

the weakest chapter in the book. It is very brief, and does not offer the promised insights that would connect Congo's colonial labour history to Congo's post-independence political history. This is a missed opportunity. The promised argument is potentially fascinating, particularly in view of the insights obtained from the analysis of the 1941 strike. Moreover, there would have been interesting opportunities to reflect on Congo's labour relations since independence, up until the present day, and on the deep roots of contemporary forms of "free labour" in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In today's Congo, labour is weakly organized or even unorganized. Trade unions are unable to mobilize and defend labour rights while they are invisible in the political landscape. At the same time, labour conditions are often appalling, particularly in the mining sector, where cases of forced labour, child labour, and other human rights abuses have been repeatedly reported.<sup>2</sup> Seibert's study hints at the links between the colonial labour history and contemporary labour relations, but it fails to really engage with these questions. It is here that she could have contributed something significant to the work of Coquery-Vidrovitch. But this would be a different study, for which Seibert's work will be a very valuable starting point.

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FINCH, AISHA K. *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba. La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841–1844*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill (NC) 2015. xiv, 298 pp. Paper: \$32.95. (E-book: \$27.99.)

In 1844, a savage wave of repression swept through the sugar lands of Western Cuba, following the uncovering of a conspiracy to organize a general uprising of slaves and overthrow Spanish colonial rule over the island. *La Escalera*, as it came to be known for the brutal interrogation technique of tying slaves to ladders and flaying them with a lash, brought to an end a cycle of growing discontent and rebellion. So severe were the reprisals of that year that it would take a generational shift for a new concerted attempt to free Cuba from slavery and imperialism, with the outbreak of the first war of independence in 1868. A great deal has been written about *La Escalera*, and historians continue to debate the extent to which there really was a generalized conspiracy, and who were its prime movers: independence-minded white Cubans, agents of British abolitionism and imperial pretensions, or urban free blacks seeking to emulate the racial liberation in neighbouring Haiti. Rarely in such accounts are the slaves on the plantations themselves perceived as the revolutionary driving force.

Aisha Finch's evocative reappraisal of the events leading up to *La Escalera* seeks to rebalance the account, and open new avenues for understanding the social dynamics that led

2. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, *The Curse of Gold* (New York, 2005), and Amnesty International, "This is What We Die For": *Human Rights Abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Power the Global Trade in Cobalt* (London, 2016).

to the insurgent outburst of the early 1840s. By placing the focus firmly on the plantation slaves themselves, drawing in particular on the testimony they gave during the interrogations, she seeks to show how the black slaves were very far from being unthinking explosive raw material either to expend in the production of sugar or exploit in the struggle against Spanish colonial power. Instead, she shows how an everyday culture of resistance and secret organization developed among the slaves themselves, and through their relationships not just with one another in the closed confines of the plantation, but as part of a much wider network built on kinship and other connections that extended across estate lines, through the rural districts and into the towns and cities.

Most histories of the period privilege certain dominant voices, those that were most visible or easily heard – whether white elites, or educated free urban blacks. This book does an excellent job at bringing to the forefront the experiences and often hidden resistances of those who usually remain as an anonymous mass: slave women and “less visible” men. Finch thereby succeeds in widening our understanding of the way in which the movement for change was constituted and mobilized, exploring “their political subjectivities, social and community formations, and gendered identities”. By viewing the events from the bottom up she is able to construct an innovative narrative that sees the attempted uprising not as the result of an overarching centralized conspiracy, but as the outcome of multiple local mobilizations that came to be linked.

*Rethinking Slave Rebellion* necessarily reads the archival sources against the grain. Relying as she does primarily on the extensive transcriptions of often-contradictory testimony given during the interrogations of 1844, she shows great sensitivity in her reading of what was often left unsaid. Answers given under duress, in response to questions that were usually biased towards a particular perspective, would leave hidden other interpretations and details that Finch successfully brings to the forefront.

