way of agricultural products to Spanish imperial trade. The production of sugar on the island had begun a slow expansion before the 1760s, in part as a reaction to the Spanish Crown’s establishment of the royal monopoly in tobacco. Yet further expan-

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2. Alexander von Humboldt, 2001, “The Nature of Slavery,” Shelley L. Frisch, trans. In *The Island of Cuba*, 255.

3. Frank Tannenbaum, 1947, *Slave and Citizen. The Negro in the Americas*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

4. Humboldt, *Island of Cuba*, 75.

sion was constrained in large measure by the Crown's restrictions on slave imports.<sup>5</sup>

Humboldt's contention that from the day the British evacuated Havana in July of 1763 "we may trace the first efforts of a new-born industry" may overstate the importance of the occupation to the genesis of the sugar boom in Cuba. But he clearly recognized the importance of the shifts in colonial policy that sought to both rebuild Havana's defenses and increase revenues by encouraging the slave trade and sugar expansion after 1763. He noted, "[t]he construction of new fortifications on a gigantic scale, placed large sums of money in immediate circulation, and the slave-trade which was subsequently thrown open, increased the number of hands on the sugar plantations."<sup>6</sup> According to official records, legal imports through the city of Havana rose to almost 8,000 slaves between December of 1763 and the end of 1765.<sup>7</sup> Of this group, more than half (4,359) were purchased by the Crown for work in the fortifications. State demand for enslaved laborers for defense works probably brought even more slaves to Havana than the planters' demand for sugar workers in the late 1760s.<sup>8</sup> Humboldt's astute observation about the importance of state investments and capital to sugar plantation expansion and Cuba's subsequent growth and prosperity has been explored in greater detail and confirmed by twentieth century historians of Cuban development.<sup>9</sup>

5. This point was clearly recognized by planters who petitioned the Crown for access to more slaves and by colonial officials who surveyed the island after the occupation. See Archivo Histórico Nacional [hereafter AHN], Estado, legajo. 3025, exp.[expediente] 4, Report of the visita of Alejandro O'Reilly dated 12 April 1764.

6. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 168-169. Restrictions on the slave trade to Cuba were loosened in 1764 to procure more enslaved labor for defense projects. Free trade in slaves was allowed by the Spanish Crown in 1789.

7. Archivo General de Indias [hereafter AGI], Santo Domingo [SD], legajo 2129, "Estado que manifiesta los gastos, y costos causados en las Reales Obras de Fortificación. . ." 31-XII-1772; Pablo Tornero Tinajero, 1996. *Crecimiento económico y transformaciones sociales. Esclavos, hacendados y comerciantes en la Cuba colonial (1760-1840)*, Madrid: Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 37; and Gloria García, 1986. "El mercado de fuerza de trabajo en Cuba: El comercio esclavista (1760-1789)," in *La esclavitud en Cuba*, La Habana: Editorial Academia, 135.

8. J.R. McNeill, 1985. *Atlantic Empires of France and Spain, Louisbourg and Havana 1700-1763*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 167 for the evidence behind his estimate of 4,000 African slaves imported under the British occupation.

9. The most thorough treatment of Cuban economic development in the nineteenth century is still Manuel Moreno Fraginals, 2001 [1978], *El ingenio complejo económico social cubano del azúcar*, Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, although Moreno gives greater credit to the Cuban bourgeoisie in initiating sugar expansion. See also Sherry Johnson, 1997. "La Guerra Contra los Habitantes de los Arrabales': Changing Patterns of Land Use and Land Tenancy in and Around Havana, 1763-1800," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 77:2, 181-209; Franklin W. Knight, 1977. "Origins of Wealth and Sugar Revolution in Cuba, 1750-1850," *American Historical Review*, 57:2, 231-253, especially p. 242. For a summary of this scholarship on revenues from defense spending in Cuba see Alan J. Kuethe, 1992. "Havana in the Eighteenth Century," in Franklin W. Knight and Peggy K. Liss, eds., *Atlantic Port Cities, Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 14-25.

