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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

PUBLIC PERFORMANCE: FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR FASHIONING IDENTITIES IN MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY CUBA

By

Jacqueline Grant

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2012

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PUBLIC PERFORMANCE: FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR FASHIONING IDENTITIES IN MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY CUBA

Jacqueline Grant

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GRANT, JACQUELINE (Ph.D., History)
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Public Performance: Free People of Color Fashioning Identities in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Cuba.

Abstract of a dissertation at the University of Miami.

Dissertation supervised by Professor Kate Ramsey.
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Free people of color held an ambiguous place in Caribbean slave societies. On the one hand they were nominally free, but the reality of their daily lives was often something less than free. This work examines how free people of color, or *libres de color*, in nineteenth-century Cuba attempted to carve out lives for themselves in the face of social, economic, and political constraints imposed on them by white Cubans and Spaniards living in the island. It focuses on how through different Afro-Cuban associations some *libres de color* used public music and dance performances to self-fashion identities on their own terms. The images they constructed were in direct contrast to those in circulation in the emerging Cuban public sphere and reveal that free blacks did not acquiesce to the constraints being levied against them and the negative stereotyping of their community, but rather attempted to self-define their identities.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Gerald and Joyce Grant

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Archival research for this dissertation was conducted in the United States, Cuba and Spain. These research trips could not have been undertaken without generous financial support from the Department of History and the Center for Latin American Studies at University of Miami as well as the Conference on Latin American history. I wish to thank these organizations for their confidence in my scholarship. For the archivists and librarians who guided me through the collections I examined, I am grateful. I would particularly like to thank Lesbia Varona at the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami and Araceli García Carranza at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí in Havana Cuba. In addition, Joseph Dorsey's invaluable suggestions for maneuvering through the Spanish collections in the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid and the Archivo General de Indias in Seville were most appreciated.

In addition to financial support and guidance in the archives, I also received much encouragement from the members of my dissertation committee. I would like to thank Professor Stephen Stein for the many lively discussions about Latin America that helped shape my approach to this study. I am grateful to Professor Ashli White for her insightful comments on the various drafts of this work. Professor Lillian Manzor brought an interdisciplinary perspective to my research, especially with regards to performance, for which I am indebted to her. I cannot begin to express my gratitude to my advisor, Professor Kate Ramsey. From my first timid forays into the world of academic research to the completion of this dissertation she has provided encouragement, advice, feedback, and suggestions. Her numerous readings of my dissertation helped hone my arguments

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Throughout my graduate studies my family has sustained me and trusted that I would indeed achieve my goal of a doctorate in history. My cousin Bette Grant-Otunla was ever before me as an example of what could be achieved with focus and determination. My sister's staunch encouragement helped dispel the periodic doubts that I would reach my goal and kept me focused on excellence and for this I am thankful. My parents did not complete the journey with me but I felt their presence everyday. This work is for them. Finally, I owe my children, Dominique and Jonathan more than I can express in writing. You were just "little ones" when the three of us began this journey together and you had to learn very early how to be quiet so Mummy could study, how to adjust your wants to fit our limited budget, and to have discussions about "colonialism" and "enslavement" when your peers were discussing more child-friendly themes. I am so grateful for your patience, your genuine excitement about my research and your unwavering pride in my quest. You allowed me my dream and now it is time for yours.

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 *Libres de Color* in Nineteenth-Century Cuba 19

Chapter 2 “Well Dressed After the French Mode”:

Embracing a Philanthropic Agenda 59

Chapter 3 Leopard Men: Manhood and Power in Nineteenth-Century Cuba 111

Chapter 4 The *Tumba Francesa*: French Blacks Define Themselves 167

Epilogue 213

References 218

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Introduction

In 1843, a series of slave revolts erupted on several sugar plantations around the province of Matanzas in Spanish colonial Cuba. Citing evidence of a widespread conspiracy to overthrow the colonial government and slavery, authorities initiated a violent response now referred to as *La Escalera,* designed to deter any future uprisings. During the ensuing investigations free people of color – *libres de color* – and their social organizations were heavily implicated in the alleged conspiracy, whether on the basis of real or fabricated evidence. As a result, the slave regulations promulgated the following year included provisions that placed *libres de color* and the activities of their social organizations under a tightened regime of legal control.

The treatment *libres de color* received from colonial authorities in the aftermath of the 1843 rebellions raises a number of questions that form the basis for this work. In choosing to study *libres de color* I have been interested in understanding why this class was so violently targeted and how they responded. After *La Escalera* they faced disempowering socio-legal restrictions that seemed intended to limit their ability to participate economically, socially, and politically in the emerging Cuban public sphere. The reprisals against them went far beyond individual punishments but rather appeared to have been designed to decimate this population and render the free black community powerless to conduct their everyday lives as they chose. In this work I argue that for *libres de color* in nineteenth-century Cuba, power and participation in the urban community were closely linked and while they faced restrictions designed to render them powerless and curtail their participation in their urban communities they did not, in fact,

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acquiesce to them. My work reveals that some urban *libres de color* addressed their constrained situations by self-fashioning identities in direct contrast to those being promulgated by the dominant white society, and in so doing, they turned to familiar organizations and cultural practices.

Afro-Cuban associations and the social, religious, and mutual aid functions they provided had long been central to enslaved and free black communities in the island. After *La Escalera* these associations and their gatherings were placed under increased surveillance because colonial authorities suspected them of having provided opportunities for blacks to plan the 1843 uprisings. *Public Performance: Free People of Color Fashioning Identities in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Cuba* focuses on how through those very organizations, *libres de color* in Havana, Matanzas, and Santiago de Cuba confronted the disabilities they faced during the period following *La Escalera* and prior to the beginning of the first war of independence.

My research focuses on three principal associations established by blacks in nineteenth-century Cuba beginning with associations that represented a variation on the social groups that both free and enslaved blacks had been forming since the sixteenth century. The members of these associations —called *cabildos de nación*—had traditionally been bound together by ethnic or linguistic affiliations but in the years after *La Escalera* new groups reflected an ethnically diverse membership.[1] The second type of organization studied in this work is the secret fraternal Abakuá society founded in Regla near Havana in the mid-1830s, which thereafter spread to other urban areas. These societies were initially formed by enslaved *criollo* blacks (that is, born in Cuba) with ties

[1] While it is not known if the free blacks in Matanzas studied in this work were members of a *cabildo* group, the fact that they hosted the event with a common goal of raising funds for a charity implies some level on community affiliation amongst the participants. In addition, the large numbers of dancers at the

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to the urban docks, but their membership eventually grew to encompass free men, men of mixed-races as well as whites and Asians. Finally, I examine Haitian-influenced *tumba francesa* groups formed by free immigrants of color from Saint-Domingue who had fled the conflicts associated with the slave uprising in that colony in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Previous studies have examined how *libres de color* responded to post-1843 restrictions against their freedoms by using their social networks, by seeking justice through the colonial legal system, and by taking advantage of economic opportunities afforded them by whites' attitudes towards employment in urban areas.[2] Taken together these works underscore that *libres de color* did not simply endure restrictions against their freedoms in the aftermath of *La Escalera* but rather continually challenged their subordinate status in Cuban society through diverse means. My work builds on and contributes to this literature by examining how, through the above-mentioned associations and others, *libres de color* used public performance events in the years after *La Escalera*, to announce their intention to participate in urban Cuban society on their own terms. *Public Performance* considers ways in which *libres de color* used performance to construct public identities that challenged negative stereotypes being circulated by whites and argues that for some groups of *libres de color* performance became a primary mode of self-fashioning.

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[2] Luz Maria Mena, "No Common Folk": Free blacks and race relations in the early modernization of Havana (1830s - 1840s)" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2001), Michele Bernita-Reid, "Negotiating a Slave Regime: Free People of Color in Cuba, 1844-1868." (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2004), Reid's dissertation was recently published as a book: Michele Reid-Vasquez, *The Year of the Lash: Free People of Color in Cuba and the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), Daniel Walker, *No More, No More. Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004)

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Libres de Color: A Destabilizing Presence

Restrictions against the growing population of *libres de color* did not begin with the *La Escalera* investigations. As this segment of the urban Cuban population began to achieve some degree of economic mobility during the 1820s and 1830s, many white *criollos* concerned about the social and economic development of their cities were anxious about the role this "problematic" population would play. In the race-based social hierarchy that existed in slave-holding nineteenth-century Cuba free blacks were considered to be inferior to whites because of their racial association with Africa and the system of slavery. White *criollos* concerned about their own social status were uncomfortable with members of this population in their midst who were free but who were also black. In 1852, Blas San Millán, the editor of an anthology of Cuban writings entitled *Los cubanos pintados por sí mismos* had signaled the importance of the work by writing, "Los cubanos tienen que conocerse para pintarse con verdad, tienen que estimarse en lo que son y por lo que son." [Cubans must know themselves in order to represent themselves with truth, they must value themselves as they are and for what they are.][3] His exhortation for Cubans to "know themselves" revealed the ongoing *criollo* elite struggle for self-definition in the first half of the nineteenth century, even while they continually opted to remain loyal to Spain in the years leading up to the beginning of the Ten Years War. And in their quest for self-definition it was impossible to ignore the economic advances (however modest) of a class of people that visibly permeated Cuba's urban spaces. At the very least the presence of *libres de color* and the evident determination of this class to participate in all areas of the emerging Cuban public sphere

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[3] Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba, 1840-1895,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 28, my translation.

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without hindrance challenged many Cuban elites who could not conceive of a mixed-race Cuban identity.

While not in legal bondage, free blacks were expected by many of the elite to be subservient to whites of all classes. For their part, *libres de color* during the first decades of the 1800s took advantage of economic opportunities in Cuban urban society to create independent lives for themselves. In spite of white *criollo* attempts to limit their opportunities, individual free blacks worked, saved, acquired property, and even took steps to pursue an education. They also came together in their organizations and pooled their earnings to accomplish communal goals such as purchasing enslaved members' freedom and providing sustenance for those in need. Their actions indicate that they intended to embrace opportunities for advancement that whites were denying them because of their race.

During the 1830s, white *criollos* sought to contain *libres de color* by attempting to limit their access to education and certain types of employment as well as to monitor their social activities. These restrictions were designed to curtail gains *libres de color* had achieved in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Of even greater concern to white *criollos* and colonial authorities was the knowledge that *libres de color* could potentially destabilize the rigid control slave masters believed they must maintain over their laborers if they were to avoid a repeat of the large-scale slave uprisings in Saint-Domingue. When *libres de color* were linked to the slave revolts of 1843 this confirmed for many whites their fears that this class of people represented a destabilizing presence in Cuban society. Large numbers of free people of color, some of them prominent, were executed, tortured, jailed, and banished from the island during the investigation of the "conspiracy."

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In the post-*La Escalera* years free blacks endured increased legal restrictions against their freedom, while also facing derogatory images that supported the racially based notion that blacks were inferior to whites. The popular theatrical performances of blackface minstrelsy that had been entertaining white Cuban audiences since the early nineteenth century were reaching the peak of their popularity. These performances presented negative images of people of color to white audiences and made *libres de color* the butt of a collective white colonial *criollo* joke. Public performances were being used to denigrate the free black community, and in turn free blacks used public performances to push back against these images by creating images of their own. My work examines the internal diversity of perspective within Cuba's free urban African-descended communities over self-representation, especially through music and dance. Focusing the dissertation in this way allows me to examine the multiple and divergent ways in which *libres de color* fashioned public images and identities on their own terms, in contrast to those images that circulated about Afro-Cuban performance and behavior.

Historiography

Public Performance builds on the important subject of the historical experience of *libres de color* in the Caribbean - and more specifically in Cuba - during the time of slavery. It does so by deepening and extending research on the significance of performative activities that were sponsored by social organizations formed by free blacks. Franklin Knight's 1972 essay, "Cuba," in the edited volume, *Neither Slave Nor Free. The Freedmen of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World,* examines the ambiguous position held by free people of color living in slave societies even as it

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suggests the importance of this population's role in the development of Cuban society. Knight writes, "The free person of color who could not be classified as “white” and who was fortunate enough not to be enslaved occupied an ambiguous intermediate position between the fully free and the enslaved. The free person of color, therefore, spanned a wide spectrum from palest white to purest black."[4] At the time of his writing in the 1970s, Knight could note that, "No specific study exists of the free colored community in Cuba."[5] Knight's observations about free blacks in his essay were my starting point for this study and suggested the main questions underlying my interest in this topic: what were free people of color experiencing throughout the turbulent nineteenth century in Cuba when population figures indicate their growing numbers in urban areas? And how does a better understanding of the free black experience impact and possibly even alter our understanding of the history of Cuban urban society during the early to mid-nineteenth century?

Since the publication of Knight's essay important new work has been done on free people of color in nineteenth-century Cuba. In her seminal work, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899,* historian Rebecca Scott examines the complex path to emancipation in late nineteenth-century Cuba. She argues that emancipation unfolded through a series of transformations including legal challenges to the slave system by free and enslaved blacks who appealed to local authorities when they believed their rights were being violated.[6] Ada Ferrer's *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation,*

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[4] Franklin Knight, "Cuba," in *Neither Slave Nor Free. The freedmen of African descent in the slave societies of the New World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 281.
[5] Knight, "Cuba," 307.
[6] Rebecca J. Scott. *Slave Emancipation in Cuba. The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985). Also see Francisco Scarano, “Slavery, Race, and Power: A Half-Century of Spanish Caribbean Scholarship,” in *Beyond Fragmentation. Perspectives on Caribbean History*

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and Revolution, 1868-1898, focuses on the Cuban struggles for independence from Spain after 1868. Ferrer examines how during the independence wars whites, blacks and mixed-race people came together in a common cause. From 1868 to 1878, during the Ten Years War, *libres de color* used military service to distinguish themselves and many rose to prominence through this service.[7]

Scott and Ferrer's groundbreaking work has opened the way to recent works focused specifically on the experience of free people of color in nineteenth-century Cuba. Luz Maria Mena's 2001 dissertation entitled "*No Common Folk": Free Blacks and Race Relations in the Early Modernization of Havana (1830s – 1840s)* discusses the ways in which, even before *La Escalera,* white intellectuals and the political elite sought to bar blacks from entering the professions in order to minimize contact between the races.[8] According to Mena, *libres de color* responded to these and other boundaries by creating everyday survival strategies subverting elite attempts at control. For example, Mena notes that while they were not allowed to gather publicly free blacks could request permission to hold dances. As a result they applied for such licenses and used these events as a cover for political organization.[9] Michele Bernita Reid's 2004 dissertation "Negotiating a Slave Regime: Free People of Color in Cuba, 1844-1868," and subsequent book,[10] focuses on *libres de color* in the aftermath of the slave uprisings that led to the *La Escalera* investigations and subsequent restrictions against *libres de color.* Reid contends

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edited by Juanita De Barros, Audra Diptee, and David Trotman (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006), 47.

[7] Ada Ferrer. *Insurgent Cuba. Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999)

[8] Mena, "No Common Folk."

[9] Mena, 199. While Mena's work also examines how blacks used dance events to resist restrictions, she focuses on how *libres de color* used dances as covers for planning armed revolts in the years before *La Escalera* and she is not working on its aftermath in this regard.

[10] Bernita Reid, "Negotiating a slave regime" and Reid Vasquez, *The Year of the Lash*.

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that while whites used the uprising as an opportunity to implement specific punishments – including torture, jail, execution, and exile – designed to repress *libres de color*, white dependence on the services provided by *libres de color* enabled blacks to evade the restrictions. Both Mena and Reid place *libres de color* at the center of their studies and examine how this population responded to boundaries placed on their freedoms by whites. My own research builds on their foundations and complements these works by focusing on how *libres de color* used public performance to respond to the 1844 restrictions levied against them.

While the scholarship in English is growing there exists a rich scholarly literature in Spanish focused on free blacks in nineteenth-century Cuban society. This literature examines how *libres de color* contributed to the island's economy and culture during the nineteenth-century. Among these works Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux's, *El negro en la economía habanera del siglo xix* (1970), and Rafael Duharte Jiménez's *El negro en la sociedad colonial* (1988) have been most valuable to this study.[11] Both studies examine specific contributions free blacks made to the Cuban colonial society. Deschamps Chapeaux focuses on the years between 1820 and 1845. Drawing from numerous newspapers of the period, he presents details about free blacks—to whom he refers to as the "pequeña burguesía"—in Havana. His work has been particularly valuable for my own because he examines how *libres de color* participated in the Havana economy in the years leading up to *La Escalera.* He discusses tailors, musicians, and militia members among others, giving names and faces to those who formed the "problematic" class that so concerned white *criollos.* Duharte Jiménez centers his study on the eastern side of the

[11] Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía habanera del siglo xix.* (Havana: Union de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba-UNEAC, 1971), Rafael Duharte Jiménez, *El negro en la sociedad colonial* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1988).

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island and specifically on the city of Santiago de Cuba. He discusses the free people of color in this region and suggests that they were spared the violent reprisals of *La Escalera* in part because they were not as financially well off as *libres de color* in Havana and other urban areas in the west. His work provided important research and analysis of Santiagueran society in the first decades of the nineteenth century that has been valuable for my study of the *tumba francesa* associations there.

My study has been informed as well by Philip Howard's *Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century,* which examines the importance of mutual aid societies for blacks in Cuba– both enslaved and free. Howard analyzes how the role of these societies changed over the course of the nineteenth century. He argues that after the 1850s these organizations became more political in nature, focusing on how their long-term concern for, "the social and economic welfare of their members" expanded into a concern for social equality.[12] I draw on Howard's important study, but my work examines a wider range of organizations, and Howard does not focus on ways black organizations made use of public dances and performances to shape and fashion public images on their own terms.

The focus of my study on black performance contributes to a growing body of scholarly literature examining how people of African descent throughout the Diaspora used performance to diverse ends.[13] In the Cuban context, Daniel Walker's 2004 *No More, No More. Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans,* considers

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[12] Philip Howard, *Changing History. Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1998), xv.

[13] Daphne Brooks' book exemplifies this interest in racialized performance. In this work she examines how blacks in the Atlantic world used performance to transform their marginalized status. Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

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how people of African descent used cultural activities and performances as forms of resistance in nineteenth century Havana and New Orleans.[14] Walker examines the first half of the nineteenth century and uses the annual *Día de Reyes* festival in his study of how people of color in Havana resisted what he terms "mechanisms of social control."[15] Building on Walker's contention that Cuban whites constructed and mobilized degrading images of blacks, imbued social spaces with negative meanings for blacks (through curfews and publicly displaying slave chain gangs), and placed restrictions on the ability of black families to form and thrive, *Public Performance* considers how this restrictive environment impacted *libres de color* specifically after 1844 and on how they responded through forms of performance.

