

Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century. By ALEJANDRO DE LA FUENTE. Envisioning Cuba. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 304 pages. \$40.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by María Elena Díaz, *University of California, Santa Cruz*

Alejandro de la Fuente's new book, *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century*, is a most welcome addition to the emerging field of Atlantic studies and to Cuban historiography. Havana's location in the Atlantic world is generally linked to the slave-based sugar plantation system developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—that is, to “what Pieter Emmer has called the second Atlantic” (226). The present book moves the story back more than two centuries to Havana's insertion in the first Atlantic system then dominated by the Iberian empires. Although previous generations of historians have documented various aspects of the city's early development, their main emphasis has often been on Havana's imperial role as a military outpost and major stopover of the Spanish fleet system. De la Fuente's book revises—or, rather, complements—that limited imperial view by highlighting Havana's maritime, commercial role as a port city, by placing it in the context of Atlantic studies, and by providing a richly textured local view of the emerging city.

The book's title alludes to the classic work of early Atlantic studies: Pierre Chaunu and Huguette Chaunu's *Séville et l'Atlantique*, though *Havana and the Atlantic* is only obliquely related to its famous predecessor and covers a much shorter period, the 1560s–1610.¹ While De la Fuente's starting point correlates to the organization of the Spanish fleet system, traditionally associated with Havana's takeoff, the rationale for ending in 1610 is not explicit. There is no mention of the dramatic decline of Seville's Atlantic trade by the 1620s or of events such as the Dutch penetration of Caribbean trade circuits that may have affected the port city's development or its reorientation in the seventeenth century's Atlantic world. The epilogue does not hint at any ruptures to come at the end of the “long” sixteenth century.

Like many current Atlantic studies, the book tries to reconstruct early transoceanic flows of commodities, people, and ideas that subvert presentist notions of national boundaries—or even imperial ones—still informing many historiographies. Except for some examples of trans-imperial crossings (mostly of commodities and material culture), De la Fuente pretty much stays within the boundaries of the Iberian Atlantic.

¹ Pierre Chaunu and Huguette Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique (1504–1650)*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1955–59).

The book's chapters deal with shipping and trade, the role of the fleets and the service economy, population and urban growth, production, slavery and the racial order, and the people of the land. Access to Cuban archives is notoriously unreliable for scholars working outside Cuba. Thanks to collaborators on the island, De la Fuente was able to access and process a considerable volume of data, including local notarial records, treasury registries, and town council records, enabling record linkages as well as fascinating glimpses of networks, careers, and lives. At times, however, he stays too close to these sources, leaving this reviewer wishing for more probing analysis of the data and their significance. A more explicit engagement with related work on Havana, even if more imperial in orientation or based on other archives, would have further enhanced this study.²

Chapter 2, on shipping and trade, is the most directly informed by current themes in Atlantic history. It is also the most innovative. The chapter traces three interrelated commercial circuits that converged in Havana: a transatlantic one directly related to the fleet system, an intercolonial one operating in the circum-Caribbean, and a less-delineated insular one. Although the data do not allow for a sustained examination of the articulation of these circuits or their precise local economic implications, the chapter illustrates quite well how they operated. Tables detail the range of commodities exchanged and their proportion of the overall Atlantic and intercolonial trade. Commodities' transoceanic trajectories from production to consumption centers are nicely traced, suggesting the flow of material culture across imperial boundaries. European migration, although also meant to tell a story of transimperial crossings and local cosmopolitanism, seems to point to population movement mainly within the Iberian Atlantic (the non-Iberian presence documented in table 4.1, for example, seems almost insignificant). The documentation of the Portuguese commercial presence in Havana is particularly important and, despite restrictions, may have been enabled by the unification of the Portuguese and Spanish crowns in 1580.