In his list of factors important to Cuba's economic growth at the end of the eighteenth century Humboldt also included "the destruction of the French colony of St. Domingo, and the consequent increase in the value of sugar; the improvements in machinery and furnaces, due in great part to the refugees from Haiti;" although he seemed to give equal weight to all these factors.<sup>10</sup> Data on the increase in the number of sugar mills in the jurisdiction of Havana shows an increase from 43 mills in 1741 to 534 mills in 1817. The average increase in the number of mills in Havana rose from 3 or 4 per year in the mid-eighteenth century to a peak of 20 per year between 1796 and 1800. The timing suggests that the collapse of Saint Domingue's sugar industry provided the greatest impetus to sugar expansion in Cuba.<sup>11</sup>

Humboldt arrived in Cuba, therefore, at the crest of the first significant boom in plantation slavery on the island. It is not surprising then that he was keen to document patterns of slave imports to the island and the dramatic demographic changes that resulted from those imports. Humboldt's contacts among the Spanish colonial bureaucrats and the Havana planter elite afforded him access to some of the official data on plantation production, slave imports, and commodity exports. With the Spanish Crown's declaration of free trade in slaves to Cuba in 1789 officials of the royal navy in the port of Havana began collecting shipping statistics. Humboldt's figures coincide closely with the manuscript records of these statistics suggesting that he had direct access to the original documents that are now housed in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville.<sup>12</sup>

The import series figures from 1790 to 1820 published by Humboldt based on the Havana customs house returns have provided the foundation for scholars' estimates of slave imports to Cuba into the twentieth century. One of the first histories of Cuban slavery published in English by Hubert Aimes included research in the colonial Spanish archives, but Aimes relied heavily on Humboldt's statistics to discuss slave imports.<sup>13</sup> Fernando Ortiz's *Los negros esclavos* remains a foundational text in the Cuban historiography of slavery. His discussion of slave imports between 1789 and 1820 is derived directly from Aimes, and thereby from Humboldt as well.<sup>14</sup> Works in English in the second half of the twentieth century have all begun with Humboldt's figures to discuss slave importations into Cuba between 1790 and 1820.<sup>15</sup> The careful research of such scholars as Herbert Klein and David Eltis, among

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10. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 169.

11. Tornero y Tinajero, *Crecimiento económico*, 158.

12. Herbert Klein, 1978, *The Middle Passage*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 212.

13. Hubert H. S. Aimes, 1907, *A History of Slavery in Cuba, 1511-1868*, New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 36, 56, 62, 94, 113, 243.

14. Fernando Ortiz, 1975 [1916], *Los negros esclavos*, La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 97-102.

others, has modified Humboldt's work, but his estimates remain the starting point for such research.<sup>16</sup> One notable exception to this pattern is Manuel Moreno Fraginals' *El ingenio* which discusses the slave trade to Cuba between 1792 and 1820 referring almost exclusively to documents of Havana's royal trading company housed in the Archivo Nacional de Cuba.<sup>17</sup>

Humboldt's research into official population statistics has also been influential in later scholarship on the effects of the growing importations of African slaves on Cuban demography. The first official censuses of the Cuban population were undertaken in the 1770s as part of imperial reform efforts in the wake of the British occupation. The counts of 1774, 1775, and 1791 were the earliest official statistics available to Humboldt. He contended that the two made in the 1770s "were made with great negligence and a large part of the population was omitted."<sup>18</sup> Historian G. Douglas Inglis is one of the few scholars to undertake a detailed analysis of both the archival originals of the eighteenth century population counts and the main secondary sources which later used the censuses' figures.<sup>19</sup> While Inglis acknowledges the possibility of official counting errors, his analysis reveals a potentially more serious problem – the compounding of errors that often results from secondary authors' reliance on the figures of other secondary sources like Humboldt. The original manuscript census cited 171,628 persons as the population of Cuba in 1775. Humboldt cited two different figures for the population of Cuba in 1775 within six pages, 170,862 and 170,370.<sup>20</sup> The first is probably a transposition error but the second is more mysterious. The lower figure is then picked up and published in works by nineteenth century abolitionist writer, David Turnbull and twentieth century historian, Hugh Thomas.<sup>21</sup>

Another concern is calculation errors in tables that can skew figures, a problem which bedevils researchers who must both compile and check data if they aspire to any degree of accuracy in reproducing the data. For instance,

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15. For instance, Arthur F. Corwin, 1967, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817-1866*, Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 15-16, 35; Klein, *Middle Passage*, 212-214; David Murray, 2002 [1980], *Odious Commerce*, 17-19. For a critique of Humboldt's estimates as too low for the period prior to 1763 see J. R. McNeill, *Atlantic Empires*, 166-170.

16. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 138-140; Herbert Klein, *The Middle Passage*, 214; and David Eltis, 1987. "The Nineteenth Century Transatlantic Slave Trade: An Annual Time Series of Imports into the Americas Broken Down by Region," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 67:1, 120-130.

17. Moreno Fraginals, *El ingenio*, 213-219.

18. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 127.

19. Gordon Douglas Inglis, 1979. "Historical Demography of Colonial Cuba, 1492-1780," Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas Christian University, 102-110.

20. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 122 and 127.

21. Inglis, "Historical Demography," 104-105. Inglis cites David Turnbull, 1840. *Travels in the West*, London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 230; and Hugh Thomas, 1971. *Cuba, The Pursuit of Freedom*, New York: Harper & Row, 12, footnote 1, and 65, footnote 23.

Humboldt's data on the breakdown by gender, race, and status of the population of Havana and its suburbs in 1810 has three errors of addition in one table amounting to a difference about 100 persons in each error. A footnote to this data by Humboldt's English translator, J. S. Thrasher offers a similar table supposedly from the census of 1846 which does not match the figures in the published census of that year and that contains five serious errors of addition, one amounting to over 100,000 persons.<sup>22</sup> Clearly Humboldt's admonishment not "to employ numerical elements, without having first examined them, and ascertained the extent of their errors" applies to his own work and the work of those who followed him.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of errors of arithmetic or data compilation Humboldt's research on the changing structure of Cuban population in comparative context has been enormously influential for later scholarship not only on Cuba but on slavery in the Americas generally. For instance, Humboldt took several important lessons from the cataclysm of the slave rebellion in Saint Domingue just nine years before his visit to Cuba in 1800 which framed his discussion of the composition of Cuba's population by race and status. He began his chapter on the population of Cuba comparing the relative sizes of the white, free colored, and slave populations of Cuba, Jamaica and the English Antilles, and the United States. He found the Cuban population to be roughly equal to that of all the English Caribbean islands, almost double that of Jamaica. Yet as he noted, "[t]he relative proportion of the inhabitants, according to race and state of civil liberty, presents the most extraordinary contrasts in those countries where slavery has taken great root."<sup>24</sup> According to Humboldt, whites in the Antilles had not taken the possibility of slave insurrection seriously enough and continued to view any concession to greater humanity or justice toward their slaves as "cowardice." He warned of another "bloody catastrophe" as a "necessary consequence of circumstances" if some ameliorative action were not quickly taken by the political elites in the Caribbean.<sup>25</sup>

Humboldt looked to the large free population of Cuba, both whites and people of color (64 percent of the total population according to his figures) as a potentially hopeful sign that "[t]he island of Cuba may free herself better than the other islands from the common shipwreck." There were higher proportions of both whites and free people of color than slaves in the population

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22. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 82 (Humboldt's table) and 234, footnote 6 (Thrasher's table). *Cuadro estadístico de la siempre fiel isla de Cuba correspondiente al año 1846*, 1847, La Habana: Imprenta del Gobierno y Capitanía General, 53 for the published census figures.

23. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 131. The quote is in the context of discussing problems with the official Cuban censuses of 1811 and 1817.

24. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 123.

25. *Ibid.*, 123-124.