Jill Lane's research on blackface performances in nineteenth-century Cuba has influenced the shape and direction of my study. Lane examines the relationship between the white *criollo* use of racial impersonation and the development of an "anti-colonial public sphere."[16] While the focus of her work is on ways in which white *criollos* appropriated aspects of black culture in order to imagine a Cuban national identity, her work provides a context for understanding white *criollo* attitudes towards blacks, both enslaved and free during the nineteenth century. Lane's examination of how whites viewed and utilized elements of black performance informs my interest in how public performance enabled *libres de color* to self-fashion particular images and identities and in this way to contest white constructions of African derived culture.[17]

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[14] Walker, *No More*.
[15] Walker, Introduction.
[16] Lane, *Blackface Cuba*, 2.
[17] Works such as Robin Moore's *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997) have focused on Afro-Cuban performance during the twentieth-century Afro-Cubanismo movement, yet few studies have focused on the earlier under-studied moment which my work addresses.

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Sources

I conducted my archival work for this study at the University of Miami's Cuban Heritage Collection (CHC), the Biblioteca Nacional de José Martí (BNJM) and the Archbishop's archive in Havana, as well as the Biblioteca Provincial de Matanzas Gener y del Monte (BPM) in Matanzas. I continued my research at the Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN) in Madrid, Spain as well as the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) in Seville. At the CHC I examined anthropologist Lydia Cabrera's works among other rare primary and secondary nineteenth-century resources. My research trips to Cuba enabled me to examine early nineteenth-century *cofradía* (Afro-Cuban organizations that were affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church) records in the Archbishop of Havana's archives, as well as the collections of Fernando Ortíz held (during my visit) at the Biblioteca Nacional de José Martí. In addition, both the Biblioteca Nacional de José Martí and the Biblioteca Provincial de Matanzas Gener y del Monte in Matanzas yielded a wealth of information in primary and secondary source documents including nineteenth-century periodicals. In Spain I accessed the colonial collections, "Papeles de Cuba" at the AGI and the Cuban records in the "Sección de Ultramar" at the AHN.

Documentation revealing the activities of *libres de color* in colonial Cuba is sparse and difficult to access. As a result, beyond this rich archival work, my study relies, in part, on reports written by travelers who visited the island in the mid-nineteenth century and witnessed public performance in which free blacks participated. In spite of the inherent biases in travelers' writings, these reports are useful for what they reveal about the actions of *libres de color* during street processions that

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accompanied religious feast days and other public performance events. Travelers were often particularly interested in the public activities of free blacks and enslaved people and while their representations are shaped by their own prejudices and stereotypes these accounts provide information about events that otherwise would have been lost to posterity. In addition, I make use of the works of Cuban intellectuals, officials, and scholars. These include the writings of the white *criollo* intellectual José Antonio Saco whose essay on vagrancy in Cuba provides insight on the *criollo* modernizing vision for Cuba, and those of police commissioner Rafael Roche y Monteagudo whose book *La policia y sus mistérios* focuses on the Abakuá's alleged criminal activities during the nineteenth-century.[18] I also draw from and analyze the works of important scholars who conducted extensive research on Afro-Cuban culture during the first half of the twentieth century. These include, ethnographer Fernando Ortíz whose first works examining Afro-Cuban culture began appearing in the early 1900s and his sister-in-law anthropologist Lydia Cabrera whose interest in *cosas negras* began after her return to Cuba from Europe in the 1930s. Ortiz' 1921 study, *Los cabildos y la fiesta afrocubanos del Día de Reyes* was one of the first to analyze Afro-Cuban cultural activities from a scholarly perspective.[19] While the focus of his early works was on alleged criminal activity in the Afro-Cuban community, this study focused on Afro-Cuban performance and was an important source of information for my own work. I also draw from Lydia Cabrera's book *La Sociedad Secreta Abakuá* based on oral studies conducted with mid-

[18] Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, "Margarito Blanco 'Ocongo de Ultan,'" in *Boletín del Instituto del Historio y del Archivo Nacional* (1964), 65:97-109, Rafael Roche Monteagudo. *La policia y sus mistérios; adicionada con "La policia judicial", procedimientos, formularios, leyes, reglamentos, ordenanzas, y disposiciones que conciernen a los cuerpos de seguridad pública* (Havana: La Moderna Poesía, 1925 [orig. 1908].)
[19] Fernando Ortiz, *Los cabildos y la fiesta afrocubanos del Día de Reyes* (1921: La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1992)

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twentieth-century Abakuá practitioners. I use these interviews as a means to examine how twentieth-century practitioners understand their organizations' history.

My work reveals the ways in which differently positioned groups of *libres de color,* who were faced with legal constraints as well as more informal restrictions, engaged in self-fashioning public images and identities through their public performances. This study raises questions about identity at a time when white *criollos* were attempting to define themselves and their society while excluding free blacks, and it also raises questions about the ongoing efforts of *libres de color* to evade constraints on their freedom and participate in their social environment on their own terms.

Review of Chapters

Public Performance argues that *libres de color* used music and dance to consciously shape their public image through specifically orchestrated public performances in the post-*La Escalera* era in nineteenth-century Cuba. Beginning with Chapter One entitled "*Libres de Color* in Nineteenth-Century Cuba" I address two questions: how did there come to be a large urban population of *libres de color* in nineteenth-century Cuba, and why did performance become a significant site for this population to fashion identities in the face of restrictions against their freedoms? Spanish custom and eventually law made it possible for some enslaved blacks to purchase their own freedom. While this option was beyond the reach of most enslaved people in Cuba with no access to the funds required for self-purchase some found ways to buy their freedom. This led to a continually growing population of *libres de color* in Cuban towns throughout the colonial period. By the nineteenth century *libres de color* were beginning

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to advance economically a fact that proved problematic to white *criollos* bent on maintaining a rigid race-based social hierarchy. In addition to addressing the growth of the free black community, this chapter also examines the importance of social organizations formed by blacks throughout Cuba's history. I argue that music and dance held a central place in the lives of members and that this made these activities useful tools for *libres de color* when addressing constraints against their freedoms.

Chapter Two is entitled "'Well Dressed After the French Mode.' Embracing A Philanthropic Agenda." After the *La Escalera* repression some urban *libres de color* became concerned that their public cultural activities could be taken as proof of a "base" African nature thus justifying their exclusion from a society that was attempting to position itself as "civilized." As a result, amongst certain groups of *libres de color* performances that had long included African-based rhythms and movements, began to give way to European-derived dances. My study of a Matanzas association of *libres de color* focuses on a travel journal written by the Swedish writer and abolitionist, Fredrika Bremer during her 1851 visit to Cuba. I use this work to analyze the implications of this free black group's agenda when hosting a charitable event. In examining this charity dance performance I explore how certain members of the free black community circumvented social restrictions against their participation in the larger Cuban community as equals to whites, by embracing a *criollo* philanthropic agenda. The group in Matanzas associated themselves with a specific orphanage called *La Casa de Beneficencia,* which was an institution founded and supported by some of Cuba's leading *criollo* intellectuals and members of the *peninsular* governing elite. While there may have been many reasons this group chose to support *La Casa de Beneficencia* in such a public way, I suggest that

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at least one of the reasons was a determination to reshape the debate about who could and should participate in the effort to modernize Cuban society. Some white *criollos* envisioned this modernizing endeavor as a "white" effort but the Matanzas dancers and patrons of the orphanage did not appear to accept this vision. The group attached itself to a "progressive" white-sponsored project, and structured their dance performances along European-influenced styles suggesting that Matanzas *libres de color* seem to have hosted this charity dance, in part, to address white perceptions of them as inferior.

In Chapter Three entitled "Leopard Men: Manhood and Power in Nineteenth-Century Cuba" I study the Abakuá society, a secret fraternal organization that formed in Cuba in 1836. I examine how black men – including free men of color – shaped their public image as members of this secret society. Authorities recognized this group as a distinct one by the 1870s, yet it is not clear that they distinguished them from other forms of Afro-Cuban associations during the years of my study. While this makes researching the early decades of the Abakuá challenging it seems clear in retrospect that the Abakuá presence was visible during public feast day celebrations. Havana police seemed to be aware that the men they were arresting during the mid-nineteenth century for street disturbances were associated with an Afro-Cuban group but it is not clear that authorities knew this was a fraternal order bound in secrecy to defend fellow members' honor—sometimes to the death. I argue that this group drew upon an existing street culture of masculinity and "toughness" to shape an identity within the circumscribed roles they were forced to assume as black men in a slave society - especially after *La Escalera*. They chose to use their participation in their *juegos* in order to construct an image as men

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of status and worth with authority over their own lives and parlayed this into real economic power on the Havana docks.

Chapter Four examines the so-called *francesas* of Santiago de Cuba who represented yet another population of color that made use of social organizations and public performances as a means of shaping their public image. Entitled "'French Blacks' Define Themselves" this chapter makes the case that French Creole blacks who settled in the southern part of Cuba in the years after the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue continued to display their distinct French Creole identity long after their arrival in the island. After 1791, Santiago de Cuba and the surrounding region experienced an influx of immigrants from neighboring French Saint-Domingue when enslaved men and women in the north of that colony rose up in arms against their masters. These immigrants brought with them French Creole traditions that very quickly began to impact Santiagueran popular culture, including distinctive dance and music styles that came to be known collectively in Cuba as *tumba francesa.* The Saint-Domingue immigrants of color formed associations and participated in public processions and dance performances. When many of the free *francesas* of color performed publicly they chose to execute French Creole dances accompanied by a distinct musical style that identified them as “French.” That is to say, French Creole was read as "French" in nineteenth-century Cuba and white *criollos* associated "Frenchness" with the standard for a civilized society. I argue that the Saint-Domingue immigrants and their descendants used this association in order to present themselves publicly as "French" by emphasizing French Creole music and dance styles. With this distinction of being *francesas* came assumptions about their character and role in Cuban society that would persist for generations. My research does not find evidence

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that these groups shaped their performances in direct response to increased restrictions against their freedoms after *La Escalera* as I had initially assumed. Rather, the *tumba francesa* groups in Santiago de Cuba appear to have taken advantage of a Cuban fascination with French culture to shape their identity as "French" blacks in the Santiagueran society effectively defining themselves as a distinct group separate from Cuban blacks.

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Chapter One

Libres de Color in Nineteenth-Century Cuba

In March 1851, Fredrika Bremer, a visitor to Cuba from Sweden, expressed an interest in traveling to a district near the town of Cardenas. This district, which she refers to as Havanavana, was said to be completely populated by free people of color or *libres de color.* Her hosts advised her, however, not to attempt a visit, as this was the area out of which the slave revolts of the mid-1840s had emerged. Bremer was particularly interested in the recreational activities of free blacks, "I shall do all in my power," she recorded in her journal, "to witness again and again these [free] African dances."[20] Her hosts, however, cautioned her by telling her that the planning of the uprisings was actually thought to have occurred during the social gatherings of the free blacks in the region. "Formerly, it is said, might be heard," Bremer wrote, "every evening and night, both afar and near, the joyous sound of the African drum, as it was beaten at the negro dances. When, however, it was discovered that these dancing assemblies had been made use of for the organization of the disturbances which afterward took place, their liberty became very much circumscribed."[21] Bremer, was clearly repeating what she had been told by her hosts during her visit to Cuba,[22] and her comment about the *libres de color* and their

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[20] Fredrika Bremer. *The Homes of the New World, v. 2: Impressions of America.* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1858), 275. Earlier, while staying at the town of Serro, just outside Havana, she had attended a performance presented by free blacks. She had been delighted by their, "peculiar wild life" and their "irregular" and "rhythmical" dances.
[21] Bremer. *The Homes of the New World*, 346.
[22] Fredrika Bremer moved about frequently during her visit to Cuba staying with a number of different families and in a few guest houses. During this Cardenas trip she mentions staying with a Mrs. W, (Bremer*,* 343) but it is not clear whether it was Mrs. W or another of her hosts that warned her against visiting the village populated by *libres de color.*

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constrained cultural activities raises interesting questions that directly relate to this study.

In this chapter I address two key questions: why did the Spanish colonial government increase restrictions against Cuba's *libres de color* in the first half of the nineteenth century, and how did public dance and music performances afford them an opening through which to contest these restrictions, especially after the slave uprisings of 1843 and the subsequent investigations in 1844? I begin by examining how Spanish law and custom facilitated the emergence of a significant free black population in Cuba, and how this group advanced economically in the early years of the nineteenth century. In addition to examining the appearance of the *libres de color* as a distinct and, for Spanish colonial authorities, problematic class in the mid-nineteenth century, I also consider the significance of music and dance for Cuba's African-descended population by examining Afro-Cuban traditions of self-organizing. Again, this section is informed by several key questions. Why did slave masters tolerate and even encourage those the enslaved to form associations, in certain cases with free people of color? What place did music and dance hold in these organizations? And how did performance within black groups enable *libres de color* to further their diverse agendas. It is my contention that when faced with increased restrictions relegating them to a subordinate position in the social hierarchy after 1843, *libres de color* in Cuba turned to their organizations and the cultural activities which had sustained them and used them as a means of contesting white attempts to not only control their lives but characterize them as socially inferior.

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***Libres de Color* in a Slave Society**

During the fifteenth century more than 100,000 enslaved blacks served their masters in Spain. Some of these Africans were pressed into service in various capacities for the Atlantic crossing and early efforts to establish permanent bases in the Caribbean.[23] Historian Franklin Knight notes in his book entitled, *The Caribbean,* "Africans had accompanied the Spanish explorers and colonists to the Caribbean from the beginning of the age of exploration." He makes no mention of Africans on Columbus' first voyage, but he indicates that, "An indefinite number arrived with the expedition of Nicolás de Ovando in 1502."[24] On his initial voyage Columbus explored Cuba's southern and eastern shores before sailing on to the island that would later be called Hispaniola.[25] Another Spanish adventurer, Sebastian de Ocampo, followed suit in 1508, but concerted efforts to establish towns in Cuba did not begin until 1511.[26] In that year, Diego Velázquez founded a settlement near Baracoa on Cuba's eastern tip.[27] When Velázquez landed in Cuba his crew included at least one person of African descent who had embarked with him from the peninsula.[28]

In the early years after their arrival the Spanish forced the indigenous people who had been living in the islands now referred to as the Greater Antilles to labor in gold and copper mines they had established. Later when the settlers planted crops like tobacco, they continued to force the Taíno to work the land through a system of labor assignment

[23] Richard Gott, *Cuba. A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 24.
[24] Franklin W. Knight, *The Caribbean, The Genesis of Fragmented Nationalism, 2nd edition,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 61.
[25] John Cummins. *The Voyage of Christopher Columbus: Columbus's Own Journal of Discovery, Newly Restored and Translated.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992). 108 and 156-157.
[26] Clifford L. Staten, *The History of Cuba* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003), 13.
[27] Staten, *History,* 13.
[28] Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 187.

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called the *encomienda*.[29] But as the Taíno people succumbed in alarming numbers to disease and overwork the Spaniards turned to enslaved Africans trafficked as early as 1518 directly from the continent.[30] According to historian David Eltis, "On the continent of Europe, Bartolomé de las Casas and, later, Jean Baptiste du Tertre encouraged reflection and in the former case real change in the way aboriginal peoples were treated, but both accepted the idea that some peoples – specifically Africans – were natural slaves."[31] The Spanish Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, had protested the appalling treatment of the indigenous people as early as the 1520s, arguing against enslaving the native people because they were subjects under the care of the Spanish Crown. For this reason, he posited, they should be treated humanely.[32] Many, including Las Casas, thought Africans to be a better labor choice for the Spanish Caribbean colonizing effort because they were not Spanish subjects and were perceived to be physically stronger and more able to endure hard labor.[33] As a result in 1527 the Crown ordered that one thousand enslaved Africans be brought to Cuba to work.[34] While historian Richard Gott indicates that there is no evidence of an immediate influx of slaves arriving as a result of this Royal order, those enslaved Africans who did labor in Cuba during the mid- to late sixteenth century did so in the mines, on small rural sugar and tobacco farms or on cattle ranches. Some also worked on building projects in the growing

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[29] Gott, *Cuba*, 6.
[30] Knight, *The Caribbean,* 62. According to Gott, "The first generation of black slaves were brought with the original waves of Spanish conquerors at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and were set to work in the gold and copper mines, and later on the tobacco farms." Gott, *Cuba,* 6
[31] David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 15. Bartolomé de Las Casas' 1542 work entitled *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies,* edited and translated by Nigel Griffin, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), written in 1542, would take up the cause of attempting to enlighten the Spanish about how the native people were being treated.
[32] De Las Casas, *A Short Account*, 5-6.
[33] Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery. From the Baroque to the Modern 1492 – 1800,* (London: Verso, 1997), 134 and 136.
[34] Gott, *Cuba,* 24.

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towns.[35] As the European presence in the Caribbean increased, so too did the numbers of Africans imported as slaves and once the extensive and brutal African slave trade was established Las Casas would come to regret his original advocacy of it.

Gott notes that there were approximately 500 enslaved Africans living in the island in 1532 and by the end of the century the enslaved black population in Cuba numbered 12,000.[36] As the enslaved black community increased so did that of *libres de color* many of whom worked as ranchers or farmers side by side with white men of lower economic means.[37] The free black population in Cuba grew, in part, because Spanish laws governing the institution of slavery allowed the enslaved to purchase their own freedom. In the developing towns the enslaved were sometimes permitted to hire themselves out in various capacities to earn money for their masters.[38] They labored constructing forts, working on the docks, and otherwise playing a crucial role in building and expanding the colony's urban centers. Occasionally they were allowed to keep a portion of their earnings, some saving their share until they had enough to purchase their own freedom; an institution called *coartación*.

Under the tradition of *coartación* slaves could request that they be "valued" or have a price set for their purchase and then begin making payments against that amount until they had bought their freedom.[39] The practice of self-purchase grew out of the *Siete Partidos,* which were a series of laws, or rather, principles, that had governed the

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[35] Louis A. Perez, Jr, *Cuba Between Reform and Revolution,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 46, and 42-43.
[36] Gott, *Cuba,* 25-26.
[37] Knight, "Cuba," 289.
[38] Franklin W. Knight, "Slavery in a Plantation Society," in *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000), 399.
[39] For a discussion on the laws governing *coartación* see Alejandro de la Fuente, "Slaves and the Creation of the Legal Rights in Cuba: *Coartación* and *Papel,"* in *Hispanic Historical Review*, 87:4 Duke University, November, 2007, 659 – 692.

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institution of slavery in Spain prior to the establishment of the Spanish empire's western realm.[40] According to these principles, which historian Alejandro de la Fuente refers to as forming, "[a] remarkable slave code,"[41] freedom was a worthy goal for all. Based on this idea of universal humanity, throughout the Spanish American world informal self-purchase agreements were established between masters and slaves. The practice varied across the colonies, but in Cuba by the eighteenth century, *coartación* become more and more formalized.[42] In addition to self-purchase, the enslaved, especially those of mixed race, had other possible paths to freedom. Some were granted freedom by their masters as a reward for loyal service or as a result of a familial or sexual relationship.