De la Fuente's chapter 3 is about the fleets and supports previous work regarding the growth of a service economy around the annual visit of merchant ships and military galleons, although it highlights more the transient population that passed through the city. Chapter 5 on production has a strong section on the emergence of an apparently modest sugar industry but little on the cattle-ranching industry despite the fact that hides constituted Havana's main export product. A very brief section deals with shipbuilding, a fascinating subject still awaiting a monographic

² For instance, Isabelo Macías Domínguez, *Cuba en la primera mitad del siglo XVII* (Seville, Spain, 1978).

treatment. Other chapters are more “local” in their orientation and focus on Havana’s growth and transformation after the 1560s. A growing free and slave population, increasing land grants and sales, and expansion of infrastructure and services count as indicators of change. Accounts of the growth and development of Havana, however, may sound a bit overstated at times. There was a hospital, but doctors were hard to come by, as were schoolteachers. Three monasteries and a church did go up (but how many parishes?), as did two Christian brotherhoods for blacks (a considerable number). Tithes, however, were lower than in most other towns in the empire, indicating a very modest productive activity, and the city depended strongly on the military subsidy. Throughout, the transformations described would have benefited from comparative contextualization to better assess their significance. A brief but very suggestive comparison of Havana’s (population) growth with that of other Spanish port towns appears only in the epilogue. Particularly pertinent would have been comparisons with the major city in the Caribbean, Santo Domingo, Hispaniola’s capital, which Havana was then in the process of displacing.

Chapter 6 on slavery and the racial order does not break much new ground but will be useful for future studies to build on. Havana’s urban slavery does not seem to differ much from urban slavery and racial hierarchies elsewhere in the Iberian Atlantic, including Brazil, perhaps, as the study suggests, because of the early modern hegemonic culture of slavery extending throughout the Iberian world, but also because of the discussion’s level of generality. Comparisons with Mediterranean slavery are apposite, but a greater engagement with studies of urban and non-plantation slavery on the American side of the Atlantic, including Mexico and Peru, is called for, particularly as increasingly nuanced studies that open up new questions and comparisons across time and place have begun to emerge. De la Fuente makes a few suggestive references to African (or neo-African) identifications and practices, but otherwise any discussion of African influences present in the city is limited to the determination of the regional origin of imported slaves. Of particular interest to this reviewer were the “royal slaves” (152) employed in the city’s public works and fortification projects. Because there is little scrutiny of “voices” in this study, we cannot know if these slaves might have invoked their identity as “king’s slaves” (153) to claim entitlements like, for instance, their counterparts in El Cobre, an Atlantic frontier zone in eastern Cuba, did a century later, under different local circumstances.³

³ María Elena Díaz, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670–1780* (Stanford, Calif., 2000).

Cuba and the Spanish Caribbean are still in need of robust social and cultural colonial historiographies analogous to those of other Iberian and non-Iberian regions in the Americas. De la Fuente's ambitious study sets the ground and leads the way in this direction—if only scholars care to move out of the nineteenth-century plantation world. His book is also an invitation for more Atlantic-oriented urban studies and conversations.

Black Townsmen: Urban Slavery and Freedom in the Eighteenth-Century Americas. By MARIANA L. R. DANTAS. *The Americas in the Early Modern Atlantic World.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 296 pages. \$79.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Cassandra Pybus, *University of Sydney*

Mariana L. R. Dantas's monograph, third in Palgrave Macmillan's series on the Americas in the early modern Atlantic world under the general editorship of Amy Turner Bushnell and Jack P. Greene, seeks to tease out the historiographical assumption that urban societies were more permeable environments for enslaved people and more propitious for the opportunity of freedom and upward mobility. In her careful, comparative study of two cities, one in North America and one in South America, Dantas not only shows this to be the case but also is able to show how these urban environments developed a permeable and accommodating nature in the first place. Most significantly, Dantas investigates the way in which enslaved people contributed to shaping the urban environment in a way that would prove beneficial to them.

In her long opening chapter, "Shaping Urban Environments in Eighteenth-Century Minas Gerais and Maryland," Dantas establishes the nature and characteristics of two urban centers: Baltimore, in Maryland, and Sabará, in Minas Gerais, Brazil. The development of these places as major regional centers happened at different points in time: Sabará was founded in 1711 following the discovery of gold at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Baltimore in the wake of the American Revolution. Still, Dantas is able to show their commonality in the commercial development of services, shops, and trades that met the demands of a wide hinterland. This first chapter provides a useful economic and demographic overview of the two regions but, curiously, makes virtually no mention of slaves and free people of color in the scene-setting of these pages. Dantas explains that she wanted to deal with people of color separately; however, in light of her argument that both towns were built on slavery and greatly influenced in their respective