

Urban Slaves and Freed Blacks

Black Women's Objectification and Erotic Taboos

Cuban multidisciplinary texts documented in detail Blacks' ordinary activities, making it possible to picture their changing status throughout colonial society. One of the earliest sources of Cuban slaves' public activities is the *Actas capitulares del Ayuntamiento de La Habana* [Chapter minutes of the city council of Havana] at the City Hall of the city of Saint Christopher of Havana on the island Fernandina (the name of Cuba given by Christopher Columbus) meetings. The Minutes are available in two volumes from 1550–1565 and 1566–1574 (Roig de Leuchsenring). Most of these records were of city ordinances or regulations imposed on slaves or freed Blacks. They covered the types of manual work allowed in public and private spaces as well as living arrangements, including restrictions on their location and on materials that freed Blacks could use. There were limits on their participation in public activities, and certain types of clothing were banned.

There are also glimpses of the impact of Blacks on daily life in Havana. These prohibitions revealed the Blacks' tenacity in re-creating regional African customs or in developing so-called Black Creole products.

The meetings at the Havana City Hall fully addressed customs of slaves, and eventually they documented the presence of freed Blacks, known as *horros*, and the activities associated with their socioeconomic positions, first as enslaved individuals and later as freed Blacks in a highly structured ethnic society. In spite of the highly regulated lives imposed upon slaves and freed Blacks, they managed to preserve their popular customs (against restrictive monitoring of their activities), which were often viewed as illegal. Of much interest to literary critics are the images of emerging Black urban "types," who became popular characters in the *Costumbrista* literature of the nineteenth century.

The most common entry in the City of Havana's Minutes is Black street ven-

dors, who were either slaves or freed Blacks. The city closely regulated the kinds of merchandise they were allowed to sell and the prices of their goods. They dealt with specified goods, such as root vegetables and other vegetables, fruits, casaba bread, eggs, and poultry, to be sold at fixed prices and in certain locations within the city limits. This commerce gave rise to a booming Black social class, and from it came a literary character, the *pregonero*, or street vendor, whose selling style and advertising methods of yelling about his or her goods (as a *pregón*, or screamer) became a subject of Costumbrista literature.

Violations by Black vendors were common entries in the City of Havana's Minutes. One violation was the establishment of illegal taverns and other places of entertainment, which often included sleeping quarters, a coded reference to a house of ill repute. For example, on August 21, 1570, there was a hearing against Margarita Hernández, a Galician woman, who had been accused of selling wine to Blacks from her house turned into a tavern. Black freed women were by law forbidden to "sell wine in a public tavern since it is gravely damaging to a republic, because after getting drunk many Blacks would get killed" (I:286).

White and Black men frequented taverns, which were one source of African-based music within an establishment that was often described in negative terms: "in the said house [. . .] there occurs much immodest and roguish behavior" (II:201). The constant references to Blacks in attendance and the veiled references to the kinds of activities that took place would also be reflected in nineteenth-century Costumbrista literature.

Another common theme in the Minutes was the City Hall's handling of lands used by freed Blacks. The creation of areas specifically for the construction of houses for freed Blacks came about as the result of formal requests from freed Blacks. Granting such petitions, as stated in one case, seemed to have been in recognition of extraordinarily good habits. Permission to build permanent dwellings contrasted with the negative portraits mentioned previously. The freed Black asking for land to build a dwelling appeared named, often with first and last names, and there was a positive reason stated for his or her request.

There seems to have been a concerted effort to restrict areas specifically geared to incorporate land under petition by freed Blacks. There were many requests by Blacks to inhabit lots next to properties owned by other freed Blacks. The rejection of land petitions seems to imply that the land requested was restricted to White inhabitants only. In Costumbrista essays these Black neighborhoods served two significant purposes. First, they were the stages of dangerous and forbidden scenes. Second, they would be the last bastions of "traditional" customs, mainly represented in foods, which have not disappeared yet under the influence of modernism.

There were two matters obviously left undiscussed in the City of Havana's Minutes: any recording of religious observances by slaves or freed Blacks or any celebration of musical activities. Other than a request from a church for permission to purchase slaves to be used in construction, there are no entries about Blacks' connections with any official religious organization. There was also no discussion of the underground practices of native African religions in Havana. The Minutes did not record the presence of folkloric music so common among slaves and freed Blacks, particularly during religious performances. "Noises," in one of the Minutes referred to as "scandals," may point to the adherence by Blacks at the time to such religious music, related to a *cabildo*, or an all-Black social organization.

Alcohol was a source of amusement for Blacks and Whites alike (II:54). This type of entry was often detailed in references to illegal taverns, which, as indicated earlier, were places for sexual entertainment. Forced prostitution, as masters engaged slaves in a sexual market, became a frequent complaint cited in the Havana City Hall Minutes, and it was the subject of legal restrictions issued by Spanish law (Hall, *Social* 91). The numerous statements that White men were often present in taverns, participating with Blacks in violations of proper social conduct, implied a special type of multiethnic marginal community. This group of "criminals" would also be a topic of interest to the *Costumbrista* writers.