Over the course of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the trafficking of enslaved Africans to neighboring British Jamaica and French Saint-Domingue increased as these colonies became powerhouses of plantation production.[43] In contrast the enslaved population in Cuba remained relatively small because the economy was not yet based on large-scale plantation agriculture. Cattle ranching had been the dominant economic concern in the sixteenth century along with sugar and tobacco farming. These endeavors continued to grow in the seventeenth century employing enslaved Africans in relatively small but growing numbers.[44] By the end of the seventeenth century slave codes began to reflect concerns about a growing presence of enslaved blacks and also free people of color and restrictions against *libres de color* were

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[40] Frederick P. Bowser, "Colonial Spanish America," in *Neither Slave Nor Free. The freedmen of African descent in the slave societies of the New World.* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 21. As historian Frederick P. Bowser explains, "It should be stressed that the *Siete Partidas* was more a statement of legal and moral principles than a compilation of specific legislation."
[41] Alejandro de la Fuente, "Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited," in *Law and History Review*, Vol. 22, Issue 2. American Society for Legal History, 2004.
[42] Bowser, "Colonial," 25, see also Knight, *Slave Society,* 130.
[43] Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves. The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), 19.
[44] Pérez, *Cuba Between Reform and Revolution*, 42-43.

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consolidated in these codes.[45] The principles set down in the original *Siete Partidos* had governed the institution of slavery in Spain, but with the growing population of enslaved people of African descent in the Americas, the laws were adapted to the evolving slave system in the Spanish colonies.[46] The 1680 slave code focused on a need to maintain security within the colonies and also to uphold the structure of race-based social hierarchies. In addition to the articles designed to govern the enslaved, the 1680 slave code included restrictions directed towards the free colored population – acknowledging that there was one that needed to be regulated. Among these were laws against wearing certain fashions typically favored by whites such as silk clothing or gold jewelry - a clear attempt to mark a visual distinction between the racial categories. It seems likely that these clothing restrictions were designed to target *libres de color* whose racially mixed heritage allowed them to "pass" as whites. This law implies that free blacks were dressing, at least until this point, as whites did and did not accept colonial social customs that sought to separate them from the rest of the free society.[47]

The eighteenth century marked a major shift in the Cuban economy. This shift began gradually as Cuban planters moved away from the subsistence agriculture of the first centuries after Columbus' arrival. Before sugar became the dominant crop in Cuba, tobacco farmers were experiencing financial success. With modest investments tobacco farmers could realize enviable profits as Europeans demand for their products

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[45] According to Rebecca Scott in her work *Slave Emancipation in Cuba* the *libres de color* numbered 106,494 in 1827 and 221,417 in 1862, 6 and 10.
[46] Knight, *Slave Society*, 125 As Knight explains it, "The Spanish Crown found it necessary from time to time to reiterate specific laws, or to issue a complete summary of the laws." He goes on to note that, "Later, as the general proliferation of laws seemed to have got out of hand again, further attempts were made to codify the laws, many of which conflicted with one another."
[47] Knight, *Slave Society*, 124

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increased.[48] Trade policies in Cuba had already been undergoing changes as the Spanish monarchy embarked on an agenda of making the Spanish colonies more profitable for the Crown. Tobacco's potential was not lost on government officials and by the 1720s tobacco farmers found themselves facing stifling regulations.[49] Frustrated, some tobacco farmers turned to the business of sugar making.

At first sugar was produced on small farms with just a few enslaved Africans as laborers. But planters, who Moreno Fraginals refers to as forming an "aggressive oligarchy,"[50] realized sugar's potential as a lucrative business and began investing more in planting canes and developing this mode of agriculture into a viable and successful industry. Moreno Fraginals writes that sugar production in the first half of the eighteenth century was "no industry in the modern sense of the word."[51] Yet even though he refers to sugar production in 1759 as still being more akin to small farming he indicates that by the time the British seized Havana and held it for a little over 10 months in 1762-1763 opening up the slave trade to Cuba, sugar production was already moving towards the plantation system of agriculture.[52]

In the few months the British held Havana, around 10,000 enslaved Africans were brought to Cuba. Previously it had taken ten years for this number of enslaved Africans to be brought to the island and the African population in Cuba continued to increase rapidly as planters committed themselves to sugar production on a large scale.[53] With greater numbers of African slaves congregated together on the plantations, planters used more

[48] Pérez, *Reform,* 50
[49] Pérez, *Reform,* 51
[50] Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *The Sugar Mill. The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba 1760-1860,* translated by Cedric Belfrage, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), 15.
[51] Moreno Fraginals, *Sugar Mill.* 25.
[52] Moreno Fraginals, 25. He notes that there were 89 sugar mills in the Havana area in 1759, 93 in 1760, 98 in 1761, and 106 in 1764.
[53] Pérez, *Cuba,* 58.

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rigorous methods of policing them. Moreno Fraginals notes, "The increasing and ever more intensive exploitation of [blacks] led to conflicts which required a rigid system of discipline."[54] The trend towards greater rigidity increased significantly after the massive slave uprising in Saint-Domingue in August 1791. This event shocked slaveholders throughout the Americas, but especially shocked the Cuban planters. Cubans saw the influx of immigrants to their communities fleeing the devastation and heard stories of rebels committing atrocities in the colony. At the close of the eighteenth century white Cuban planters were profiting from the destruction of the sugar industry in Saint-Domingue. Yet they were also aware that their growing sugar businesses and the corresponding increase in slave trafficking to Cuba placed their society on a path similar to that of the French colony. They believed their profits from sugar production would hinge on how well they were able to control the enslaved population, and one population—the *libres de color*—stood as a challenge to white *criollo* control over Cuba's enslaved Africans.

Free People of Color: A "Problematic" Class

In the social hierarchy of early nineteenth-century Cuba, *libres de color* gave this rapidly increasing population of enslaved blacks a visible example of what was possible. While many *libres de color* attempted to distance themselves from the stigma of enslavement, there were, in fact, longstanding channels for interactions between these two classes. By the nineteenth century there were families of color in Cuba who had been born free, but many of Cuba's free blacks had experienced enslavement and these individuals maintained familial connections within the enslaved community. Slaves and

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[54] Moreno Fraginals, *Sugarmill,* 25.

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libres de color also interacted on a daily basis in the busy urban spaces of Havana and Matanzas and other growing towns. Urban slaves often traveled throughout the city on their masters' behalf, selling wares and conducting other business that put them in contact with *libres de color*. Whites feared that slaves desiring their freedom would collaborate with free blacks who had the skills, opportunities, and economic means to help organize revolts against the system of enslavement. And in fact, a number of slave revolts in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries confirmed the troubling suspicion that *libres de color* were indeed willing to join with their enslaved brothers and sisters as well as with abolitionists in an effort to challenge the slave system through violent means.

By the nineteenth century certain occupations had become racialized. For example carpentry and tailoring became so associated as spaces of black employment that whites concerned about social mobility refused to perform these jobs.[55] An article published on February 6, 1828, in the newspaper the *Diario de la Habana* entitled "The Public Good," noted that "It is a very sad fact that in all parts of the civilized world the art of midwifery is considered among the honorable professions, and that only on the island of Cuba, through deep-seated tradition, perhaps originating in the scarcity of white persons in the nascent population, should it be degraded and left wholly to the most wretched and destitute women of color in the city."[56] The author, the white *criollo* intellectual, José Antonio Saco, was always ready to express his concerns about threats to the development of Cuban society. Whites' reluctance to work in certain trades interfered with the elite agenda for Havana's population to develop into a more productive

[55] José A. Saco, *Memoria sobre la vagancia en la isla de Cuba,* (Santiago de Cuba: Instituto Cubano del Libre, 1974), 58.

[56] Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, editors. *Afrocuba: An anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture,* New York: Ocean Press, 1993, 58-59.

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society—which they clearly envisioned as a productive *white* society. As a result, Saco and other Cuban intellectuals regarded the *libres de color's* domination of certain jobs as a significant problem. Preoccupied with the belief that every member of society should be gainfully employed, Saco was concerned that many whites avoided working in certain honorable professions, such as midwifery, because they associated them with blacks.

The situation, however, represented a window of opportunity for *libres de color* because it created openings for employment, which in turn allowed them to build some semblance of economic security for themselves. Free blacks of color tended to settle in and around towns since significant numbers of them had already been living in urban areas when they were manumitted or when they purchased their own freedom. Others gravitated there because they could earn a better income in the towns providing the numerous services associated with urban living than they could in rural areas. In the towns, *libres de color* worked as artisans such as cigar makers, seamstresses, tailors, potters, and masons. They also became prominent for their tailoring skills in part because whites identified this profession with blacks—a circumstance that proved beneficial to those *libres de color* who worked in this capacity. In a society where clothing exhibited one's status and wealth, the ability to provide the latest fashions to the Havana elite, made free black tailors valuable professionals in the community. In fact, it was noted that, "el oficio de sastre ... estaba en manos de pardos y morenos libres," [tailoring ... was in the hands of the free people of color.] A few free black men such as Francisco Montes de Oca and Francisco Uribe even opened their own tailor shops.[57] Far from catering solely to *libres de color*, these men of color counted numerous distinguished white *habaneros,*

[57] Deschamps Chapeaux, *El Negro en la económia,* 135, 140 and 144.

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both *peninsulares* and *criollos,* as their clients. In fact they advertised in the same daily papers patronized by white merchants.[58]

Libres de color occasionally practiced professions as well – albeit not in large numbers – working as physicians and attorneys. As they garnered more income they also began to acquire the accouterments of social mobility. Historian Luz María Mena gives examples of free blacks in the 1830s and 1840s who owned homes and businesses which indicated a certain degree of economic achievement. She mentions specifically the Carabajal sisters, who were mulatto and owned a two-story house in Havana, as well as the Valdivia and Barbosa-Reyes families who owned respectively a jewelry store and a funeral home.[59] The freeman Félix José Maria Barbosa had been a member of the battalion of the mulatto military regiment called the *Pardos Leales de la Habana.* He and his wife were associated with a Catholic lay organization, the *Real Cofradía de Caridad,* and counted members of Havana's white elites amongst their friends.[60]

Black musicians, too, distinguished themselves in the nineteenth century. Both Claudio Brindis de Salas and Tomás Vuelta y Flores were popular musicians, and each had his own orchestra. Vuelta y Flores was also the composer of many danzas and contradanzas, dance styles that were popular during this period of Cuban history. The two musicians shared as well the distinction of prior military service as they had both been members of the battalion of *Morenos Leales de la Habana.*[61] Brindis de Salas' orchestra was a public fixture and played at outdoor venues for the amusement of passersby (para

[58] Deschamps Chapeaux*, El Negro en la económia,* 140-141. Montes de Oca's shop was located at 78 Mercaderes street in Havana, and he regularly advertised the items of clothing he had for sale (Diario de la Marina, 7 Feb, 1834) On 1 Feb, 1842 he ran a notice in the same paper about a new chemical method for cleaning clothing.
[59] Mena, *"No Common Folk,"* 169.
[60] Deschamps Chapeaux, *El Negro en la económia*, 74.
[61] *Ibid*., 106 and 111.

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distracción del paseo) while Vuelta y Flores and his musicians performed at numerous parties that enlivened the Havana nightlife.[62]

Libres de color continued to work, save, purchase homes, and open businesses but social mobility in the free black community was not limited to material wealth. *Libres de color* also valued the personal satisfaction and potential social capital of intellectual improvement. As historian Robert Paquette notes, "Many free people of color were educated. Some had learned to read and write, however crudely, as they needed to do for the kinds of middle-level jobs they were filling."[63] While as a whole, literacy rates in nineteenth-century Cuba were low, *libres de color* made the connection between education and increased opportunities. They recognized the importance of education for their own advancement and therefore placed a high premium on providing schooling for themselves and their children. Teachers of color opened schools to instruct their children and other adults in their communities.[64] A few free blacks thwarted the rule against higher education for blacks in order to pursue their educational goals. Throughout the colonial period in the Spanish Americas there had been bans against people of African backgrounds attending universities, but these were not uniformly enforced. Occasionally light complexioned blacks were able to enroll and complete their studies without attracting attention. Herbert Klein discusses a mulatto lawyer, Julian Francisco Campo, who graduated from the *Universidad de la Habana* with a degree in civil law and who was licensed to practice law by the *audiencia.* Presumably Campo was very light skinned because his African background was not discovered until he attempted to acquire a title

[62] Deschamps Chapeaux, *El Negro en la económia,* 108 and 111. Author refers to a notice about Brindis de Salas that appeared in the Diario de la Habana on July 9, 1841.
[63] Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood. The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba*, (Connecticutt: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 117.
[64] Bernita Reid, "Negotiating a Slave Regime," 48.

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by applying for a patent of nobility – a legal document that would confer noble status – in the late eighteenth century.[65] Another man of mixed racial heritage, José Francisco Báez, practiced medicine in Havana for thirteen years in the mid-eighteenth century before it was discovered that his father was a mulatto and his right to practice medicine was challenged. Francisco Báez had studied with two prominent surgeons and he successfully appealed his case to the Crown.[66] It was also possible to circumvent the legal prohibition against higher education by applying for a special certificate that granted legal "whiteness." These certificates or *cédulas de gracias al sacar* allowed the person to claim the same legal status as whites.[67] Individually some free blacks were able to find ways to create comfortable lives for themselves, especially in the island's towns, and unease about their presence in the urban areas continued to increase. All this suggests that even in a social climate where their status as people of color positioned them as the subordinates of whites of all classes, many *libres de color* did not internalize prevailing notions of racial inferiority, but instead took steps to improve their condition by whatever means were available to them.

In addition to having access to numerous opportunities for economic advancement, free men of color like the musician Tomás Vuelta y Flores had already found that militia service afforded them a certain level of prestige, respect and political clout within their communities. As early as the sixteenth century the Spanish Crown, realizing that there were not an adequate number of whites in the island who could be pressed into military service to defend Cuba against piracy and other European invaders,

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[65] Herbert S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas. A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 206-207.
[66] Klein, *Slavery,* 207.
[67] Bowser, "Colonial," 46.

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formed militia units comprised of *libres de color.* These units were separated by race into black (*moreno*) and mulatto (*pardo*) groups.[68] In the mid-eighteenth century free men of color fought for Spain during the Seven Years war, in Florida, and also in Vera Cruz. In 1762, after the eleven-month British occupation of Havana, Spain increased all the island's militia units including those of the *morenos* and *pardos* and this pattern of expanding the colored units continued into the nineteenth century.[69] While the Crown saw these units as a viable solution to the problem of defense in Cuba, the provision of black men with weapons and military training was not universally embraced. Some, such as the prominent white *criollo* Francisco Arango y Parreño, who even acknowledged that the support of the black units had proven to be valuable, still advocated as early as the 1790s after the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue, that these units be disbanded. He and others of like mind were concerned about the dangers of arming black men who could incite the slaves to rebel.[70]

The decision to establish the colored militias may have been of concern to some white *criollos* but the prestige of military service had great significance for men of color and they parlayed this prestige into de facto leadership roles amongst their fellow blacks. A number of these military men were also leaders or held prominent positions within their social organizations. Status within the black community, while a significant benefit, was not the sole advantage of military service. For men of color such service also came with some practical rewards. These particular benefits, known as *fuero* rights, meant that militia members could have access to military courts, did not have to pay certain taxes,

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[68] Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 17 and 82.
[69] Childs, *Aponte*, 82.
[70] Reid-Vasquez, *Lash*, 38.

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received pensions and access to desirable burial sites, and the right to carry weapons—the right that so concerned commentators like Arango y Parreño.[71] When the Ten Years War for independence between Cuba and Spain began in 1868 many of these black and mulatto militia fighters continued to fight for Spain but others filled the ranks of the insurgents and distinguished themselves by fighting alongside white *criollos* for independence and nationhood.[72]

Through their participation in social groups and their military experience, many free blacks in urban areas had developed organizational skills that urban whites considered potentially threatening. In 1812, an uprising now known as the Aponte rebellion frightened the white slaveholding class in Cuba. Officials identified a freeman, José Antonio Aponte, as the leader of the island-wide revolt, which included free people of color and slaves. His experience as a member of the colored militia and leader of his local *cabildo* made him a well-respected and influential individual in his community. Aponte and his cohorts wanted independence from Spain and an end to slavery, but while the rebels burned several plantations and killed eight whites, injuring several others, the conspiracy was betrayed and Aponte hanged. As a warning to those he had inspired to revolt, his decapitated head was displayed publicly.[73] Aponte's desire for independence may have coincided with the private thoughts of some white *criollos*, but his agenda for ending slavery, his military experience, and his possible associations with veterans of the Haitian Revolution concerned many whites who might otherwise have supported his call for independence. They feared that Aponte had intended to impose black rule on the

[71] Childs, *Aponte*, 83 and Bernita Reid, "Negotiating," 106.
[72] Knight, "Cuba," 290.
[73] Gott, *Cuba,* 48-50. Matt Childs writes, "By the time the rebellions ended, slaves and free people of color had killed eight whites, injured numerous others, and burnt or partially destroyed several plantations," *Aponte,* 1.

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island and that this would be the consequence of the overthrow of Spanish rule.[74]

In spite of their suspicions about the loyalties of the *libres de color* authorities investigating the Aponte uprising expressed some surprise to see that *libres de color* and slaves had actually conspired together to plan the uprising. Many whites thought in spite of the numerous reasons for these groups to unite, men and women of color who were free would, in the final analysis, desire to associate with the master class rather than with the slaves.[75] Yet as Philip Howard notes, "These men [Aponte and his co-conspirators] realized that it was the duty of Afro-Cubans to liberate their enslaved brothers and sisters in spite of differences among their languages, nationalities, and customs."[76] Authorities quickly decided that blacks – both enslaved and free – who had betrayed the rebellion would be publicly rewarded in order to send a clear message that allegiance to the colonial government and support of the existing hierarchy were the paths to distinction and advancement for free blacks. Steps were also taken to discourage or monitor interaction between enslaved and free people. Public music and dance performances were placed under surveillance and in Havana gatherings at taverns where conspiracies could be planned were curtailed.[77] During the 1830s, colonial authorities uncovered other conspiracies involving collaboration between free people and slaves, and they used this evidence as justification for continued restrictions against Cuban free blacks.[78] Free blacks found themselves in a situation where they were free, but were excluded from full participation in the white dominated society and relegated to a separate social space.