Cuba (46:18:36), in stark contrast to Jamaica (6:9:85) and to the US (81:3:15).<sup>26</sup> For Humboldt the reasons for the significantly larger free population of color were unique to Cuba and his enumeration of those reasons is worth quoting at length:

In no part of the world, where slavery exists, is manumission so frequent as in the island of Cuba; for Spanish legislation, directly the reverse of French and English, favors in an extraordinary degree the attainment of freedom, placing no obstacle in its way, nor making it in any manner onerous. The right which every slave has of seeking a new master, or purchasing his liberty, if he can pay the amount of his cost; the religious sentiment that induces many persons in good circumstances to concede by will freedom to a certain number of negroes; the custom of retaining a number of both sexes for domestic service, and the affections that necessarily arise from this familiar intercourse with the whites; and the facilities allowed to slave-workmen to labor for their own account, by paying a certain stipulated sum to their masters, are the principal causes why so many blacks acquire their freedom in the towns...The position of the free negroes in Cuba is much better than it is elsewhere, even among those nations which have for ages flattered themselves as being most advanced in civilization.<sup>27</sup>

Most of these practices that favored freedom derived from Spanish practice and law codified in the thirteenth century *Siete Partidas*. Humboldt does not discuss Spanish law in detail here except to contrast it with a particularly harsh code in eighteenth century Martinique which condemned freed people to reenslavement if they offered asylum to an escaped slave.<sup>28</sup>

In the English language edition of Humboldt's *Ensayo político*, however, his translator, Thrasher expands on Humboldt's mention of the practice of *coartación*, or self-purchase by installments. *Coartación* was well established in Cuba custom from the sixteenth century onward but it only began appearing in modern Spanish law in the eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Slaves who were hired out were allowed to retain a portion of their earnings and apply it in installments toward the eventual purchase of their freedom. Once the initial payment had been made the slave's price could not be changed. Those who had problems with their owners could appeal to the annually appointed syndic for redress. Thrasher also mentions that many *coartados* (those slaves whose enslavement had been "cut" by partial payment of their price) would

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26. Ibid., 123.

27. Ibid., 136.

28. Ibid., 137 and 239 footnote #2.

29. Some examples from the sixteenth century appear in María Teresa de Rojas, 1956, "Algunos datos sobre los negros esclavos y horros en la Habana del siglo XVI," in *Miscelánea de estudios dedicados a Fernando Ortiz por sus discípulos, colegas y amigos*. . . , La Habana: Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, 1275-1287. On its first mention in metropolitan law, Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, 196.

redeem themselves up to \$50 or \$100 shy of their purchase price no matter how much wealth they subsequently acquired. Thrasher, who was an ardent pro-slavery advocate hoping to effect the annexation of Cuba to the US, attributed this last practice to some possible “unobserved peculiarities of the negro mind” which from affection, interests, idiosyncrasy, or “intuitive desire” endeavored to retain some “immediate and tangible superior to whose opinion he can look with respect, and from whom he can claim protection in calamity.” Some *coartados* may have sought to retain the benefits of some measure of maintenance or medical care from their owners while enjoying the relative freedom of movement, employment, and accumulation of wealth.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Thrasher does not mention as a possible deterrent the fact that as completely freed persons of color, said *coartados*, would have been liable for tribute payments to the Crown and militia service.

Still the main elements of Humboldt’s description of manumission in Cuba, and Thrasher’s note on *coartación*, resurface in virtually every subsequent discussion of the topic – its distinctly urban manifestation, its prevalence among domestic servants and skilled workers, the Iberian legal and religious tradition favoring freedom, an economy that supported hiring out and allowed slaves to retain a portion of their earnings and to apply it in installments toward their freedom, and the resultant large free population of color. One example is the classic scholarly work on *coartación*, Hubert Aimes’ 1909 article, “*Coartación: A Spanish Institution for the Advancement of Slaves into Freedmen.*” Although Aimes did not rely heavily on Humboldt’s and Thrasher’s evidence in this article he did take up their suggestion that such practices or, at least the extent of such practices, were unique to Cuba. Here Aimes pointed out the long history of the practice of self-purchase in installments in Cuba before it was codified in the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Aimes argued, in error, that *coartación* had no precedent in Roman or Spanish law, and was, therefore, unique to Cuba, “carried thence to other West India islands.”<sup>32</sup> There were, in fact, both Roman and Spanish legal precedents for *coartación*.<sup>33</sup> Aimes was correct, however, that self-purchase arose in contexts with “an unelastic supply of laborers,” and a growing demand for labor, especially skilled workers. A customary or legal context which allowed slaves to accumulate and retain property was also important for the development of self-purchase by installments, yet more recent research has

30. Ibid., 238-239, footnote #1.

31. Hubert H. S. Aimes, 1909, “Coartación: A Spanish Institution for the Advancement of Slaves into Freedmen,” *Yale Review*, 17, 412-431.