This study is particularly strong at restoring women to their rightful place in a history that has till now been very male-dominated, in which few female voices can be heard beyond the handful who obtained notoriety either for openly fighting alongside the men, or for their role in betraying the movement. In this, Finch contributes to the growing literature that re-examines the dynamics of slave society in which women played just as important a role as men, albeit an often less immediately visible one. She also shows how Cuban slave society and culture was not simply a Cuban construct, but one that was built upon experiences and identities that crossed the Atlantic from different parts of Africa. After all, many of those involved in the uprisings were first generation slaves, with the very fresh memory of being torn from their homelands. Finch shows how the differences and similarities between the various groups played out in Cuba’s volatile environment.

Finch begins with a general exploration of how Africans, and those of African descent, fitted into the wider social context of colonial Matanzas – the province at the forefront of Cuba becoming the world’s leading sugar producer, where the most advanced sugar mills were located and where the uprisings were most apparent. She goes on to examine the rural slave networks that developed in this environment, where despite the controls imposed by plantations on their captive workforce a surprising level of geographical mobility remained possible – whether illicitly or sanctioned. This contributed to a number of noteworthy slave uprisings during 1843, which are the subject of chapter three, and provided a basis for the building of a conspiracy for a much larger and more general rebellion in 1844, though this was uncovered before it could explode. Finch then looks at the urban connection, and the links between the rural slave networks and the free blacks in the city who were held to be the ringleaders of the movement. Although the whole book

returns women to their fair and rightful place in the history, chapter five focuses upon them in particular – not only reappraising the few who were seen as prominent, but uncovering those whose stories have tended to remain hidden by the historical record, deconstructing the masculinized version of events that has tended to predominate. Chapter six then looks at how the 1844 movement was actually built up from a multiplicity of local experiences and rebellions, resulting in a much more nuanced understanding of how leadership in the uprising was constituted; at the same time, it looks beyond “leadership” as such, to the often anonymous role played by male and female slaves in challenging the basis of their continued servitude. Finally, Finch provides a fascinating insight into how African cultural and religious practices played a key role in mobilizing slaves, and bolstering their courage to stand up and fight.

The particular strength of *Rethinking Slave Rebellion* is the way in which Aisha Finch seeks to recover the experiences and involvement, the faces and voices, of the many enslaved women and men who took part, often anonymously or in hidden ways, in these iconic events. As with most such endeavours, in order to achieve this much needs to be read into the often misleading sources, and in particular into what has been omitted. However, therein potentially lies a danger. While not for a moment wanting to detract from the power and importance of this study, Finch does perhaps display a tendency to read into the evidence the story that she is predisposed to find. For example, she understandably wants to demonstrate how strong black women (whether enslaved or free) played an active role, and as a result asserts such an interpretation even when the textual evidence being drawn on would appear to say differently. That is not to say that she is necessarily wrong in her interpretation, but it does point to the difficulties in attempting to rewrite history from the perspective of those whose voices have been typically muted or distorted in, or simply absent from, the official records upon which we as historians are dependent.

Also, by focusing on rethinking the movement against slavery in the 1840s from the perspective of free and enslaved Africans and those of African descent, the story remains a partial one. Not all whites were elite, and the rural workers were not exclusively black. Certainly Cuban society and culture was very much defined by race – not on clear-cut black/white lines, but rather along a spectrum allowing for many gradations of racial mixing. Although many of the declarations made during the interrogations asserted the intention of killing all whites, there is still a need to treat such testimony critically, as it is hard to separate this from the predisposition of the colonial authorities to play on the racial fears of the time. Indeed, a number of white workers were also caught up in the events, and accused of involvement. Much research still needs to be done into the multi-racial making of the Cuban working class.

Nevertheless, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion* is an impressively researched and highly readable addition not only to nineteenth-century Cuban historiography, but also to the history of insurgencies in general. Aisha Finch sets a standard for ensuring that the voices and experiences of even those who have left the least mark on the archival records, and women in particular, can regain their rightful place in our understanding of our past.

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