There were many vectors of division amongst Cuba's *libres de color* and this has

[74] Childs, *Aponte,* 4.
[75] *Ibid*., 68.
[76] Howard, *Changing History,* 75.
[77] Childs, 178.
[78] *Ibid*., 173 – 176.

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proven to be challenging for scholars attempting to categorize them as a distinct class. Newly freed blacks and those blacks who had been free for generations had achieved different levels of wealth and assimilation into the Spanish-dominated society. Some *libres de color* had managed to achieve economic success by the 1840s, but many other blacks who had attained freedom were actually not completely free. Some were still bound to former masters because of personal debt or because they were in the process of purchasing a family member's freedom. These *libres de color* were consumed with basic survival needs. While free blacks shared a common African ancestry there were also grounds for division within the community as well as between *libres de color* and enslaved Cubans.[79] In spite of *libres de color's* internal stratification, though, because of their racial identity and their free status white society viewed them monolithically and mistrusted their loyalty. The 1842 slave code reflected the increased climate of suspicion towards the free colored population. It included several provisions directed towards controlling this group such as requiring that they obtain a license from authorities before they could be employed, and placing their social gatherings under restrictions – a stipulation that had actually been a part of an earlier unimplemented slave code.[80]

That *libres de color* still managed to achieve some economic success during the first half of the nineteenth century in spite of the restrictions against their freedom only served to exacerbate white unease. Biographical accounts about free black families in the

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[79] David W. Cohen and Jack P. Greene, "Introduction," in *Neither Slave Nor Free,* 12-13.
[80] Knight, *Slave Society,* 125 and 127-128, and Knight "Cuba," 301-302. The 1789 slave code introduced the new provision that slave masters could be fined or could even lose their slaves if they did not follow the code's protective requirements. White *criollos* in Havana appealed to the governor not to implement or even publish the decree announcing this code as they were concerned the requirements would undermine their authority over their slaves. Knight writes, "The slave code of 1789 would have been a monumental achievement [with regards to treatment of slaves] if it could have been implemented. Unfortunately, contrary to the common opinion ... the so-called magnificent code of 1789 was never even read in the colonies," *Slave Society,* 125.

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early nineteenth century reveal snippets of information about the lives of people who by the 1830s seemed to be integrated into the daily activities of colonial Havana and other Cuban towns. While whites patronized their businesses and welcomed them into their social gatherings as performers and their homes as servants, *libres de color* faced increasing social and legal restrictions in the early decades of the nineteenth century because of their racial status. For example, Vuelta y Flores might be called on to perform for a private gathering for whites on any given night, yet if he and his friends wanted to host their own social event they had to apply for special permission to do so. When in 1843 slaves took torches to plantations near Matanzas local authorities soon implicated free black involvement. The uprisings seemed to confirm Cuban planters' worst fears and the *libres de color* would bear the brunt of the reprisals.

La Escalera – Brutal Reprisals Against *Libres de Color*

In March and again in November 1843, a succession of slave uprisings took place in Matanzas and on plantations near Havana. While initially thought to be isolated revolts, one planter claimed to have uncovered evidence of a conspiracy for an island-wide uprising. Suddenly, the concerns officials had had about what free blacks were doing in their homes, on their jobs and during their *cabildo* gatherings seemed warranted. Cuba's newly arrived Captain General Leopoldo O'Donnell embarked on an aggressive investigation designed to crush any further thoughts of rebellion.[81] This inquiry appeared to uncover a web of subversive networks that included white abolitionists, *libres de color*, and slaves. According to reports produced during the investigation the ultimate goal of the conspirators had been to abolish slavery and gain Cuba's independence from

[81] Paquette, *Blood*, 3.

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Spain.[82] Investigators targeted *libres de color* and blamed them for the alleged conspiracy.[83] Records show that during the first three months of 1844, *libres de color's* homes were searched and they "faced an intense period of search, arrest, torture, interrogation, trial, and abuse."[84] O'Donnell used such force in his determination to deal with the challenge to the island's security that the method of torture employed during the investigative phase rather than the insurgency itself named the event – *La Escalera.*

La Escalera means "ladder" and referred to the method of interrogation used by colonial officials to elicit confessions from suspected insurgents. It involved tying the victims upside down to a ladder and whipping them with a leather whip at the end of which was affixed a piece of metal. According to one account, "Don Ramon Gonzales, ordered his victims to be taken to a room which had been whitewashed, and the walls of which were besmeared with blood and small pieces of flesh, from the wretches who had preceded them in this cruel treatment. There stood a bloody ladder, where the accused were tied, with their heads downward, and whether free or slave, if they would not avow what the fiscal officer insinuated, were whipped to death by two stout mulattoes selected for this purpose. They were scourged with leather straps, having at the end a small destructive button made of fine wire."[85] Along with hundreds of slaves, some well-known free Afro-Cubans were arrested including the poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, known as Plácido and the poet and former slave Juan Francisco Manzano. These free men of color along with prominent white intellectuals and writers were implicated in the

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[82] Howard, *Changing History,* 86.
[83] Knight, *Slave Society*, 95.
[84] Bernita Reid, "Negotiating," 81.
[85] Richard Burleigh Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans* (New York: Samuel Hueston, 1850), 84. While there are numerous reports that the men were tried before execution, this eye-witness accounts suggests this was not always the case.

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conspiracy and were executed, imprisoned, or sent into exile.[86] Authorities became even more convinced that in order to maintain control of enslaved blacks it was necessary to limit their interactions with the growing population of free blacks. This concern extended to free blacks who were living in Cuba but had not been born there. By 1844 all of Spain's former mainland colonies had gained their independence and liberated the enslaved Africans in their populations. As a result blacks in these new countries were living in emancipated societies.[87] Cuban officials considered the presence of *libres de color* from these independent nations to represent a threat to Cuba's own slave society. In March 1844 any free black men who were not born in the island were given two weeks to leave. From then until June of the following year, over seven hundred *libres de color* left Cuba for Mexico, Africa, the United States, Jamaica, Brazil, and Europe.[88] O'Donnell's agenda to decimate the free black population in Havana and other urban cities is evident in this order to expel even the foreign born *libres de color*. While newly arrived foreigners may indeed have represented a threat to Cuba's security, many of those expelled had actually lived in the island for years establishing businesses and raising families with Cuban partners.[89]

The repression of *La Escalera* revealed a deliberate agenda to restrict *libres de color's* ability to organize future uprisings. Military service, which had been an asset to

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[86] Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba*, 30. Robert Paquette provides the following numbers drawn from the partial records of the Military Commission at Matanzas, 38 free people of color executed, 743 free people of color imprisoned, and 433 free people of color banished from the island. Paquette, *Blood,* 229.
[87] John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire. A Concise History of Latin America,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 120.
[88] Paquette, *Blood,* 228.
[89] Reid-Vasquez, *Lash,* 75. According to Reid-Vasquez, 739 'native' *libres de color* left Cuba between March 1844 and June 1845—the same time period Paquette gives for the departure of the foreign-born *libres de color* living in Cuba. (Reid-Vasquez, 81) Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux uses the same number and refers to those departing the island as "individuos de color." (Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la económia,* 24) It is not clear if this number represents both populations of color.

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the local authorities against foreign threats, had also provided valuable skills to militia members. Aponte had been a commander in the *Moreno* battalion of the Havana militia – a fact not lost on the authorities investigating the revolt he led in 1812.[90] Their continuing discomfort about maintaining the colored militia during the early nineteenth century seemed to be justified in the aftermath of 1843. The colored militia that had had such a long and prestigious history of service to the Crown in Cuba was immediately disbanded and it would be ten years before it was reformed.[91]

The twenty-four years between 1844 and 1868 placed the free black community under intense surveillance. This diverse community was identified by white Cubans as a racially distinct social group and barred from full participation in Cuban society because of that status.[92] The slave regulations of 1844 included a number of restrictive provisions against them. For example, if *libres de color* could not provide evidence of "employment, property, or a known means of subsistence," they would be labeled vagrants and investigated. They were prohibited from working in the apothecaries and any crime committed by a *libre de color* against a white person was severely punished. Authorities were also cautioned to "watch vigilantly" any *libres de color* who resided in rural areas, as well as those who did not seek permission from authorities before coming together in social or other gatherings.[93] Clearly, authorities wanted to contain the free blacks in a way that would seriously curtail any future challenges to white colonial society, and they intended for this population to understand their social "place" as being subordinate to that of whites.

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[90] Paquette, *Blood,* 123.
[91] Bernita Reid, "Negotiating," 172.
[92] Mena, "No Common Folk," 228
[93] Paquette, *Blood*, 274 (taken from José María Zamora y Coronado, *Biblioteca de legislación ultramarina en forma de diccionario alfabético*. (Madrid, 1844-49), 3:139-141.

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Other scholars have noted that until 1868 *libres de color* no longer turned to armed struggle as they had during the first half of the nineteenth century. Instead they used other means to challenge the restrictions levied against them and continued to pursue education to improve their status and opportunities.[94] These efforts were facilitated in part through their community organizations. After *La Escalera,* and before the beginning of the Ten Years war, these organizations continued to be monitored in many ways because of the role they were suspected of playing in the conspiracies, but they were not disbanded, and in fact new groups formed. As a result they became important vehicles of social integration and mobilization for *libres de color* through which they could address issues of inequality. Within many of these groups music and dance played a significant role. It is my argument, that through the privileging of public performance different groups of *libres de color* attempted to contest the restrictions to which they were subject and construct their public image on their own terms.

The Afro-Cuban History of Self-Organizing

In Spain, according to Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz, social groups called *cofradías*, originally emerged in Seville, Andalusia where groups of Spaniards as well as Africans were affiliated with specific Roman Catholic churches. Ortiz writes, “De los cabildos afrocubanos, así como de sus capataces, pueden encontrarse indubitados y muy antiguos antecedentes históricos en Sevilla, según vemos en las crónicas de Ortiz de Zúñiga, el cual se refiere a los bailes y fiestas de los esclavos africanos en la capital andaluza durante el reinado de Don Enrique III (o sea 1390).” [Of the Afro-Cuban cabildos, as well as of their captains, we are able to find reliable ancient historical

[94] Bernita Reid, "Negotiating," 98 and 204.

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antecedents in Seville, according to the chronicles of Ortiz de Zúñiga, which refer to the dances and festivals of the enslaved Africans in the Andalusian capital during the reign of Don Enrique III (or about 1390).] Ortiz explains that in order to impose civil and religious order in Seville during the time of King Alfonso the Wise, blacks as well as other residents of Seville were required to organize into *cabildo* groups, "como les era obligatorio organizarse en cofradías."[95] From the earliest years of Spanish colonization of Cuba Africans formed social groups. No documentation has yet been found that authorized the establishment of black organizations in the early years after conquest so it is not clear how these groups were originally structured or exactly how they functioned for the African membership. What is known is that social, religious, and mutual aid type groups of some sort began forming quite early in the colony's history, and that authorities were aware of them.[96] Among these groups were those called *cofradías* and others known as *cabildos de nación*.[97] *Cofradías* were organized under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church. According to Cuban historian, Alejandro de la Fuentes, "The *cofradías,* or brotherhoods, which were always created under the advocacy of a patron saint, were supposed to bring blacks into the church and provide a space for mutual aid and Christian charity. In practice the cofradías did this and more. They functioned as mutual aid and burial societies. But slaves and free blacks also used these institutions to reconstitute their own forms of social organization and to organize their own festivities under the umbrella

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[95] Ortiz, *Los cabildos y la fiesta*, 4-5

[96] In lieu of official records regarding the formation of early black social groups, scholars draw from public references that indicate their presence in the towns such as wills earmarking funds for the *cofradías* or records of purchases made by these groups. Alejandro de la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century,* (Chapel Hill: The University of North carolina Press, 2008), 111 and 169.

[97] María del Carmen Barcia, *Los ilustres apellidos: negros en la Habana colonial* (Habana: Ediciones Boloña, 2009), 59. Carmen Barcia, director of the Casa de Altos Estudios Fernando Ortiz in Cuba, notes that many of these early organizations were formed by blacks who came to Cuba from the southern part of Spain.

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of the Christian calendar."[98] *Cabildos de nación,* on the other hand, while sometimes adopting a patron saint were not, in general, affiliated the Catholic Church. Again, there are no records that provide information about the formation and internal structure of these early *cabildo* groups in Cuba, or even what types of activities occurred during their meetings. Scholars have relied on passing contemporary references to their existence or on information about similar groups that existed in the Iberian peninsula in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[99] Eventually, the distance from Roman Catholic control that *cabildos* afforded the membership seem to have made these associations the more popular of the two for many Africans and their descendants.[100]

Cabildos and *cofradías* were not the only options for blacks or people of a mixed racial heritage forming associations in early colonial Cuba. References to other organizations called *hermandades* and *gremios* have also been found. It is important to keep in mind that these groups were not always clearly defined and distinguished from one another, nor was their membership likely mutually exclusive. In addition, given a lack of documentation produced by the members themselves it is difficult to identify each group's social composition. In general, the *hermandades* can be loosely defined as brotherhoods, which were similar to the *cofradías* in that they had a close affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church, but the members organized themselves to accomplish a specific action. There do not seem to have been many of these groups in Cuba. The *gremios* or guilds were a very old form of Spanish organization that drew together people of a like class or profession. In Matanzas the most important of these were groups of

[98] Alejandro de la Fuentes, *Havana and the Atlantic*, 168. De la Fuentes mentions the existence of two *cofradías* in Havana in the early 1600s but indicates that no records tell of when or how they were created.
[99] Carmen Barcia, *Los Ilustres Apellidos*, 48. According to María del Carmen Barcia there were references about black cabildo groups and their festivities from the second half of the sixteenth century
[100] Howard, *Changing History,* 27. Both groups continued to form throughout the nineteenth century.

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artists, coachmen, and bricklayers. They were similar to the Catholic brotherhoods except that their members operated as lay people rather than in an official religious role. By the nineteenth century, these *gremios* had developed into societies focused on providing mutual aid, education and recreation for their members.[101]

By allowing and even encouraging the enslaved and *libres de color* to organize and meet in their *cabildos* where they participated in familiar African rituals, authorities facilitated the centrality of music and dance in the lives of Cuban blacks. Their performance rituals allowed them to share remembered elements of West African traditions with each other while also transforming the rituals in the process. That whites would allow those they enslaved and later *libres de color* to engage in dance and music heavily influenced by African communal traditions indicates the vast difference in meaning both groups attached to these activities.[102]

Writing in broad strokes about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century West African and European religious ideologies, Africanist John Thornton notes that both traditions had a concept of two separate worlds—one in which a person moved and existed and another that tended to be indiscernible to most people—that were "intimately interconnected."[103] Thornton goes on to explain that in some West African belief systems connections could be made between the two worlds through “revelations” often facilitated through, "hypnotic dancing, singing, or drumming."[104] This suggests that when Africans danced and sang, these activities were infused with meanings that went much

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[101] Israel Moliner Castañeda, *Los Cabildos Afrocubanos en Matanzas* (Matanzas: Ediciones Matanzas, 2002), 21-22, “Su filiación era laica y no religiosa.”
[102] Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom. Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 125-126.
[103] John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 236.
[104] Thornton, *Africa and Africans,* 243.

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deeper than a simple urge for recreation. Dance scholar, Yvonne Daniel, discusses this idea of dance in dispersed African communities writing, "Over time, Africans in the Americas re-created dance/music and ritual sequences and created new forms in response to what they experienced. We have to conclude that they believed their dancing and music making were linked to both survival and salvation. They needed to dance and play music in order to save and protect their individual spirits, their dignity as humans, and their sense of a cosmic family."[105] The difference between recreational performances and ritual religious dance “infused with meaning” was the difference between a simple response to a basic desire for relief - which was presumably acceptable to colonial whites, and actions that suggested agency and connection to empowering deities - which might have been seen as unacceptable to colonial whites whose goal was to control Cuba's black population. Yet in light of the fact that Africans continued to be allowed to dance and make music Cuba’s white slave masters in the early nineteenth century appear not to have understood the religious dimension of African dance. Clearly, even while whites were suspicious of *cabildo* gatherings that could be used to mask planning meetings for blacks intent on rebellion, they did not seem to suspect that the actual dancing and music might be religious rituals that were as subversive to colonial slave society as were discussions about violent revolts. Instead they saw black performative activities as being recreational rather than religious in nature and thus harmless and by extension, tentatively acceptable. Had they understood that dance movements and drum rhythms could serve to connect blacks to a powerful spirit world, authorities may have done more than simply monitor these activities.

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[105] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom,* 64.

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Cuban officials allowed blacks to form social groups but they understood that they were walking a fine line. Their concerns centered on fears of slave uprisings and they understood that whether they allowed blacks to meet in their groups, or restricted them from doing so rebellion was always a possibility. The gatherings could act as a "safety valve" for the slave system, yet, allowing them to take place could also be opportunities for men and women to engage in conspiracies. As a result the early colonial attitude towards *cabildos de nación* tended towards a hesitant tolerance. According to Howard while the first African mutual aid groups formed in the rural areas amongst the agricultural slaves, in the towns and urban areas free and enslaved Africans also formed groups.[106] In the absence of documentation from the first mutual aid societies, scholars such as Cuban historian Israel Moliner Castañeda, use eighteenth- and nineteenth-century records to describe *cabildos de nación.* These records suggest how the first groups might have been structured. Based on his research examining newspaper lists of payments nineteenth-century *cabildo* groups were required to render in order to organize dances he chronicles the development of Matanzas groups.[107] Moliner Castañeda

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[106] Howard, xiv. Both *libres de color* and enslaved blacks participated in the *cabildos* but it is not clear whether enslaved people were actual members. Howard writes that the *cabildos "*served the interests of both freedmen and slaves," (Howard, xiv) and Cuban scholar, Carmen Barcia writes that the organizations were legally for freed Africans "legalmente sus miembres tenían que ser africanos libres," but that because they had originally arrived in Cuba in an enslaved condition, they had numerous associations with the enslaved community therefore both slaves and free participated in the reunions. In this work I have referred to enslaved participants as members. Carmen Barcia, *Los ilustres apellidos*, 55-56.