32. Ibid., 412.

33. Jerry R. Craddock, John J. Nitti, and Juan D. Temprano, eds. 1987, *The Text and Concordance of Las Siete Partidas de Alfonso X* [microfiche based on edition of the Real Academia de la Historia, 1807], Madison: The Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, Ltd., Partida III, Título II, Ley VIII.

shown that neither these conditions nor the development of self-purchase customs like “coartación” were unique to Cuba.<sup>34</sup> Aimes was also careful to point out that “coartación” was not always practiced with equal enthusiasm over time. He distinguished the period from 1821 to 1840, after Spain signed treaties with Britain to abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as one in which slave property was closely guarded by slave owners, constraining manumission.<sup>35</sup>

Among Cuban historians, the work of Fernando Ortiz has probably been the most cited on the subjects of urban slavery and manumission. In his chapter on urban slavery, in *Los negros esclavos*, Ortiz reproduced the following quote from Humboldt on the “gradations of suffering” faced by slaves in rural or urban settings and different occupations.<sup>36</sup>

What a world of difference there is between a slave who serves in the house of a rich man in Havana or Kingston, Jamaica, or who works for himself and simply pays his master a daily sum, and a slave laboring on a sugar plantation. A measure of the hierarchy of human deprivation can be seen in the threats leveled against disobedient blacks. The “calesero” is threatened with [the] “cafetal”, the slave working in the cafetal fears transfer to sugar planting. In this latter situation, the Negro who is married and lives in a separate hut and, with all the characteristic tenderness of Africans, finds comfort in the lap of his needy family at the end of his workday, has an immeasurably better lot than the isolated slave who gets lost in the crowd. This disparity of situation is altogether unfamiliar to anyone who has not personally seen the Antilles.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of Humboldt’s relatively brief tour in Cuba he clearly understood the importance of such factors as rural or urban setting, type of work, degree of autonomy, and possibilities for family life in shaping the experiences of slaves in the Americas. All of these factors have been fruitfully explored in twentieth century scholarship on slavery in the Americas.<sup>38</sup>

Ortiz’s discussion of the relatively open nature of urban slavery which follows Humboldt’s observations, has had a considerable impact on slavery scholarship in the twentieth century. Ortiz concluded that the condition of the

34. On *coartación* in eighteenth and nineteenth century Cuba see Herbert Klein, 1967, *Slavery in the Americas*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, especially 196-200 and Laird Bergad, Fe Iglesias García, and María del Carmen Barcia, 1995, *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790-1880*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 133-141. These authors also argue that the practice of *coartación* was unique to Cuba, but other studies have found evidence that it existed in other American slave societies. See for instance, Edgar J. Mc Manus, 2001 [1966]. *A History of Negro Slavery in New York*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 8-13; or Douglas Cole Libby and Clothilde Andrade Paiva, 2000, “Manumission Practices in Late Eighteenth Century Brazilian Slave Parish: São José d’El Rey in 1795,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 21:1 (April) 96-127.

35. Aimes, “Coartación,” 427-430.

36. Ortiz, *Los negros esclavos*, 283-284.

37. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 256.