Historical texts continued to offer portraits of Black figures based on their specific place within the highly structured and controlled, colonial, slavery-based society. The earliest of such historical accounts is found in *Descripción de la Isla de Cuba, Con algunas consideraciones sobre su población y comercio* [Description of the island of Cuba, with some observations about its population and its commerce] by Cuban-born Nicolás Joseph de Ribera. Written in Spain in 1760, but never published, this first-person account of the conditions of Cuban society provided information about the island's judicial management as a Spanish colony, including the effects that limitations on the slave trade had had on commerce.

As part of his historical overview of the Cuban population, de Ribera's chapter entitled "De sus gentes" [About its peoples] begins a condensed account of a national racial profile. He omitted any serious attempt to memorialize the native inhabitants, who had disappeared by the time of his writing: "in some other towns one sees such descendants of them, they are of mixed race and they are quite few" (101). Using a descending scale of racial components, de Ribera divided the population "by color" into three distinctive groups: Whites, mulattoes and Blacks. "The Whites are from Europe or they are descendants of Europeans. The Blacks are brought from Africa or they

are descendants of Africans, and the mulattoes are a mixed race of Black and White” (101). De Ribera was a declared supporter of the slave trade, which, he wrote, must be increased in order to support Cuba’s booming agricultural industry of the late eighteenth century.

His discourse on Black racial classifications was based on their “condition,” inherent in their birth, as “free or slaves.” He explained that dichotomy: “All the Whites are free, and those Blacks and mulattoes who by their own labor or by the generosity of their masters acquired freedom. And the slaves, those subjected to such an unfortunate condition, as a prize of war or by another legitimate title in Africa, were transported to that Island, or were born there of captive mothers brought there” (101).

De Ribera offers glimpses of a highly structured caste system among slaves. This caste system of African-born slaves and their descendants, known as criollos [Creoles], are at the heart of the rigid Cuban slavery system. His final observations on the racial constitution of the African ethnicities, whose origins he divided into “fifteen or twenty different nations,” none of them named, provided a subcategory: Cuban-born slaves, or criollos, and those natives of Africa known as bozales (102). This division, as with Whites and freed Blacks, provided de Ribera grounds for explaining an animosity that kept them apart: “Criollos are those who are born on the Island, and the bozales came here after their birth. The former speak Spanish as the Spaniards do, which is the only language of the whole Island. And the others, more or less, according to their intelligence, and the time that they have heard it” (102).

Although de Ribera clearly preferred the Creole slave over the bozal, he also commented on a special consideration for the bozal slaves: “one tries then to instruct them in our religion and in our laws, and equally in the language of the land” (102). As many eyewitnesses stated, however, often this regulation was not observed, particularly in rural settings, such as the plantations.

Creole slaves were not afforded any special privileges. De Ribera had a sympathetic view toward them, perhaps simply because, unlike the bozales slaves, they had been born in Cuba. He referred to an immediate need for new laws on slavery, an update that was necessary because “they were formed a long time ago in Havana, they are antiquated now . . . and at every step they show that they were made with extremely little knowledge of the whole Island” (144). Such legal reform was necessary for differentiation of the rights of the three main racial components on the island: “It seems to me that on the Island, there is a need for municipal ordinances that distinguish the rights of Whites, and of Blacks, and of mulattoes” (144). The subject of mulattoes, the island’s third racial component, to whom de Ribera presumably was willing to grant rights, remains

unexamined throughout the text. His lack of interest in further exploration of the freed Black may be explained by the mulattoes' disassociation from slavery-based tasks on plantations; however, his mention of them indicates their increasing importance as a component of the Cuban social fabric. He makes no effort to illustrate such a role, for example, by indicating their fields of work or places where they were allowed to live.

José Martín Félix de Arrate (1701–1765) offers a different view of slavery in his *Llave del Nuevo Mundo, Antemural de las Indias Occidentales, La Habana Descripta: Noticias de su fundación, aumentos y estado* [Key to the New World, defense of the Western Indies, Havana described: news of its foundation, growth and condition] (1761). This is a more comprehensive study of the emergence of Havana as an urban center of a booming economy. In a text considerably longer than de Ribera's, de Arrate, writing as a member of the City Council of Havana, states his hope for an increase in the importation of Africans onto the island as slaves, the only means for fulfillment of Cuba's economic potential. Understandably, his prejudiced view toward slaves stemmed from his promotion of slavery itself, a business from which the city of Havana derived many economic benefits.

De Arrate characterized Blacks as barbaric, compared with the late native, indigenous peoples, whose demise had been a reason for the importation of Blacks. His portrayal of the indigenous people, summarizing an unnamed chronicle, was set within the tradition of the noble savage: "they were peaceful in nature, docile and shy, very respectful toward their superiors, with great skill and aptitude for instruction in the Faith, willing to help, of good disposition and personable, and pleasing in form and beauty" (18). This was in contrast to the African slave, delineated as a "barbarian" (18). He lamented:

It is indisputable that in this country and in others like it, the preservation of the Indians would have been incomparably more desirable than the entrance of the aforesaid Blacks, because that people being less barbaric, as our historians suppose, they would serve with more intelligence and skill in their work in sugar and tobacco, in sowing and in the harvests of the rest of the products that the Island offers, which do not demand so much strength as the work in the mines. (40)

De Arrate did not record details concerning the booming sugar market that he indirectly refers to in the preceding quotation, preferring to dwell on data dealing with the city of Havana.

Havana had begun to contend for the luxurious life of the capital cities of the viceroalties of Mexico and Peru. De Arrate recorded the existence in Havana of