[107] Referring to written documentation about *cabildo* groups Moliner Castañeda concludes that, "puedo afirmar rotundamente que las fuentes matanceras son las más completas que existen actualmente en el país sobre esta materia. (15) [I am able to affirm that the Matanzas sources are the most fully complete that actually exist in the country about this material.] He concludes that, "En Cuba, los cabildos de Africanos no debieron comenzar a organizarse hasta después de la dominación inglesa de parte de la isla y en la medida que (durante la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII) iba en desarrollo el sistema de plantación, lo cual implicó un necesario aumento de los negros esclavos como mano de obra básica." (12) [In Cuba, the African cabildos did not begin to organize until after the domination of part of the island by the English and in the proportion to (during the second half of the 18th century) the development of the plantation system, which implied a necessary increase of the enslaved blacks as basic manual labor.] Moliner Castañeda might be referring here to cabildos that could trace their existence to written records as numerous scholars refer to the presence of African organizations from the sixteenth century. In spite of Moliner Castañeda's claim, in

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indicates that some *cabildos* in Matanzas were considered to be "independent" because they were not formally bound to one another nor affiliated with the Catholic Church.[108] Each of these independent *cabildos* appears to have operated as an autonomous group in terms of internal operations. In contrast there were other *cabildos* whose membership was drawn from among the subgroups of Africans identified as Congo. These *cabildos* were subject to the leadership of the *Cinco Naciones Congas de Matanzas*. In other words, while these individual *cabildo* groups each had their own elected hierarchy the *capataces,* or leaders, looked to the *capataz* of the central *cabildo* of the *Cinco Naciones Congas* for guidance and direction and thus they were not operating as independent autonomous organizations.[109] There were other differences between the *cabildo* groups in Matanzas. The independent groups tended to have officers that included captains, secretaries, and treasurers and memberships numbering from about 70 to 350. The internal hierarchy of the *Cinco Naciones* were organized along the lines of a royal court with kings, queens, and princesses.[110]

In general, however, in spite of the variations of the titles of *cabildo* leaders, elected *capataces* managed the majority of the *cabildos*. While the membership included both free and enslaved blacks, these captains tended to be African-born free men – *morenos.* Specific roles for the leaders might have varied somewhat from organization to organization, but the requirements of the *capataces* to interact with Spanish officials and

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the appendix to her work Carmen Barcia lists a record of the existence of a Havana carabalí *cabildo* in 1717 (393)

[108] While Moliner Castañeda does not provide records of cabildo leaders' requests to colonial government official for permissions to organize I am assuming, because of the public nature of the sources he uses (newspaper lists of payments made), that these *cabildos* formed with the knowledge of the colonial authorities.

[109] Moliner Castañeda, *Los Cabildos,* 35. Moliner Castañeda writes that this governing *cabildo* was the *Rey de las Cinco Naciones Congas de Matanzas.* The ethnic subgroups were of the following "nations" according to the author, "congos, bantúes, carabalíes, mandingas, ararás, minas, and gangás."

[110] Moliner Castañeda, 35-36. The author does not give membership numbers for the *Cinco Naciones*.

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other individuals who might have dealings with the *cabildo* lent the position some element of prestige. Some of the *cabildos* also elected prominent free black women for their queens or *matronas.* The *matronas* used their positions to accomplish ceremonial as well as administrative functions on behalf of the membership.[111] Ortiz notes that, "Las mujeres formaban parte de los cabildos," and "Tenían por reina a una negra libre y rica." [Women formed part of the cabildos.] and [They had as queen a free and rich black woman.][112] Each *cabildo* had rules governing such practices as the collection of dues.[113]

According to Matt Childs, "The Spanish term '*cabildo'* represents the English language equivalent of a town council or a town government. Consequently, the labeling of these societies as *cabildos de nación* provides some indication of how they functioned as representative bodies for African 'nations' by providing political and administrative services."[114] From what is known of nineteenth-century *cabildos,* these associations had economic power as well. Officers collected membership dues and used these funds to take care of the various needs of the membership. When a person was ill funds could be used to cover their medical expenses. When a member died, the *cabildo* could pay for the expenses associated with providing a funeral and also offset the cost of burial. The funds were also used to purchase freedom for enslaved members, especially those who were elderly or ill.[115] In addition, the *cabildos de nación* fostered the politicization of free and enslaved blacks. Howard writes that during the nineteenth century, "these dances, or

[111] Howard, *Changing History,* 36, 39, and 41.
[112] Ortiz, *Cabildos,* 3
[113] Howard, 47 and 51, "ejercían un oficio o actividad común."
[114] Childs, *Aponte,* 96.
[115] Howard, 49.

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tumbas, also served as venues for political activity when members met to conspire against the government."[116]

It is significant that in a number of *cabildos,* the leadership was or had been members of the black militia. These men enjoyed a certain amount of prestige for their proven courage as military men. But more importantly their experience as soldiers taught them not just how to fight, but how to organize a military effort. Having been entrusted with the charge to defend Cuba on Spain's behalf, against external and internal enemies it is understandable that they could feel entitled to certain rights that were steadily being rolled back as the enslaved population in Cuba grew. In the investigations following the 1812 uprisings, when the militia member and *cabildo* leader Aponte's subversive activities were uncovered, it became clear how valuable – or dangerous depending on the perspective – military service was when coupled with the opportunities afforded by the social gatherings of *cabildos de nación.* The first rebellions associated with Aponte began in January and the conspirators used the December holiday to meet under the guise of hosting dances. The comings and goings of attendees provided the cover for private discussions of insurrection. Matt Childs cites examples of enslaved men who requested and received passes to travel to the town of Puerto Príncipe in the island's interior during the period leading up to the January uprising in this city. He writes, "Authorities later learned that at taverns, festival celebrations, and small gatherings on weekends and holidays, slaves and free people of color took advantage of their limited opportunities to travel and collectively meet to plan their rebellion."[117] This was the dilemma of the

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[116] Howard*,* 27
[117] Childs, *Aponte,* 123.

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colonial authorities; the activities that were intended to lessen the possibility of insurrection, in some cases, actually concealed the planning of them.

According to Howard, the disbanding of the black militia, "inevitably prompted blacks to use their mutual aid societies as substitutes for the militias in order to regain a sense of self-worth and possibly socioeconomic privileges."[118] Howard contends that when forming new *cabildos* after *La Escalera*, some Afro-Cuban leaders made a conscious effort to separate themselves from practices that had caused suspicions amongst the whites.[119] Whether or not Howard is correct in his view that free blacks turned to their societies to regain lost self-esteem, many of the groups formed after 1844—which he refers to as "Pan-Afro-Cuban" societies—eschewed single ethnicity membership. I will argue here that rather than allowing whites to dictate their role and construct their image in the emerging public sphere, *libres de color* became more assertive in how they would participate. In the context of the heightened post-1843 repression, music and dance, which had always held great significance for Cuban blacks, became tools for *libres de color* intent on inserting themselves into the public view and controlling their public image.

Free Afro-Cubans belonged to *cabildo* groups comprised of Africans who identified with various ethnic backgrounds or they joined religious *cofradías* associated with the Catholic Church and which were closely involved in supporting Church activities. In addition, some such as the members of the colored militia had professional affiliations. Others participated in the Carnival *comparsas*—groups that formed specifically to prepare the dances and songs that would be performed at Carnival

[118] Howard, 32.
[119] *Ibid*., 99.

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celebrations. But while race may have served to identify them to white *criollos* as a homogenous class, I do not make the assumption that nineteenth-century *libres de color* self-identified as a distinct group with common goals. Even during the purge of *La Escalera,* when they were persecuted because of their racial identity and their status as free people, the *libres de color* still addressed the increased restrictions against their freedoms in different ways. My study of the performance events presented under the auspices of the various *cabildos de nación* and other black associations make clear that people of color in nineteenth-century Cuba were motivated by different interests and concerns and that these were reflected in the kinds of social groups they organized and the types of public performances in which they chose to engage. My research also reveals that Cubans of African heritage made particular use of the public aspect of their music and dance events in order to shape their public image.

Performance As a Site of Signification

Music and dance were central to the lives of enslaved Cubans and continued to be important to the growing population of *libres de color.* The centrality of performance in the lives of Cuban blacks, both enslaved and free is documented by the numerous examples of blacks engaging in dance and music throughout the colonial period. On

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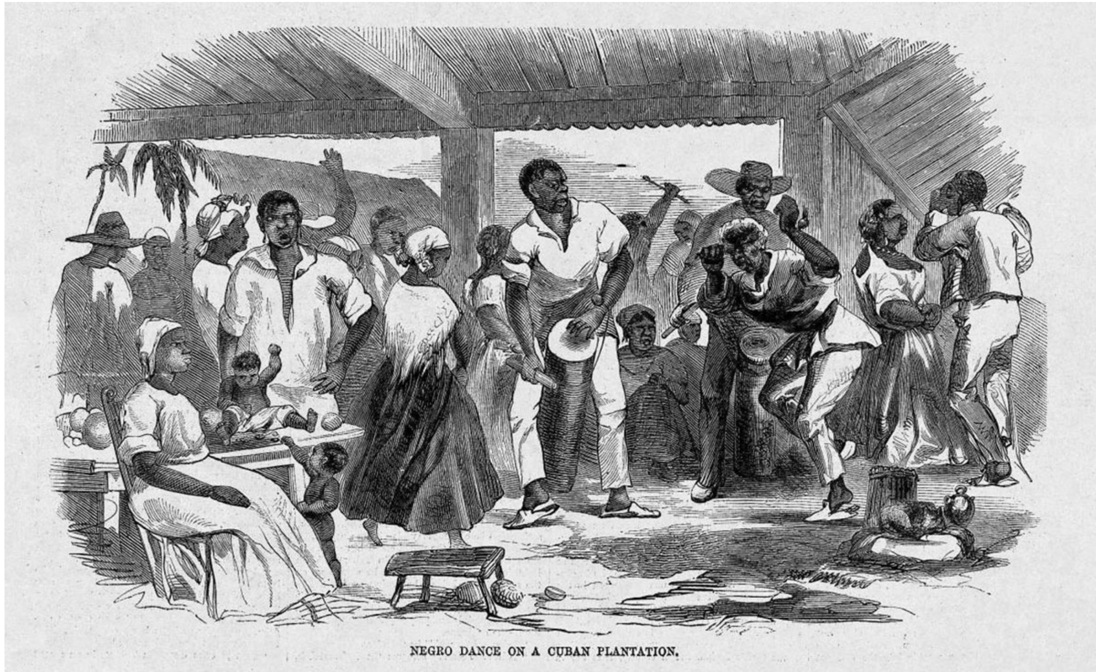
Cuban plantations, enslaved Africans were allowed time – often on Sundays – to dance and play music.


NEGRO DANCE ON A CUBAN PLANTATION. [120]

The break in the plantation's work schedule became for the enslaved an expected part of the routine of plantation life and authorities believed that this respite was a crucial element in maintaining control over this population. Eventually the tradition of giving plantation workers free time found its way into the legal system. The slave code of 1842 codified the right for the enslaved to hold dances accompanied by drums as long as whites supervised the proceedings and no slaves from other plantations attended the gatherings. Twice a year they could also request special permission to organize processions with costumes and dancing as long as these were held in daylight hours.

[120] Slave Dance, Cuba, 1859, caption: "Negro Dance on a Cuban Plantation." Image reference as shown HW0006, as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

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According to this law, Afro-Cuban societies, with their free black and enslaved memberships were allowed to hold meetings—which generally involved music and dancing—on Sundays or special feast days, but these gatherings could only take place in certain designated areas.[121] In 1844, as investigations into the previous year's slave revolts ensued authorities issued a regulation reminding local officials of the requirement that blacks obtain permission before gathering together stressing that it was to be "strictly observed."[122]

The centrality of performance in the black community provided Cuban free blacks with an activity they could manipulate in order to pursue various agendas. Afro-Cuban music and dance, however, could not have been as useful a tool for free people of color had whites not been intrigued on some level by these traditions. Because they were being observed, *libres de color* could control their public performances and by extension fashion their public image. The writings of historians, novelists, and newspaper contributors from the period indicate that throughout the nineteenth century whites were drawn to "black" performance albeit in an ambivalent way.[123] Most *peninsulares* and white *criollos* were not privy to the private dances that took place within the African *cabildo* organizations but they could observe public events such as religious festivals on Catholic feast days.[124] While some whites were drawn to what they saw as the exotic performances of these enslaved blacks and *libres de color*, there was often a strong

[121] Knight, *Slave Society*, 128.
[122] Paquette, *Blood,* 274.
[123] Examples of works that discuss white fascination with African-influenced performance include John Charles Chasteen's *National Rhythms, African Roots. The Deep History of Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004)*,* Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés or El Angel Hill. A Novel of Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)*,* Jill Lane's discussion of *veladas* in *Blackface Cuba,* and Fredrika Bremer's travel journal *The Homes of the New World*.
[124] Scholars such as Chasteen and Carmen Barcia mention the parties hosted by blacks and attended by the sons of wealthy white *criollos* who wanted to mingle with mixed-race girls. It is not clear that this was a practice engaged in by a large majority of Havana whites.

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element of distaste coupled with this attraction amongst some of those who recorded their responses to African-based dances they had witnessed. Cuban whites revealed both aspects of their response to *cosas negras* in the way they chose to include facets of "African" cultural activities in their own forms of entertainment. Both in the popular press and on stage they mimicked black dialect and culture.

By the mid-nineteenth century, *libres de color* would certainly have been all too aware of the popular minstrel stage performances in which whites blackened their faces and parodied blacks through the creation of specific black characters. Stage characters such as the *catedrático* representing a black person who was unsuccessfully affecting the behavior of an intellectual or the *bozal* African (Africans who were born in Africa and thus not culturally and linguistically assimilated into the dominant culture) with little or no concept of "civilized" (white) culture, were well known stock figures in the theatre performances of the nineteenth century.[125] The first blackface stage performance in Cuba took place in Havana in 1812 and included a dialogue between "*negritos*" using non-standard spoken Spanish in a parody of the dialect of *bozales*.[126] Over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, blackface theater performances perpetuating these negative stereotypes continued to be popular in Cuba. In fact, during the 1850s and 1860s these minstrel performances attained the peak of their popularity among whites in urban Cuba. Cuban theaters even hosted North American minstrel shows, but as music historian Ned Sublette notes, "they preferred their own style of blackface musical comedy, in their own language, which had already been going on for decades as part of the cavalcade of

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[125] Lane, *Blackface,* 78.
[126] Lane, 29.

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stereotypical comic characters on the Cuban stage."[127] This nineteenth-century popular culture denigrating blacks made public performance a key site of self-fashioning for free people of color.

Jill Lane suggests that by presenting the popular stage characters of the *bozal* and the *catedrático* these performances were in effect "giving voice to Cuban life and experience."[128] She argues that enjoying the joke of a blackface performance together appears to have provided white *criollos* with a sense of community. *Criollos* also seemed to use blackface performances as a way to delineate boundaries. Lane contends that in wearing the "mask" of blackface in order to create the popular characters these performers were reinforcing their own whiteness and distancing themselves from these characters.[129] Building on Lane's observations, it appears that *cosas negras* could be a part of the Cuban identity only if controlled and shaped by dominant whites attempting to appropriate black performance through blackface minstrelsy. Free people of color seemed ready to challenge the negative stereotypes in blackface minstrelsy by counteracting the images being presented on the popular stage through their own public performances during which they controlled the images presented.

By the nineteenth century when the white elite had embarked on a "civilizing" agenda for Cuba, Afro-Cuban dance had become a sign of inferiority and backwardness. This attitude was not limited to whites but was also embraced by some blacks who had internalized the prevailing prejudices.[130] Interestingly this white concern about Afro-Cuban culture also worked to the advantage of the *libres de color*. Whites for better or

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[127] Ned Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), 238.
[128] Lane, 20
[129] *Ibid.*, 15-16.
[130] Paquette, *Blood*, 127.

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were taking note of African-influenced dance, which in turn afforded blacks – especially in the wake of *La Escalera* – an opportunity to use public performance to challenge demeaning presumptions about them and assert their presence in the emerging public space.

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Since the beginning of the slave trade to Cuba, Africans and their descendants had resisted the restrictions placed on their freedoms. As the population of *libres de color* increased in the island so too did the possibility of collaboration between free and enslaved blacks in armed resistance. *Libres de color* who could move about the island with information and supplies, and who had military and leadership experience along with some degree of material resources became a source of concern to colonial authorities and slave owners. Authorities understood that *libres de color* fighting in solidarity alongside the enslaved would constitute a formidable threat to Cuba's slave society. With the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue in 1791, this concern seemed to them even more justified. Colonial restrictions targeting this population increased over the course of the first half of the nineteenth-century, culminating in a veritable purge against them during *La Escalera.* Legal constraints after *La Escalera* were designed to control *libres de color* and "confine" them to a social space separate from whites. While as other scholars have noted, free blacks seemed to relinquish their efforts at armed resistance until the beginning of the Ten Years War. They did not, however, relinquish their efforts to participate in the emerging Cuban public sphere on their own terms. And for this, I argue, they turned in part to the organizations that had been an integral part of their lives since the mid-sixteenth century.

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Colonial authorities allowed Africans and their descendants in Cuba to form associations of various forms in part because they assumed the music and dance activities that took place during the gatherings were forms of recreation. The rationale was that if the enslaved and free blacks were allowed time to relax and engage in pleasurable activities they would be less inclined to foment rebellion. While the dancing may have had recreational elements, African performance traditions were more religious than recreational. Yet seeming official ignorance or unconcern provided opportunities for blacks who continued to practice rituals and dances even while whites monitored these activities. Whether dancing in elaborate costumes representing their "nation" during Roman Catholic feast day processions or dancing minuets, for blacks, music and dance remained vital activities during their gatherings.

After *La Escalera* and before the start of the Ten Years War free black organizations were under greater suspicion and restrictions, yet authorities continued to allow new ones to form and established ones to continue to meet. During this period these organizations and in particular their public performances were primary spaces for free black self-fashioning and self-assertion. In this study I suggest that *libres de color* used public performances under the auspices of their social organizations in order to shape their public image. By manipulating the mode of their dances and their music they sent a message that they intended, in spite of the restrictions levied against them and the negative stereotypes targeting their mannerisms and behavior, to be engaged in the society in which they lived. This was especially true for the ethnically diverse Afro-Cuban societies that sought to downplay stereotypes associated with their race in play in Cuban society after 1844. One such group in Matanzas addressed these stereotypes by

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shaping their public performances to emphasize their similarities to dominant white Cuban society and downplay boundaries associated with racial difference.

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Chapter Two

"Well Dressed After the French Mode": Embracing a Philanthropic Agenda

A Cuban Community

In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Jürgen Habermas argues that the emergence of a new idea of community, which he terms the "public sphere," was linked to the growth of a print culture in eighteenth-century Europe.[131] In his view, the "community of readers" that developed in Europe as a result of this print culture helped shape the notion of a public sphere. Jill Lane has argued that in nineteenth-century Cuba, the sense of a public community in the white Cuban-born *criollo* imagination emerged in response to their experience of exclusion within colonial society. White *criollos,* who were made to feel "different" by Spanish-born *peninsulares,* began to imagine a Cuban community with a character and culture separate from that which tied them to Spain. For many white male *criollos* this imagined Cuba excluded women, Asians, and people of African descent.[132] Yet, as I argue in this chapter, some African-descended people in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba who also embraced the idea of a Cuban community refused this attempted exclusion. Instead they used multiple means – including performance, long a key site of social bonding for Cuban blacks – to contest the restrictions they faced and insert themselves into the emerging public community as it was being imagined by the dominant (white) class.