38. Ortiz, *Los negros esclavos*, 195.

[Cuban] urban slave approximated more closely that of the owner, than [that] of the rural slave. . .”<sup>39</sup> This relatively sanguine view of the lives and possibilities for freedom among Cuban slaves, especially urban slaves, was brought to bear on the discussion of comparative race relations in the Americas in Tannenbaum’s *Slave and Citizen*. He saw manumission as “the crucial element in slavery; it implies the judgment of the moral status of the slave, and foreshadows his role in case of freedom.”<sup>40</sup> While Humboldt recognized a hierarchy of suffering based on occupation and other conditions of life, Tannenbaum focused on access to manumission as the key element in determining the gradations of oppression under enslavement. “There were, briefly speaking, three slave systems in the Western Hemisphere. The British, American, Dutch, and Danish were at one extreme, and the Spanish and Portuguese at the other. In between these two fell the French.”<sup>41</sup> Much of his argument rests on Iberian traditions that favored manumission – the medieval Castilian legal code, the *Siete Partidas* which reflected a long history of slavery and slave trading on the Iberian peninsula and a religious tradition that officially recognized the humanity and spiritual personality of the slave. Tannenbaum contrasted this open Iberian system of law and custom with that of the Anglo-American colonies that had no modern tradition of slavery in their metropolis, no slave law, and whose religious institutions showed little concern for their African slaves.<sup>42</sup> Although Tannenbaum’s book was not a detailed monograph, he did use a number of examples from the various colonies he discussed. For the Iberian colonies, examples from Cuba and Brazil (and to a lesser extent, Mexico) were used most often to illustrate the ease and frequency of manumission in those colonies. In particular Tannenbaum cited the custom of *coartación* as a widespread practice that ameliorated the experience of slavery for the slave, especially in Cuba. His discussion relies heavily on both Humboldt and Ortiz.<sup>43</sup> Echoing Ortiz’s optimism, Tannenbaum went so far as to conclude that, “slavery under both law and custom had, for all practical purposes, become a contractual arrangement between the master and his bondsman.”<sup>44</sup>

This optimistic argument for the singularity of Cuba in the openness of its colonial society to manumission was further elaborated by Herbert Klein in his book, *Slavery in the Americas*. Here Klein expanded the discussion of the legal and religious precedents and customs that, he argued, created a more

39. For a recent review of the slavery studies literature see David Brion Davis, April 2000, “Looking at Slavery from Broader Perspectives,” *American Historical Review*, 105:2, 452-466.

40. Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*, 69.

41. *Ibid.*, 65, footnote # 153.

42. *Ibid.*, 49-91.

43. *Ibid.*, 54-56, see footnotes # 124-130.

44. *Ibid.*, 55.

open and fluid system with regard to the pursuit of freedom and social mobility for Africans and their descendants in the Americas. He also sought to discuss, in more depth than Tannenbaum had, the dimension of social and economic factors in the explanation of the widespread access to manumission in Cuba. In Klein's discussion it was the combination of the legal and religious codes and practices and a diversified economy on the island that gave slaves in Cuba more possibilities to pursue freedom.<sup>45</sup> Because Cuba came late to large-scale sugar production for export on plantations, the island first developed an economy that offered many opportunities for slaves to accumulate wealth, especially in the thriving port of Havana.

Humboldt had recognized that, in spite of the explosive growth in sugar production, sugar had not yet taken complete hold of the Cuban economy in 1820 since almost two-thirds of the population was free and only one-sixth of the enslaved population worked on sugar plantations.<sup>46</sup> Klein amplified this point by showing the diversity of both rural and urban occupations worked by slaves – in livestock ranching, tobacco plots, small mixed farms, in urban manufacturing, military service, urban construction, entertainment, domestic service, etc. According to Klein, the opportunities to gain skills and live more independently enriched the lives of slaves, increasing their chances of achieving freedom and sustaining themselves when free.<sup>47</sup> Like Humboldt, Klein's comparative framework was based on the sharp contrast between Cuba and the Anglo-American colonies, in this instance, Virginia. There the plantation so dominated economic life that the opportunities for slaves to acquire skills and earn money were severely restricted. Following Humboldt, both Tannenbaum and Klein, saw the proof of the unique historical context of Cuba's colonial society in the ease and frequency of manumission there and in the resulting large free population of color compared to other colonies with slaves. The open attitude toward free people of color meant that "there was no sharp break between slave and free, or between colored and white freedmen." Especially in the cities, all groups performed the same kind of work and often shared the same social existence in urban areas."<sup>48</sup> Klein went so far as to argue that by the nineteenth century, the relatively open attitudes and practices developed over the preceding centuries regarding slavery, "had

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45. Herbert Klein, 1967, *Slavery in the Americas. A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 127-164. Although the first three parts of this book deal with the institutional, legal, and religious precedents, structures, and customs with regard to slavery, Part IV deals with the diversified economy in Cuba and the thriving urban economy of Havana as conducive to the pursuit of freedom by slaves. This tends to be minimized by Klein's critics who focus on his argument about legal and religious traditions. Tannenbaum briefly mentions the urban economy as an important part of the climate that favored freedom, citing Ortiz. Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*, 58.

46. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 124-125.

47. This point is summarized on page 163, Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*.

come to be accepted as legitimate and morally operative by the majority of Cuban whites.”<sup>49</sup>

This extrapolation of openness, from the period of the urban service economy to that of the plantation economy, was challenged by a number of scholars especially during the 1970s. Franklin Knight argued that generalizations about the nature of slavery over large spans of time based on legal codes or cultural traditions “can be of only limited value in understanding or comparing the nature of slave plantation societies in tropical America.”<sup>50</sup> Instead, he favored comparisons based on equivalent stages of economic and social growth. In his analysis, plantation societies showed remarkable similarities wherever they appeared regardless of the cultural heritage of the site.<sup>51</sup>

A substantial bibliography has developed documenting a “hardening” of the slave regime in Cuba as sugar production expanded, but there is some disagreement about the dating of it. Knight and others looked to the 1790s as the moment when the demands for enslaved labor in the expanding sugar sector began to outweigh the urban service economy of the earlier colonial period, bringing with it harsher work regimes and less tolerance of manumission and freed people.<sup>52</sup> Aimes and Klein, following more closely Humboldt’s observations about the diversity of slave experience in Cuba in the early 1800s, date a real shift in official attitudes toward free people of color to the aftermath of the Escalera rebellion in the 1840s.<sup>53</sup>

Scholarly emphasis on the harshness and rigidity of slave systems has shifted somewhat over the last several decades to a greater focus on the diversity of slaves’ experiences and on the agency of slaves in shaping their lives through their own economic activities, recourse to legal channels for redress

48. *Ibid.*, 194-211. The beginning of this section of the book relies heavily on Humboldt, Ortiz, and the Aimes article to discuss *coartación* adding further information on the nineteenth century and the socio-economic positions of free people of color. More recent work has corroborated this more open, service economy and large free population of color at least through the eighteenth century, M. Moreno Friginals, 1986, “Peculiaridades de la esclavitud en Cuba,” *Islas*, 85, 3-12.

49. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, 85.

50. Franklin Knight, 1970, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 193. Knight specifically treats the historiography on comparative race relations to date, including Tannenbaum and Klein in his introduction, xiii-xix. See also p. 132, footnote # 22.

51. *Ibid.*, 194.

52. On changing sexual mores and marriage patterns see Verena Martínez-Alier, 1989 [1974], *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth Century Cuba*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. On increased repression, especially of the free colored population see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, 1971, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies. A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press; Robert Paquette, 1988, *Sugar Is Made with Blood*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press; and Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, 1971, *El negro en la economía habanera del Siglo XIX*, La Habana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba.

53. Aimes, “Coartación,” 427-430 and Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, 199. Still Klein maintained that sugar did not dominate Cuban society until after emancipation in 1886, p. 150.

of grievances, cultural expressions and the like.<sup>54</sup> One example in North American historiography is Rebecca Scott's study of the emancipation process in nineteenth century Cuba which placed the enslaved themselves at the center of the process as they exploited changes in metropolitan law, pursued manumission, and negotiated the terms of their working lives with their enslavers.<sup>55</sup>

There has also been a call for more research on slavery outside the plantation sector to better capture the full range of the slave experience in the Americas.<sup>56</sup> Studies of slavery in frontier areas have been a particularly rich source of evidence for the diversity of slaves' experiences in the Americas.<sup>57</sup> A recent example in Cuban slavery studies is María Elena Díaz's book on the royal slaves of El Cobre in eastern Cuba. Díaz describes a group of slaves living more like peasants than plantation slaves. The *cobrerros* vigorously defended their autonomy and culture against both private entrepreneurs and colonial bureaucrats, ultimately taking their petitions directly to the King in Madrid and winning their freedom.<sup>58</sup>

The growing body of work documenting the many gradations of experience under the slave systems of the Americas and the ingenuity and tenacity of slaves all over the region in pursuing freedom and dignity through whatever openings those systems allowed has brought scholars back to a new appreciation of the work of Frank Tannenbaum.<sup>59</sup> The appreciations look to his suggestions about the importance of different colonial systems in shaping the slave experience, to his broader point (often obscured by those who have rejected his thesis about these differences) about the centrality of slavery and of Africans to the creation of the New World. Thomas Holt's essay based on

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54. See for the Anglo-American colonies such works as, Barry Higman, 1984, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press; Daniel H. Usner, Jr., 1992, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 1998, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press. Some of this bibliography is also summarized in John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 170-177*, which discusses the historical circumstances of the "peasant breach" in some Atlantic slave systems.

