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Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba: Resistance and Repression

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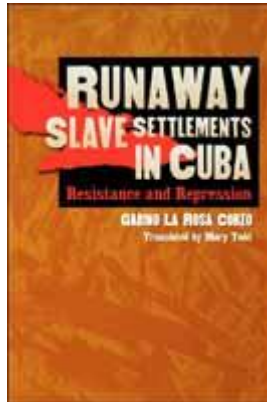
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Gabino La Rosa Corzo. *Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba: Resistance and Repression*. Translated by Mary Todd. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 292 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendices, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8078-2803-3; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8078-5479-4.

Reviewed for H-Atlantic by Antonio Santamaría García, Área de Cultura Científica, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Spain; translated by Jodi Campbell, Texas Christian University.

Studies on slavery, whether broadly international or focused on particular slave-based societies such as Cuba, constitute a principal historiographic theme. The analysis of this theme has its roots in the time when the trade in Africans was still practiced, and scholars have adopted multiple approaches from distinct angles through and across disciplines. Within this panorama, however, it is still possible to make new and interesting contributions, though this requires a notable effort. This is the case with Gabino La Rosa Corzo's book *Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba*, an investigation of the *palenques* or settlements of fugitive slaves, translated from its original Spanish edition, *Los palenques del oriente de Cuba: resistencia y acoso* (1991).

La Rosa addresses the widest possible chronological framework. The book begins with the colonization of Cuba and the first recorded slave uprising in Jobabo in 1533, and pays particular attention to the events of El Portillo in 1743, the first large-scale attack on a slave settlement. Although this first chapter of the book, dedicated to the period before the nineteenth century and to the origin and development of the early modern slave-based Cuban plantation system, is intended to serve as an introduction, it is well crafted and particularly valuable given the scarcity of studies on this time period.

The focal point of *Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba*, however, is centered on the years following the Haitian Revolution of 1791, when this Greater Antilles island became the

sugar bowl of the world, adapted its colonial relationship with Spain to facilitate the development of commercial agriculture and fruit exportation, and substantially increased its importation of slaves, necessary to the labor of sugar production given the island's low population. Chapters 2 through 4 are a chronological study of the stages of the growth, consolidation, and decline of the slave-based plantation, while the last chapter analyzes the *palenque* as a system of resistance.

In regard to its analytical framework, this book chiefly addresses the eastern half of Cuba, less populated and more economically underdeveloped than the western half. This has important implications, especially given that one of the author's arguments is that the slave settlements of the eastern part of the island were not concentrations of escaped slaves from all over the territory, as has traditionally been believed to be the case due to the isolation of the region. Rather, they came from the nearby surroundings. Therefore, one of the implicit conclusions of the book is that it is necessary to study the corresponding patterns on the other side of the island. A second main issue (implied, though not directly stated) is that the geographical focus of the study allows it to explain why the cimarron settlements of eastern Cuba began to disappear before the process of abolition. This process began with the colony's first war of independence (1868-78), because the area's economy remained underdeveloped and the majority of the sugar mills disappeared in the process of modernization of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Within this framework, La Rosa's research is very interesting in that it addresses relatively unknown aspects of slavery with a refined, complete, and interdisciplinary methodology that combines the tools of history, anthropology, and archaeology, and contributes new knowledge to all three. The diaries of the slave-hunters, to which the author has dedicated a previous monograph (*Cazadores de esclavos: diarios* [2004]), along with official, civil, and military documentation about the slave settlements and the conflicts that developed with them, are the principal archival sources. In addition to these, the author uses information gleaned from excavations carried out on the settlement sites themselves, from which he reconstructs maps and diagrams that are essential to the study.

The author also uses his analysis of the *palenques* to study the daily lives of slaves, and by extrapolation, the habits and customs that were common to them and to rural Cubans in general. La Rosa is interested in the nature of the economy, the kind of agriculture that was practiced, what foods were cultivated, and the daily routines of the islanders, all of which are valuable additions to the principal theme of the work.

Along with the aforementioned conclusions, La Rosa analyzes the kind of locations that slaves chose for their hideouts: hidden locations that were easily defended and located near potential shelters so that the settlement could be quickly abandoned in case of attack. A particularly interesting conclusion is that the fugitive slave population was not particularly belligerent, and generally chose flight rather than confrontation when it felt threatened.

Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba analyzes one of the multiple forms of black resistance to slavery on this Greater Antilles island. Similar work on this topic has been published by José Luciano Franco and Francisco Pérez de la Riva, but in general, and particularly in

recent decades, historians have been more interested in other forms of resistance, including rebellions and political and legal battles, such as those studied by Rebecca J. Scott, Gloria García Rodríguez, and Manuel Barcia Paz. The lack of references is surprising, and the book does not incorporate the most recent scholarship in this field into its text or brief bibliography. This is understandable given that the original text was written over a decade ago, but it is regrettable that the translation of this book in English was not taken as an opportunity to update the material. This is the only defect in an otherwise excellent and important study.

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