It was imperative to white Cuban *criollos* that the society they created reflect their

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[131] Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* translated by Thomas Burger, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
[132] Lane, 141.

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notion of themselves as Cubans and that this identity held up to European scrutiny. While white elites in Cuba were not a homogenous group politically, many of the well-educated class had been influenced by European intellectual thought. Some aspects of Enlightenment thought appealed to Cuban intellectuals. For example, educated Cubans read and discussed the works of French philosopher René Descartes and English scientist Isaac Newton as well as the works of other Enlightenment thinkers.[133] Committed to the pursuit of wisdom through the study of science, these intellectuals argued in their respective fields for reform and a break with the way things had been accomplished in the past—in a word they argued for 'progress" as they understood it. But Cubans did not import Enlightenment ideals wholesale and Manuel Moreno Fraginals describes the Cuban "sugarcrat ideology" as being one which advocated "reformism with slavery."[134] The Enlightenment concept of "equality" was particularly difficult for some Cuban leaders to embrace. Caribbean historian Gordon K. Lewis explains that, "Even [Cuban priest and intellectual] Varela, who as early as 1822 had written, in his *Memoria*, a distinguished plea for slavery abolition, could object to the translation of August Comte's treatise on legislation on the ground that it contained passages favorable to the idea of equality between the white and black races."[135]

In addition to imbibing the messages of reform and progress embedded in European Enlightenment ideology, elite Cubans were struck by the physical icons of "progress" and "modernity" transforming the cities of their neighbor to the north. Between 1790 and

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[133] E. Bradford Burns and Julie Charlip. *Latin America. An Interpretive History. 8th Edition.* (New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2007), 65.
[134] Moreno Fraginals, *Sugarmill*, 60 and 61.
[135] Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought. The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in Its Ideological Aspects, 1492-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 155. Comte's positivist philosophy became popular amongst elites and leaders in nineteenth-century Latin America.

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1860 there was a tremendous population growth in many North American cities. "Cubans who traveled to the United States could not help but compare Havana with New York," explains Louis Pérez, Jr.[136] Historians Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy describe the North American urban growth in this way, "New York was the metropolis; New Orleans, the 'Queen of the South'; and Chicago, the swaggering Lord of the Midwest, destined to be the 'hog butcher for the world."[137] When Cubans evaluated their populace using French, British, and North American standards Cuban intellectuals found their society lacking. By the final years of the eighteenth century they were already engaged in activities designed to modernize urban Cuba. Some elite *criollos* spearheaded efforts to ensure that their cities reflected their perceptions of themselves as a civilized people and they were adamant that the construction of themselves as Cubans be in line with contemporary Enlightenment ideals about "science, the arts, commerce and industry, beautification, and agriculture and education."[138] This concern with elevating their status as *criollos* and ensuring that status was reflected in the physical space of cities like Havana and Matanzas dominated Cuban intellectual discussions throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. It was the impetus behind much of the effort to reorganize the urban areas and mold the population.

Some white intellectuals considered the improvement of Cuban society to be solely a white concern. *Criollo* writings of the period were at times very explicit in this attitude, arguing not only that the effort to civilize Cuban society should be undertaken

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[136] Louis A. Pérez, Jr. *Slaves, Sugar, & Colonial Society, Travel Accounts of Cuba, 1801-1899* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1992), xiii.
[137] Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy, *The American Pageant, 10th edition* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1994), 302.
[138] Knight. *Slave Society*, 16. According to Knight, Cuban elites were more drawn to Enlightenment ideals about scientific method and economic concerns than to the more philosophical aspects of Enlightenment thought.

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by whites, but even that only whites could be considered Cubans. "The Cuban nationality of which I have spoken," wrote the prominent *criollo* intellectual José Antonio Saco, "and the only one that should concern all sensible men, is that formed by the white race."[139] As this chapter examines, numerous *libres de color* did not accept this assessment of Cuban nationality.

Literary works produced in Cuba during the 1830s and 1840s sought to construct a narrative of what a national image might look like. Novelists, poets, and playwrights were concerned with how "origins" and geographic space revealed the essence of what it meant to be a Cuban. Of particular concern to elite whites attempting to maintain clear-cut social distinctions between the classes, was the presence *libres de color* who worked and lived in the colonial towns and who traveled throughout the cities in the course of their day. Rather than remain on the margins of society and within their "place" in the rigid social hierarchy, *libres de color* who had achieved economic standing and who were also exposed to and often energized by the same Enlightenment ideology motivating whites, considered themselves equally capable of participating in the modernizing agenda. In this chapter I examine the idea that while many *libres de color* approved of the efforts to modernize their cities and "improve" the inhabitants by following European models, their assumption that they would be involved in this modernizing effort indicates that they did not consider this endeavor a racially exclusive one.

During the years after *La Escalera,* their social status was confined, yet successful *libres de color* were unwilling to relinquish their previous advancements. My study indicates that one way they adapted to the more restrictive post 1844 environment was by

[139] Louis Pérez, Jr. *On Becoming Cuban: National Identity, Nationality, and Culture,* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1999), 90.

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drawing on organizations and practices that had previously helped them cope with the tremendous challenges they faced throughout the history of African enslavement in Cuba. Rather than turn to armed resistance as some had in the years prior to 1843, a number of *libres de color* appear to have relied even more on their social organizations in order to resist the restrictions imposed and facilitate their participation in the Cuban community on their terms.

Music and dance became particularly useful tools to these ends in the mid-nineteenth century for people of color. Public and private performances were imbued with numerous meanings from religious to recreational, to political. *Libres de color* after *La Escalera* were able to use public performances as vehicles through which they could both make themselves visible to those in the dominant classes and manipulate this visibility in ways that challenged and attempted to reshape the derogatory images about them in play at this time. One of the ways that *libres de color* used public performance was as a means of associating themselves with philanthropic activities within the urban communities. In doing so they aligned themselves with charitable efforts that had been spearheaded by *criollo* elites, colonial authorities, and the Catholic Church and that joined together to address Cuba's social problems.

One of the institutions with which the *libres de color* became involved was the orphanage *La Casa de Beneficencia,* one of the most visible and well-supported charitable projects of the period. This institution, initially founded in Havana in the last decade of the eighteenth century, was a special project of the leading Cuban intellectuals of the day. The white population joined together in raising funds to support the works of this organization, which stood as a testament to their progressiveness. At the center of

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this chapter lies Swedish traveler Fredrika Bremer's 1851 account of a public ball hosted by *libres de color* in Matanzas to raise funds for that city's recently opened branch of *La Casa de Beneficencia*. Bremer's descriptions of the minuets and other dances she watched Matanzas that evening provide a window (albeit refracted) on the activities of this segment of Cuba's urban population. Her account also provides a platform from which to analyze ways this group negotiated their ambiguous social position. Without the benefit of other sources on this event, Bremer's journal provides valuable insights, which, if interpreted carefully and placed within the context of nineteenth-century Cuban politics, can help suggest motives and agendas of this little known population.

Connecting Bremer's account to a range of other sources I argue that for the *libres de color* who hosted the dance, the engagement was a way to embrace publicly as equals the white *criollo* agenda of social improvement. I suggest that they used performance as a site from which they could declare that they should be included in the emerging discussion about a distinctly Cuban character being undertaken by white *criollos*. By associating their philanthropic efforts with projects developed by prominent *criollos*, *libres de color* seem to have consciously sought to show that they were as equipped to participate in "progressive" efforts as were white *criollos,* thus challenging the race-based hierarchy that placed them somewhere between whites of all classes and enslaved blacks.

The *Criollo* Modernizing Agenda

For the group of writers referred to as the *delmontinos,* after Domingo del Monte, who initiated this gathering of literati, literature provided an opportunity to articulate their vision of Cuban identity to their fellow Cubans. They felt a strong mandate to use

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their writings to "enlighten public opinion."[140] Del Monte recorded his experience as follows, "Desde que llegué de New York en 1829, no he cesado, en compañía de los demas jóvenes patriotas amigos mio, de promover en lo que podia en mis cortos recursos pecuniarios é intelectuales, todo lo que juzgaba conveniente en pro de la Isla, y principalmente nos empleábamos en ilustrar la opinión pública, ya por medio de la imprenta, ya en conversaciones privadas, en reuniones académicas, en los paseos, en las tertulias, en los teatros." [Ever since I returned from New York in 1829, I, along with my other young patriotic friends, have not stopped promoting as best I could with my limited financial and intellectual resources everything that I thought appropriate for the island's benefit. We were mostly engaged in enlightening public opinion, whether through the press, or in private conversations, in scholarly meetings, on outings, in social gatherings, in the theaters.][141] In other words these writers were attempting to distinguish themselves as white *criollos* separate from peninsular born Spaniards who governed them. In his study of how the image of Cuban nationhood was constructed by mid-nineteenth-century novelists, José Luis Ferrer shows that white *Criollo* writers depicted the rural space, in spite of the continued existence of plantation slavery, as a site from which the true Cuban could emerge. The urban space, in contrast was seen as being a complicated amalgamation of classes and races mingling together without clear geographic boundaries. "Importante para el programa político de la burguesía criolla es la representación de la nación como un sistema de clases, etnias y razas organizado de acuerdo a un orden jerárquico precisio." [Important for the political program of the *criollo* bourgeoisie is the representation of the nation as a system of classes, ethnicities

[140] Lane, 26.
[141] Lane, 26. Lane is quoting from Lorna V. Williams, *The Representation of Slavery in Cuban Fiction,* translated by Williams (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 17.

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and races organized according to a precise hierarchical order.][142] It seems that a large part of what made the urban areas problematic for nineteenth-century Cuban intellectuals was the social "disorder" present in Havana, Matanzas, and the island's other growing towns. The *delmontinos'* use of literature to construct a sense of Cuban particularity held anticolonial implications and government censors carefully monitored the work of the writers they deemed potentially subversive. Del Monte complained that he and his fellow writers were frustrated in their efforts because of the restricted climate under which they worked in the 1830s.[143]

The Cuban sugar boom of the late eighteenth century created a *criollo* elite, and this elite – along with the *peninsulares* or the Spanish-born elite – pushed for urban reforms. In spite of what the *peninsulares* thought of them, the members of the *criollo* elite considered themselves more sophisticated and educated than the *peninsulares* who held most of the positions of authority in the island. The *criollos* were limited in their political participation in the island's governance, but they dominated the economic arena. Some of them were active in a group called the Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, which came to be known as the Economic Society. This group had actually been formed in 1793 as a modernizing space through which, it was conceived, many efforts to improve Havana and other urban spaces, would be achieved.[144] A number of the Society's members were pivotal to Cuba's development in the first half of the nineteenth century including, José Antonio Saco and Domingo del Monte. In 1795, another important institution was formed in the island, the Real Consulado y Junta de Fomento or

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[142] José Luis Ferrer, "Novela y nación en Cuba, 1837-1846" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Miami, 2002), 388.
[143] Lane, 27.
[144] Leyma Hidalgo Valdés, *Real Casa de Beneficencia de la Habana. Luces y Sombras de una Institución, 1794 – 1865,* (Barcelona: Linkgua ediciones, 2006), 17.

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Development Board.[145] This organization was responsible for directing and carrying out the strategies of Cuba's economic elite – essentially the members of the Economic Society.[146]

In the first part of the nineteenth century, it was these members of the Economic Society, through the Real Consulado that took upon themselves the responsibility to shape Havana into a civilized and progressive social order and explore ways that Cuba could enhance its image on the worldwide stage. The members of the Economic Society solicited ideas from amongst their number that would address the question of how to "elevate" Havana society. Saco responded with a work entitled *Memoria sobre la vagancia en la Isla de Cuba* that emphasized the need for public order and identified vagrancy as a particular impediment to social improvement. Saco was a prolific writer whose views would have a tremendous impact on the direction Cuba's dominant classes would take in formulating plans for Cuba's future. Born in the eastern part of Cuba in 1797, Saco moved to Havana after his parents' death where he studied philosophy at the University of Havana under the well-respected and politically influential priest and university professor, Félix Varela. He was one of a number of *criollo* intellectuals and students of Varela who concerned themselves, in the first half of the nineteenth century, with the question of how to address the social ills they perceived in Havana.[147]

Saco's essay as well as his other writings, expressed his concern with public order and the need to keep people from roaming about the city without purpose. He emphasized the detrimental effect on the city of those he considered to be idle and having nothing

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[145] Miguel A. Bretos, *Matanzas. The Cuba Nobody Knows,* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 62.
[146] Hidalgo Valdés, *Real Casa,* 17-18.
[147] Saco, *Memoria Sobre la Vagancia en Cuba,* 7-8.

المنارة للاستشارات
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productive to do, writing that, "Estas reflexiones nos convencerán, de que si deseamos purgar nuestra sociedad de muchos delitos, debemos tomar un partido contra los vagos, porque hombres sin oficio, ni ocupaciones, ni bienes con qué mantenerse, necesariamente han de jugar, robar o cometer otros delitos." [These reflections will convince us that if we desire to purge our society of many crimes, we ought to take a stance against vagrants, because men without trade or occupation, or a good way of maintaining themselves, will necessarily turn to games or robbery, or commit other crimes.][148] Vagrancy conflicted with the desire to recreate Havana's image because the problem was so visible it could not be ignored. "No hay ciudad, pueblo, ni rincón de la isla," wrote Saco, "hasta donde no se haya difundido este cáncer devorador." [There is not a city, town, or corner where this devouring cancer has not become widespread.][149] Beggars, prostitutes, mentally disturbed people and orphans seemed to be swarming about the city streets with no identifiable means of occupying their time or "good way of maintaining themselves."[150] A number of these uncontained individuals were children who could be rehabilitated and reeducated. Because of this, in addition to trying to "clean up" the city, officials and intellectuals considered ways to mold this pool of potentially productive citizens.

Based on some of Saco's observations and recommendations, the members of the Economic Society as well as the colonial governing officials initiated a number of social and cultural projects to manage the city's sanitary conditions, educate the population, organize projects to improve existing public spaces, and create new spaces for public

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[148] Saco, *Memoria*, 76. Saco spends a good deal of time in this work discussing gaming houses as a source of vagrancy. He describes gaming houses as, "la escuela de corrupción para la juventud" [the school of corruption for the youth],16.
[149] Saco, *Memoria*, 16.
[150] Hidalgo Valdés, *Real Casa,* 21.

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enjoyment and recreation.[151] These projects were designed to help form an orderly society, but the presence of *libres de color* in the urban space was problematic and posed a challenge for this modernizing agenda. According to Cuban historian Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, in spite of the fact that they were free, people of color in Cuba who were no longer enslaved, were still expected to respect and defer to all whites just as the enslaved were.[152] An ideal well-ordered society for men such as Saco was one that was vertically structured by race and class. Historian Franklin Knight describes the social hierarchy in Cuba at this time in this way, "The society was structured along caste-like lines which roughly corresponded to racial lines. At the top of society was a group of whites. Below in the social order came a group of free people who were not white…at the bottom of the structure were the slaves."[153] *Libres de color* as a class of people within Cuban society could jeopardize the goal of a rigidly constructed race-based social hierarchy if they did not remain in their "place" below whites of all economic and social states. Their status as free people meant that they did not belong in the slave class, yet their race meant that they could not fit easily amongst those of European heritage without impacting the status of whites – a status that was linked to the concept of purity of blood or *limpieza de sangre.* Saco noted with concern, the increasing black (both enslaved and free) presence in the island, which he saw as being a consequence of the pursuit of profits. "Los cubanos halagados con el precio extraordinario que adquirieron esos frutos en aquellos, multiplicaron sus ingenios y cafetales."[154] [The Cubans, pleased by the extraordinary

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[151] Hidalgo Valdés, *Real Casa,* 20 and 29.
[152] Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en la economía*, 49. Here he is quoting from A. de las Barras no page cited.
[153] Knight, *Slave Society*, 85.
[154] José Antonio Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el Nuevo* Mundo 4 vols. (Havana: Cultural, 1938), 3:29

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prices the fruits of the earth (sugar and coffee) obtained in the markets of Europe (referred to in a previous sentence) multiplied their sugar and coffee plantations.] This increase in sugar production meant that the sugar producers imported more and more enslaved Africans. Because of the fear of a rising population of color, Saco advocated an end to the slave trade even while defending the institution of slavery itself.[155]

By the early 1800s the Spanish notion of *limpieza de sangre* had shifted significantly from its original meaning. In Spain the idea of pure blood had been related to religion. Those families that were Christian and had not been contaminated by religious heresies could claim *limpieza de sangre.* In the New World this idea of purity came to be associated with race, and specifically with skin color and other physical attributes, which served as markers for a person's racial background.[156] People with "pure blood" were of European heritage throughout their family lineages. The large numbers of *libres de color* – and especially those who were of mixed heritage and who had light to very light skin – made it difficult to determine racial heritage.

Travel documents from the period indicate that this was something Europeans and North Americans visiting the island took note of as they struggled to identify racial background amongst the people they encountered. One traveler, the American abolitionist, Julia Ward Howe, expressed surprise to meet a person whom she thought to be a mulatto because of their dark skin but who was introduced as a *criollo* (implying white *criollo*), while another, who looked white, was laughingly referred to by his classmates as mulatto. "We have seen children at a school who were decidedly dark, and would have been taken for mulattoes in the North, — they had straight hair, vivacious

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[155] Knight, *Slave Society,* 149.
[156] Paquette, *Blood*, 112.

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eyes, and coffee-colored skins, —those whom we interrogated called them '*Criollos,*' as if the word had a distinct meaning. We could not ascertain that they were considered to be of black descent, though the fact seemed patent. In this school, which we saw at recess only, some of the mischievous boys amused themselves with dragging their comrades up to us, and saying: 'Señora, this boy is a mulatto.' The accused laughed, kicked, and disclaimed."[157] In fact, Howe could not even describe her own *criollo* host's skin color as either white or dark but indicated that it had a "clouded hue."[158]

While it may be expected that travelers unfamiliar with Cuban society might be confused with regards to race, this uncertainty was not limited to foreigners. In Howe's account the Cuban boys she encountered manipulated race as a form of teasing, indicating a certain ambivalence with regards to racial identification. This was also evident in the Cuban legal system where cases challenging a person's racial status often revealed the confusion that race mixing was causing in the social arena. Historian Verena Martinez-Alier notes in her work, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba*, "According to the marriage legislation, nineteenth-century Cuban society was divided into two large groups, those of European origin and those of African origin, physical appearance serving as the criterion of distinction."[159] The prevalence of *libres de color* with obviously mixed parentage in the urban areas gave visible evidence that blacks and whites were coming into contact with each other socially and sexually, further complicating the colonial social system and making the use of phenotype an imprecise method of determining race. For example, the following definition for the term *trigueño*

[157] Julia Ward Howe, *A Trip to Cuba,* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860), 230-231.
[158] Howe, 230.
[159] Verena Martinez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba. A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society,* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 71.