55. Rebecca J. Scott, 1985, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba, The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

56. See for instance, Verene Shepherd, ed. 2002, *Slavery Without Sugar*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press.

57. The literature on the Spanish empire is particularly strong in this regard. See for example, Frederick P. Bowser, 1974, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524-1650*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; Patrick J. Carroll, 1991, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz. Race, Ethnicity and Regional Development* Austin: University of Texas Press; Colin Palmer, 1976, *Slaves of the White God, Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press; William Frederick Sharp, 1976, *Slavery on the Spanish Frontier. The Colombian Chocó, 1680-1810*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

58. María Elena Díaz, 2000, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

a talk given at a Michigan State University symposium on the Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora in the mid-1990s uses Tannenbaum as a springboard to an even broader understanding of the value of comparative study of the African diaspora.<sup>60</sup> An upcoming workshop on Comparative slavery in the Atlantic World organized by Harvard's Atlantic History seminar also will take the Tannenbaum thesis as its focal point.

All of which brings us back to Humboldt. This conference is a testament to a renewed interest in his work although this interest seems to be running on a parallel rather than connecting track to the renewal of attention to Tannenbaum. I hope this brief review has clarified the close connections between those enterprises. Humboldt's acute observations of Cuban slavery continue to resonate in Cuban history and slavery studies more generally.<sup>61</sup> The statistics he compiled form the base of virtually all discussions of the momentous changes taking place in Cuba from the 1760s to the 1820s. His descriptions of the varied lives of slaves in Cuba captured well the diversity of slave experience on the island. As such his observations have informed much of the study and theorizing about slavery in the Americas. He helped lay the groundwork for an understanding of slavery as an institution and experience both diverse, according to specific historical places and moments, and shared by all the peoples of the Americas.

Humboldt's profound understanding of one of the fundamental features of American life was also infused with a deep moral revulsion against slavery as "the greatest of all evils to have plagued mankind."<sup>62</sup> Yet, his revulsion did not lead him to efface the many gradations of the conditions and experience

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59. One example is Jane Landers, 1999, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1-3. Landers notes that while Tannenbaum's thesis about the openness of Iberian systems to manumission and tolerance of free people of color many not hold for areas of monocultural sugar production for export, it could have validity in urban settings or even in areas with plantations where slaves had access to urban institutions like St. Augustine and its hinterland. Not all are as convinced of the value of Tannenbaum's early explorations of the gradations of enslavement and possibilities for freedom, see Díaz, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre*, 352 footnote #10. Díaz mentions Tannenbaum's thesis as the "old cultural reductionistic thesis on Iberian slavery" while describing her own study as one which shows the *cobrerros'* lives and community as "a more fluid continuum between slavery and freedom." (13). While her study is certainly a much more nuanced conceptually and well documented than Tannenbaum's broad strokes in *Slave and Citizen* her evidence on the possibilities for pursuing freedom through the Spanish legal system seem to uphold rather than negate Tannenbaum's work.

60. Thomas Holt, 1999, "Slavery and Freedom in the Atlantic World: Reflections on the Diasporan Framework," in Darlene Clark Hines and Jacqueline McLeod, eds., *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

61. Humboldt's descriptions of urban slavery are still often the foundation of historical summaries of eighteenth and nineteenth century Cuba, especially Havana. See for instance, Philip A. Howard, 1998, *Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1-20.

62. Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, 256.

of slavery as a way to imagine its end. As he reminded us, “[t]o remedy the evil. . . it is necessary to probe the sore; for there exists in social, as well as organic bodies, reparative forces, which when well directed, may triumph over the most inveterate evils.”<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, such deep-rooted optimism about the abilities of social bodies to purge and heal themselves has not been entirely fulfilled.

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63. *Ibid.*, 125.