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is given in the dictionary of Cuban "voices and phrases" published in 1836 by geographer Esteban Pichardo, “The person of slightly darker colour or similar to that of wheat (*trigo*) in the same way as the person of lighter colour, milky with a pink hue is called *white* … In a racial context the word *white* is used even if the person is *trigueño,* in order to differentiate him from *negro* or *mulatto*; although there are some of the latter who are whiter than many of the white race.”[160] In Pichardo's definition "whiteness" went beyond skin color as some people of mixed race were lighter complexioned than those he designates as white. His work codifies the racist vision of colonial society shared by many of his contemporaries who were uneasy with the racial mixing in their midst.[161]

In the 1830s, Francisco Dionisio Vives, who governed the island from 1823 until 1832 considered free blacks and mulattoes such a threat to the island’s stability that he suggested they be expelled from Cuba as a group.[162] Vives’ proposal may have been less than serious, and he did acknowledge that there were among the *libres de color* men who were, “reputable artisans, good family men, who have urban estates and slaves.” Yet he was aware that a general uprising amongst enslaved blacks might cause these men to join arms with the insurgents or alternately that they might foment rebellion amongst the enslaved.[163] While expelling the *libres de color* might not have been a practical idea, in the view of some members of the dominant class, it became important for this population of people, who were neither black nor white, to be carefully contained so the boundaries

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[160] Martinez-Alier, *Marriage,* 72. She is quoting Estéban Pichardo, *Pichardo Novísimo o Diccionario provincial casi razonado de voces y frases cubanos* (Havana, 1953), p. 659-660. This was first published in 1836.

[161] Francisco Javier Pérez, *Diccionarios, discursos etnográficos, universos léxicos: propuestos teóricos para la comprensión cultural de los diccionarios* (Caracas: Universidad Católia Andrés Bello: Fundación CELARG, 2000), 50.

[162] José Antonio Saco, "Un interogatorio absuelto por el Capitán General don Francisco Dionisio Vives," In *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el nuevo mundo y en especial en los países americo-hispanos,* 341-356. (Habana, Cultural, 1938), 355.

[163] *Ibid.,* 105.

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between the races – and thus family honor – could be maintained. Laws and decrees addressing interracial marriage reflect this concern for placing boundaries between the races, but they also reveal a certain ambiguity towards interracial associations. In the first decade of the nineteenth-century the colonial authorities were concerned about the age of consent for potential marriage partners. In 1803 this age was set at twenty-three and twenty-five for men and women respectively.[164] By 1805 the focus was on whether or not a person considered to be of the nobility and of pure blood could or should be allowed to marry a person of mixed race.[165] Yet the attitude amongst whites towards *libres de color* seems to have been somewhat ambivalent. In the hopes of "whitening" the population some colonial elites suggested that the legal restrictions against interracial marriages be repealed.[166] While this obviously had racist aims, encouraging marital unions and thus sexual intercourse between whites and blacks seems counterintuitive in a society concerned about *limpieza de sangre*. Moreno Fraginals mentions the case of a wealthy mulatto family that experienced both sides of this ambivalence. He writes, "His descendents [referring to the mixed-race Juan Gregorio de Neyra] achieved total whiteness in successive marriages, but in 1802 proceedings were begun to stop the marriage of one descendant, María Josefa de la Luz Hernández, on the grounds of tainted blood."[167]

Criollo attitudes towards *libres de color*, then, appear to have been influenced by a number of factors including economics, politics, and a concern for the social development of the Cuban population. The fact remained that the *libres de color* were

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[164] Martinez-Alier, *Marriage,* 11.
[165] *Ibid.,* 13.
[166] Moreno Fraginals, *Sugarmill*, 138. Here Moreno Fraginals is referring to Porfirio Valiente's work entitled *Reformes dans les îles de Cuba et de Porto Rico* 1869, chapter 24.
[167] Moreno Fraginals, *Sugarmill,* 155, note 5.

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difficult to ignore. They were so numerous in urban areas by the early years of the nineteenth century that their presence made some whites uncomfortable.[168] Franklin Knight compiled the following figures breaking down the population numbers for the *libres de color* between the years 1774 and 1860.

Year	Libres de Color	% Total Population
1774	36, 301	20.3
1792	54, 154	19.0
1827	106, 494	15.1
1841	154, 546	15.1
1860	225, 843	16.2

In 1774 the population of *libres de color* in Cuba was around 36,000. This number rose to over 154,000 in 1841 supplemented by a wave of immigrants from Saint-Domingue, and by 1860 free blacks in Cuba numbered 225,843.[169] While this actually represented a decrease in the percentage of *libres de color* in the island's total population, their congregation in cities meant that they were very visible in the daily activities of the urban environment.

A Demand to be Seen

In 1851, Fredrika Bremer, arrived in Cuba for what would be a three-month visit. This trip to Cuba was a detour for her as she had been traveling throughout North America since 1849. Though born in Finland, Bremer was raised in Sweden and by the time of her journey to the Americas was already a well-respected novelist in that

[168] Pérez, *Reform*, 97.
[169] Knight, "Cuba," 284. The figures for the table were also taken from this source.

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country.[170] Bremer describes herself as being eager to learn as much as she could about the regions she visited. She explains that her decision to travel to America was in part to, "become clearer in my own mind on certain questions connected with the development of nations."[171] While in Cuba, Bremer, who was an ardent abolitionist, sought out opportunities observe people of color. One of these events was the dance performance hosted by *libres de color* in the town of Matanzas, which she wrote about in her travel journal, referring to it as a "negro ball." The ball was really a banquet and a dance performance held on behalf of the charitable organization *La Casa de Beneficencia,* and while *libres de color* hosted it, the audience was made up of white patrons who paid to watch the black men and women perform European-styled minuets.[172] She writes, "I was one evening one of the spectators of a great ball given by the free negroes of Matanzas for *La Casa de Beneficienza* [sic] in the city, to which the white public were invited by the black. The ball took place in the theatre, and the gazing public occupied the boxes."[173] The theater Bremer refers to was located near the Plaza de Armas. This was an impressive venue, which hosted the many international performers who visited Matanzas in the nineteenth century.[174] Bremer describes the theater's interior during the event as, "A banquet, arranged with flowers, lamps, and ornaments, [that] occupied the lower part of the dancing hall. The dancers amounted to between two and three hundred persons.

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[170] Jennifer S. Uglow, *The International Dictionary of Women's Biography* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1982), 87.
[171] Bremer, *Homes,* 53.
[172] Bremer records the name of the organization as *La Casa Beneficienza,* however contemporary sources refer to it as *Casa de Beneficencia.* See also Luz María Mena's *"No Common Folk,"* 123, and Raimundo Cabrera, *La Casa de Beneficencia y la Sociedad Económica: (sus relaciones con los gobiernos de Cuba).* (Habana, Imp. "La Universal," 1914).
[173] Bremer*,* 306.
[174] An 1846 map of Matanzas shows a theater located near the Plaza de Armas with calle de Plaza de Contreras between the theater and the Plaza. This theater is the likely venue for the performance attended by Bremer as the more impressive Teatro Sauto would not be built until 1863. "Map of Matanzas" 1846, Plano de la Ciudad de Matanzas, publicado bajo los auspicious de su Gobernador Brigadier Don José Falguera. This is located in the map room at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, la Habana, Cuba.

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The black ladies were, for the most part, well dressed, after the French mode, and many of them very fine."[175]

By 1841 the Matanzas city population had grown to 19,124 and of this group 3,041 were *libres de color*.[176] If Bremer's estimate of the numbers of performers in the theater is even close to being correct and assuming some growth in the free colored population between 1841 and 1851 the dancers she saw would have represented a significant percentage of the town's free black population.[177] The Matanzas black community was far from a homogenous group in their affiliations at this time and neither Bremer's account nor my archival sources have revealed information about the socio-economic status or organizational affiliations of those who sponsored the event. While the party of performers at the charity dance might have represented a mixture of various social, religious and professional groups, what can be discerned is that they all chose to associate themselves with the Matanzas branch of the orphanage. In addition, they did this at a time when their own status in the community was seen as problematic to some white *criollos*.

The dancers opened the proceedings with minuets with Bremer clearly did not enjoy. "Some couples danced, with great dignity and precision, some exceedingly tiresome minuets. What a foolish dance it is when not danced with beauty by beautiful or

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[175] Bremer, 307-308.
[176] Laird W. Bergad, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century. The Social and Economic History of Monoculture in Matanzas.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. (For the table on p. 34 Bergad relies on information from the Matanzas Provincial archives)
[177] Moliner Castañeda, *Los cabildos afrocubanos*, 35. Moliner Castañeda indicates that the larger *cabildo* groups, which he calls the independent groups because they did not fall within the hierarchy of the *Cinco Naciones Congas de Matanzas,* were around 70 to 350 members strong. It is probable that this performance was hosted by one of these large independent groups but also possible that this gathering represents a coming together of several different smaller groups.

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charming people!"[178] Her issue with the dance does not seem to be because it was poorly executed but that it was being danced by people (*libres de color*) who were not naturally suited to perform it. Just in case that point was lost on her reader Bremer continues, "The principal lady in this case [performing the tiresome minuet] was so ugly, spite of her really magnificent apparel and fine carriage, as to remind me of a dressed-up ape, and the movements of the cavaliers were deficient in natural elasticity, which the negroes in general seem to want."[179] While Bremer was not impressed with the minuets she witnessed at the Matanzas ball, we learn from her European perspective that the dancers were magnificently dressed, and performed with dignity and precision. The dances were "tiresome" but not poorly executed indicating this group had spent time perfecting their movements in this most European of dances. The very public staging of the Matanzas charity ball suggests that through their bid to raise funds for the orphanage, the dancers were intent on displaying their perception of their own status to the whites amongst whom they lived, but who, in many cases, did not accept them as equals. It is significant that this group chose to present minuets rather than traditional African-influenced dances at their fundraising event. At this time many white Cubans and foreigners had a fascination with *cosas negras,* or literally, black things. The burgeoning awareness amongst Cuban *criollos,* that the institution of slavery had influenced Cuban culture had also awakened an interest in how blacks conducted their lives. For some whites African dance was fascinating and exciting while others, even though fascinated, also considered this style of performance barbaric. In the midyears of the nineteenth century young white men sought out social gatherings hosted by *libres de color* in private homes. Cirilo

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[178] Bremer, 308.
[179] *Ibid*.

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Villaverde in his novel *Cecilia Valdés*, which had first been published in 1839, described such an event. At these private parties young white *criollos* indulged their desires to dance with pretty mulatta girls to the great consternation of their elite parents.

The secrecy of African religious performance, in particular the religious rituals practiced amongst *cabildo* members, also drew the curiosity of whites. Bremer wrote in her journal of another visit she made to observe a dance performance at a Havana *cabildo.* She noted that there were crowds of white men lining the road and grouping together outside the doors to the *cabildo* meeting-houses trying to get inside to observe the rituals.[180] This attraction on the part of whites for African-based culture sometimes worked to the advantage of the free people of color as it enabled them to make use of performance to accomplish specific agendas. As in the case of Bremer's visit to the *cabildo,* whites who assumed they were witnessing an authentic African performance might contribute a monetary donation to the *cabildo's* treasury when the black performers donned Africanist costumes and played drums for the visitors.

By the same token blacks could take advantage of their white audience's interest in black cultural activities to achieve more than monetary gain. They could use this interest to challenge racially exclusive notions of Cuban identity. Blacks could not have made use of these performative events to reshape their image in the emerging Cuban social sphere had whites no interest in black performance. Popular entertainment amongst whites was already drawing on white recreations of what they saw as African behaviors – such as speech patterns and ways of dress. This was especially evident in the stage presentations of blackface minstrelsy that were popular among nineteenth-century white Habaneros. Jill Lane in her study of this style of entertainment found that, "the impulse toward early

[180] Bremer, 379.

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ethnographic representation of nonwhite people oscillated between realism and parody."[181] These representations permeated the entertainments enjoyed by Cuban whites. Urban *libres de color* in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba would have been familiar with the supposedly humorous writings of Creto Gangá who was a character developed in 1845 by the poet and playwright Bartolomé José Crespo y Borbón. Through Creto Gangá's satirical writings in the Havana newspaper *La Prensa,* Crespo y Borbón commented on the black community using racist representations of "African" prose – grammatically incorrect Spanish.[182] For their own amusement, whites used stereotypic depictions of black characters that surely must have caused free blacks, determined to distance themselves from the stigma of slavery and inferiority, to feel great embarrassment. It was all the more important, in the face of the popularity of such representations in print and on stage, for *libres de color* to organize public performances of their own that would contradict the negative stereotypes inherent in Crespo y Borbón's writings as well as in the minstrel performances.

Surrounded by derogatory images of African-derived culture, free blacks were conscious that their public behavior would be judged and that their dances and other festivities had the power to either confirm their "backwardness" or present them as civilized participants within Cuban society. Years after *La Escalera*, at the end of the Ten Years war, concern for the quality of social events remained a central issue for black leaders. By then they had created their own newspapers and periodicals and they used them to call continually for proper behavior at social gatherings. An article submitted to the black publication *El Pueblo* in 1880 indicates that, "Las veladas tras que nos divierten

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[181] Lane*,* 20.
[182] *Ibid.,* 19-20.

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nos enseñen las buenas maneras de la sociedad, el trato que debemos a las damas, el que á los caballeros, nos proporciona una conversación facíl y agradable, en fin, en mienda nuestra comportamiento y morigera nuestras costumbres." [After the evening socials amuse us they teach us good social manners, how we ought to treat ladies, (the behavior) of the gentlemen, providing us with an easy and agreeable conversation and in the end, improving our behavior and restraining our customs.][183] For black leaders after 1878, the end of the Ten Years War, concerns about proper behavior at social gatherings became an important part of the agenda of "improvement," but these concerns had been circulating in the public and private organs of communication much earlier in the midyears of the nineteenth-century. Not only were blacks, such as those performing in Matanzas, spotlighting their behaviors during public activities, white leaders were also calling for social gatherings that would encourage the use of good manners reflective of a civilized society. As one *criollo* writer put it in 1860, "El índice más expresivo de la civilización de un pueblo es el estado de su sociedad, y no se puede juzgar de está sino por el modo de su reunión." [The most expressive indication of the civilization of a people is the state of their society, and it is not possible to judge this other than the manner of its gatherings.][184] Whites, then, were paying attention to "the manner of their gatherings" and using print literature in order to express their concerns.

In addition to newspaper accounts calling for attention to public gatherings, the 1861 regulation of the Matanzas *criollo* organization, the *Liceo Artístico y Literario* reminded members that Carnival dances should, "conserve en ellos el decoro y compostura que

[183] *El Pueblo,* Semanario Literario y de intereses generales. Organo de la clase de color. Julio 11 de 1880 (Año 1 segunda época Núm 13) BNJM

[184] J.A. *Liceo Artístico y Literario de Matanzas.* Domingo, Julio 15 de 1860, 50. (BNJM) The writer does not sign his name but the paper was an organ of a white *criollo* group so it can be surmised that this was a white *criollo* writer.

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recomienda á toda sociedad de buen tono." [conserve the honor and composure recommended to all societies of good tone.][185] By 1878 the *Sociedad de Recreo Club Matanzas* had as one of its objectives, "proporcionar á sus socios todos las distracciones admitidas en la Buena sociedad." [to provide to its membership all the distractions appropriate in the good society.] This would take the form of monthly dances.[186] The *Liceo Artístico y Literario's* requirement for attention to "honor and composure" might have been in response to behaviors such as those identified in the following description recorded by Samuel Hazard, in his work entitled *Cuba With Pen and Pencil.* In describing an 1866 ball hosted by the members of the Matanzas *Liceo*, Hazard indicates that he and his companions left the ball at midnight and entered a Carnival street scene. "Lights blaze in such profusion that it seems more than day; music and dancing are everywhere; songs, devilry, and mirth have taken complete possession of the place; while people of all ages, sexes, and colors are mixed together, in what seems inextricable confusion, intent upon having a good time in the open air, while their masters and betters are doing the same thing under cover."[187] The "devilry and mirth" Hazard witnessed, and his implication that whites were also behaving in such a manner were exactly the behaviors *criollo* leaders were attempting to address when they focused on the quality of social gatherings. Blacks, such as those hosting the Matanzas charity dance, who had achieved or were born into freedom and who were intent on raising their social status in the community would presumably have paid particular attention to these publicly

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[185] Reglamento del Liceo Artístico y Literario de Matanzas, 1861. This booklet is bound together with other regulations in a booklet entitled *Estatutos de la Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del Pais de la* Habana dated 1833. BNJM.

[186] Reglamento de la Sociedad de Recreo Club Matanzas. Imprenta Litografía y Papelería "La Nacional" de Esteban Lavastida, 1878, Gelabert, Numero 60. This is bound together with other regulations in a booklet entitled *Estatutos de la Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del Pais de la* Habana dated 1833. BNJM.

[187] Samuel Hazard, *Cuba with Pen and Pencil* (London: Sampson Low, Marston Low, & Searle, 1873), 304.

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disseminated concerns circulating in the white newspapers and other organs of communication during the mid-years of the nineteenth century and taken great pains to ensure their own gatherings were impeccable.

In his study, *Changing History, Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century,* historian Philip Howard suggests that an awareness of how they were being perceived by the colonial authorities after 1844 caused blacks who formed new social organizations during this period to adapt consciously to the new environment by changing the way their societies were structured. The *cabildos* that were formed in the 1850s, which Howard calls Pan-Afro-Cuban organizations, represented a more integrationist stance as memberships were no longer restricted by nation, ethnicity, or origin.[188] As Howard shows, when the focus shifted from maintaining and passing on specific cultural traditions, members found other commonalities that served to facilitate integration into the dominant sphere. Howard's observations regarding the shifting goals of the Afro-Cuban social organizations after 1844 are particularly applicable to the Matanzas charity dance. In the 1851 fundraising event *libres de color* used the Matanzas charity dance to offer a carefully orchestrated performance for public consumption. The performance seems to have been designed to include all the elements considered necessary for a "civilized" social event. From the exclusive venue to the elaborate French-inspired costumes, the lavish decorations and refreshments, and the dancing of minuets, all was arranged to minimize the obvious element of division – race. The timing too is significant because it was a moment to make a claim for their rightful place in civilized society. By participating in philanthropy and by attempting to take part in social improvement efforts, the Matanzas *libres de color* appear to have been expressing an

[188] Howard, *Changing History,* 97.

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assumption that they should be included in the Cuban community white *criollos* were attempting to define. The *libres de color* in Matanzas seem to have made a conscious effort in their dance presentation to influence how they would be perceived by white *criollos.*

Philanthropy From Europe to the New World

The *libres de color* dancing in Matanzas made use of the white attraction to *cosas negras* in order to challenge (by dancing minuets) rather than perpetuate (by using African styled instruments and movements) prevailing negative if also ambivalent attitudes towards black culture. This suggests that at least some members of this group had internalized dominant racialized notions of progress and civilization. In fact, the philanthropic nature of the event reveals free blacks' social aspirations. Their venture into philanthropy offered a powerful statement about their perceptions of their status within the Cuban social hierarchy.

By the nineteenth century philanthropy was powerfully associated with notions of class in European derived cultures. It implied abundance, and civic mindedness, and leisure as well as a hierarchy where those in a privileged position gave assistance to those in need. This view of philanthropy has a long history that has evolved through the ages. According to the Aristotelian virtues, a person's giving was more reflective of his own character rather than being motivated by any particular "love of humanity."[189] As Christianity took root and spread throughout Europe the idea of giving became associated with a desire to please God and to take care of one's neighbors because this would be part

[189] Scott Davis, "Philanthropy as a Virtue in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages," in *Giving. Western Ideas of Philanthropy,* ed. Jerome B. Schneewind (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 2.

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of what was pleasing to God.[190] The poor had initially been seen as Christ-like and worthy of benevolence, but gradually by the thirteenth-century patrons began to be more discerning about the recipients of their charity – considering some poor more worthy than others.[191] Among those who were considered unworthy of charity were the able-bodied men and women who seemingly could work in some capacity and yet were apparently idle recipients of others' wealth. It also began to seem that these idle poor were more than just nuisances on the city streets. As a group they constituted a dangerous element within the community that could lead to political instability. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century a number of popular disturbances, sometimes referred to as Peasant Revolts, spread throughout many European countries. As the title implies, the poor were conspicuously involved in many of these.[192] Poverty, vagrancy, and political instability were thus linked which in turn demanded that charity become a civic as well as a religious concern. It is highly likely that the growing association between political instability and vagrancy in Europe informed Saco's views when he wrote his treatise outlining the dangers of vagrancy in Cuba and describing it as a cancer in the island.[193] A January 7, 1851 notice in the newspaper, the *Aurora de Matanzas,* reveals that *libres de color* would have been aware of the prevailing concern about vagrancy. It notes with regards to a dance being held in honor of a young lady named Adela Monplaisir, "La jente libre de color podrá asistir á estas funciones sin temor de ser requerida en el tránsito por las calles de noche hasta."[194] [the free people of color will be able to attend these

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[190] Davis, "Philanthropy," 13.
[191] Suzanne Roberts, "Contexts of Charity in the Middle Ages. Religious, Social and Civic," in *Giving. Western Ideas of Philanthropy,* ed. Jerome B. Schneewind (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 46-47.
[192] Roberts, "Contexts," 47.
[193] Saco, *Memoria*, 16
[194] "Teatro Principal," *Aurora de Matanzas,* Martes 7 de Enero, 1851, No. 6. BPM.

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functions without fear of the requirements for passing through the streets at night.] Even walking abroad at night was something they did under restriction.

As in Europe, the first institutions in Latin America that offered social assistance had emerged from the efforts of the Catholic Church. By the nineteenth century Liberal leaders in Spain attempted to implement some aspects of Enlightenment discourse, such as the idea that environment could impact a person's development, by founding *juntas de beneficencia.*[195] These were committees through which charities were administered. In all of Spain's provinces, as well as in the colonial possessions, Liberal governors also took up the task of providing for the poor and destitute, criminals who were considered worthy of reform, and those who had no work – a task that was previously solely in the hands of the Church. The town councils or *ayuntamientos* were responsible for actually administering charitable organizations.[196] Throughout the Spanish colonies, the church had initiated the building of schools and universities as well as convents and asylums,[197] but while the church held great power, especially in the earlier period of colonization, it did not have full sway. Church efforts were often financed by the colonial government as well as by wealthy elites.[198] This three-part association between the church, the colonial state, and the elites had long been "at the core of all the charitable and philanthropic

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[195] In pondering the nature of man, some philosophers came to believe that if the environment in which a child was raised was changed he could be educated and "in a generation or two all the evils will whither and blow away." Louis I. Bredvold. *The Brave New World of the Enlightenment.* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), 108.
[196] Teresita Martinez-Vergne, *Shaping the Discourse on Space: Charity and Its Wards in Nineteenth-Century San Juan, Puerto Rico,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 39.
[197] Andrés A Thompson & Leilah Landim, "Civil Society and Philanthropy in Latin America: From Religious Charity to the Search for Citizenship," in *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 357.
[198] Cynthia A. Sanborn, "Philanthropy in Latin America: Historical Traditions and Current Trends," in *Philanthropy and Social Change in Latin America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2005), 5.

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institutions that developed in Latin America for three centuries."[199] The uniting of religious and civic efforts to address social needs meant that there emerged an active laity in Latin American societies that operated in connection with the church, but were often not under direct control of the church.[200] Often the actual work of social services took place amongst the lay organizations and fraternities. Certainly this was true in Cuba where *cofradías* or lay organizations associated with the Church, were involved in caring for their membership.

Since 1762 when the British occupied Havana, Bourbon rulers in Spain had realized the need to reform methods of governance in Cuba. Representing a break from the Hapsburg regime, which had supported laws that gave privileges to numerous private interests, in the second half of the eighteenth century, Charles III implemented reforms designed to strengthen the Spanish Crown's authority in Spain and in the Spanish possessions.[201] In Spanish America and in particular in Cuba, the main thrust of these reforms took the form of military reorganization. The Bourbon regime used Cuba as a kind of laboratory for developing various improvements they had in mind for the other Spanish colonies. What worked in Cuba was then extended throughout the rest of the Spanish colonial world.[202] These reforms would eventually shape the methods in which social services were administered and by whom – allowing enterprising *libres de color* the opportunity to participate in projects that were also being embraced by the *criollo* elite.

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[199] Thompson, "Civil Society," 358.
[200] *Ibid.,* 359.
[201] J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World. Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 307.
[202] Sherry Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba* (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 2001), 12.

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In 1788, Charles III died and his son Charles IV became the new King of Spain. Spain was struggling financially because of the combined effects of war in Europe, poor harvests, and an economic depression.[203] Charles IV initiated a number of modernizing projects in Spain and in the Spanish colonies towards the end of this century. These projects sought to revamp economic policy and address issues of production and export so that the colonies could provide income to alleviate the financial crisis. Enlightenment ideology challenged the idea that there could be an entire class of people who were relegated to a certain status and who were incapable of personal improvement.[204] This ideology, too, questioned the belief that God determined a person's social status.[205] Modernization then included the expectation that people could change.

In Cuba and Puerto Rico, ideas about progress and modernization were interpreted to mean that a society could improve itself by "improving" its population.[206] The way that a city looked and the way that it operated reflected the state of the populace. In these colonial islands whose urban areas were overflowing with visible evidence of the poor, and where elites believed the cities' appearance told a story about the people who inhabited them, no significant improvements could be made to modernize the societies without addressing the issues of poverty and vagrancy.[207] *Criollos* were especially sensitive to discussions of a civilized populace because they were bombarded with derogatory writings that painted a picture of American society as inferior to European society. The French naturalist Comte de Buffon wrote an important work, his *Histoire Naturelle,* published in 1761, in which he described America as a world that was not yet

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[203] Elliott, *Empires,* 374.
[204] Martínez-Vergne, *Shaping the Discourse on Space*, 40-41.
[205] Martínez-Vergne, 40.
[206] *Ibid.*, 13.
[207] *Ibid.*, 29.

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mature and where, "animals and people were smaller than their European counterparts."[208] Travelers too codified in their journals derogatory images of *criollos.* Howe wrote of the Cuban whites she encountered,

> The taste of the Cubans, if judged by the European standard, is bad taste. They love noisy music, —their architecture consults only the exigencies of the climate, and does not deserve the name art. Of painting they must have little knowledge, if one may judge by the vile daubs which deface their walls, and which would hardly pass current in the poorest New England village. As to dress; although I have whispered for your good, my lady friends, that the most beautiful summer-dresses in the world may be bought in Havana, yet the Creole ladies themselves have in general but glaring and barbaric ideas of adornment and their *volante*-toilette would give a Parisienne the ague.[209]

Repudiating the label of inferiority, elites attempted to address the most obvious deficiencies in their communities in part through numerous charitable efforts thus linking philanthropy with modernization. This proved socially advantageous for the Matanzas *libres de color.*

The Spanish Crown and the Church played important roles in charitable and philanthropic concerns in Cuba. As Alejandro Bouza Suárez writes, "Desde la fundación del primer hospital en Cuba en 1522 (o 1523) hasta la designación como Capitán General de la Isla de Cuba del Teniente General Don Luis de Las Casas y Aragorri en 1790, se fueron creando instituciones de beneficencia; esta importante actividad social no dejó de ser atendida bajo su mandato, por el contrario, recibió impulso al igual que otras obras sociales. De igual manera, otras administraciones colonials también prestaron atención al desarrollo de la beneficencia durante el siglo xix." [Since the foundation of the first hospital in Cuba in 1522 (or 1523) until the appointment of Captain General of the Island

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[208] Elliott, *Empires,* 328. Here Elliott quotes from Comte de Buffon's work.
[209] Howe, 231-232.

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of Cuba, Lieutenant General Don Luis de Las Casas y Arragorri in 1790, institutions of charity were created; this important social activity was not left to be undertaken under its (colonial government) mandate, on the contrary, it received an equal impulse from other social works. In an equal manner, other colonial administrations also paid attention to the development of charity during the nineteenth century.][210]

Charity had emerged from a combination of efforts and in Cuba the Church had continued to be the driving force behind most social assistance programs until the eighteenth century. During the Hapsburg regime the Church had been granted enormous rights and immunities. In keeping with the desire to consolidate power in the Crown and limit the power of the nobility and the Church, the Spanish rulers began paying attention to the areas where the Church had been most active – this had a direct impact on how philanthropy would be administered in the Spanish colonies in the nineteenth century.[211]

Philanthropy Amongst Blacks

In her discussion of late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth-century Barbados, Melanie Newton suggests that in the Caribbean philanthropic organizations played an important role in defining the local public spheres. She argues, "lower- and middle-class challenges to aristocratic dominance of civic life transformed the public sphere in Atlantic world societies."[212] This challenge took place in what she refers to as "community-based civic organizations," which included philanthropic organizations.[213] According to the editors

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[210] Alejandro Bouza Suárez, "Propuesta de periodización para el estudio de la Beneficencia en Cuba en el siglo XIX" In *Rev. Cubana Salud Pública* (2001;27(1)), 67.
[211] Elliott, *Empires,* 308.
[212] Melanie Newton, "Philanthropy, Gender, and the Production of Public Life in Barbados, c. 1790-ca. 1850," In *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World.* Edited by Pamela Scully and Diana Paton. (Duke University Press: Durham, 2005), 225.
[213] Newton, "Philanthropy," 225

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of, *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions,* philanthropic activities have often been a crucial site for grappling with social issues: "Philanthropy … becomes a location where cultural values and norms are contested. The way philanthropy is done, the way it is structured, and its preferred objects often become battlegrounds for other issues."[214] What is striking about this observation in light of Newton's study of Barbados is the link between philanthropic efforts and "a local struggle by free people of color against racial discrimination."[215] Given the restrictive social climate for *libres de color* in Cuba in the midyears of the nineteenth century the *libres de color* in Matanzas can indeed be seen to have contested prevailing cultural values and norms through their philanthropic efforts in this period.

In the United States after emancipation people of color had a sense of communal responsibility that they exercised through their churches and secular societies.[216] Blacks in North America relied on their community giving in order to sustain themselves and their communities.[217] Members collected clothing, provided shelter, and offered food to help runaways. They also pooled their resources to help the poor.[218]As in North America, in nineteenth-century Cuba blacks took care of their needs within the context of their social organizations. As some experienced economic success in the early years of the nineteenth century *libres de color* in Cuba had used their resources through their social organizations to help their less fortunate brothers and sisters of color. In order to raise funds, *cabildo* members typically paid an entrance fee to join the organization and then

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[214] Warren F. Ilchman, Stanley N. Katz, and Edward L. Queen II, *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions,* Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1998.
[215] Newton, "Philanthropy," 225.
[216] Adrienne Lash Jones, "Philanthropy in the African American Experience," in *Giving. Western Ideas of Philanthropy,* ed. Jerome B. Schneewind, 153-198 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 156.
[217] Lash Jones, "Philanthropy in the African American Experience," 154.
[218] *Ibid*., 157.

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regular monthly dues. Money was also raised in other ways such as charging members and their guests to attend social events and instituting a special tax to raise funds for a specific goal, or even appealing to the organization's officers for direct donations or loans.[219] These funds were used to help with the practical needs of members such as caring for those who were sick or helping families provide proper funerals for their deceased loved ones, as well as for purchasing freedom for those who were still enslaved.[220] Yet some Cubans of color were willing to step outside the realm of the *cabildos de nación* to assert a role in the larger society. If *libres de color* in Cuba had remained within their expected sphere with regards to social assistance, they would have continued to address their charitable needs through the traditional mutual aid functions long practiced within their social organizations. At least some of them, however, chose to embrace a European-influenced style of philanthropy as a form of giving beyond mutual aid. This embrace suggests a desire to participate in Cuban society as white *criollos* were participating. By further extension it also suggests that some *libres de color* did not see themselves as a separate group, or that they were attempting to overcome the social pressures that defined them as such.

Given that successful *libres de color* had already shown themselves to be civic minded through their activities as participants and patrons of *cabildos de nación,* it is striking that the Matanzas group would host a public charity ball that solicited the support of white Cubans.[221] It would appear that if providing charitable assistance was also personally fulfilling for *libres de color,* they could have received this satisfaction through

[219] Howard, *Changing History,* 51. *Liceo Artistico y Literario de Matanzas*, Sunday 15 July, 1860, 50. BNJM.
[220] *Ibid.,* 50.
[221] *Ibid.*, 40.

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the work they were already doing within their *cabildos*. One explanation might be that appealing to a white audience for support would enable them to raise additional funds. Yet it would also seem that if this were the case, it would have been more lucrative to offer this audience an exotic (or even mildly exotic to appeal to the elite crowd they hoped to attract) “African” performance rather than minuets. Locals and tourists alike had shown their interest over and over in *cosas negras* and would have had little opportunity to observe these activities elsewhere, guaranteeing a large audience and a profitable fundraiser. Instead, however, the Matanzas dancers opted to avoid presenting an “African” performance and instead presented minuets to raise funds not for a *cabildo* treasury, but for a white sponsored charity. Cuban blacks had a long tradition of mutual aid activities in the island that had proven to be effective in taking care of the needs of their *cabildo* membership. By adopting a more European-style of philanthropy, the Matanzas *libres de color* seem to have had an agenda beyond fundraising: that of sending a public message that they intended to participate in Cuban society on the same level and in the same arenas as white Cubans.

Philanthropy and the *Criollo* Agenda

The Matanzas ball raised money to advance an important work of charity within the city and while it is impossible to know if there was a conscious effort to accomplish other goals outside of fundraising, the dance does seem to have served the event's free black hosts in additional ways. Choosing *La Casa de Beneficencia* as the beneficiary of their event accomplished at least two things. First, it directly linked the *libres de color* with the modernizing efforts initiated by Cuban *criollo* intellectuals who sought to bring

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progress to Cuba. It also unveiled in a very public way, the race mixing that while prevalent in Cuba, was often ignored amongst *criollos* concerned about their own social status and who believed that Cuba's African heritage could be an impediment to their goals for a modernized, orderly, and progressive country.[222] The earlier discussion regarding the importance of *limpieza de sangre* in colonial Cuba highlighted the fact that the presence of mixed-race people in their midst also cast doubt on the "purity" of their own blood – a detail not lost on the *peninsulares* to whom purity of blood was a mark of superiority. It is revealing that of all the charities the *libres de color* chose to lend their support to, they selected one that not only represented the pride of "enlightened" Cuban intellectuals but also would have some specific significance to the urban mulatto population itself.

For Saco and other like-minded Cuban intellectuals *La Casa de Beneficencia* was an admirable institution that helped accomplish the goal of "improving" the Havana population. It was one of a number of similar institutions that emerged in Havana at the turn of the nineteenth century.[223] During this time the *criollo* intellectuals' concern, as observed earlier centered on health and sanitation as a means of reforming the urban space. The institutions that emerged were focused on accomplishing this task by controlling the marginalized population through instruction, correction, and confinement.[224] By the late 1700s, Havana had spilled outside the defensive walls dividing the city into areas informally designated as being *intramuro* (inside the walls)

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[222] Louis Perez Jr. *On Becoming Cuban.* In this work Perez, Jr. makes the point that continued interaction with North America served to contrast the backwardness of Spanish society with the brilliance and innovation of North American society. The African presence in Cuba – with the derogatory stereotypes associated with Africans – was also seen as retarding Cuba's ability to improve itself.
[223] Hidalgo Valdés, *Real Casa de Beneficencia,* 12-13.
[224] Hidalgo Valdés, 15.

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and *extramuro* (outside the walls).[225] Outside the walls numerous neighborhoods developed. People whose ways of life and activities did not meet with the approval of the wealthy *habaneros* who lived inside the walls inhabited some of these neighborhoods. For a time these *extramuro* neighborhoods such as Jesús María and San Lázaro were not even considered a part of the city.[226] Certain districts outside the walls and away from the congestion of the *intramuro* barrios were, however, seen as desirable for building institutions such as hospitals or for creating public areas for recreation. It was here in the late eighteenth century that *La Casa de Beneficencia* was established. It was thought that the task of educating young girls who desperately needed to change their environment would be more easily facilitated if they could be secluded from the bustle of the city.[227] A proposal was made to then Captain General don Luis de las Casas to found the institution. The rationale for the need for *La Casa de Beneficencia* was to reduce the presence of permanent beggars in the city by providing a place for the poor and by educating orphans. Orphans were not considered only to be those children who had lost both their parents. Orphan status could be conferred if the child had one or even two parents who were considered poor, "Que sean huérfanos de padre o madre ó de uno otra, siempre que el superviviente sea considerado pobre." [That they be orphaned of both parents or of one or the other whenever the surviving one is considered poor.][228] These orphans could be

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[225] The walls surrounding Havana had been built between 1667 and 1680 to protect the city from foreign attack. It was finally torn down in 1860. Hidalgo Valdés, 31.
[226] Hidalgo Valdés, *Real Casa,* 26.
[227] Ibid., 34.
[228] *Reglamento para la Real Casa de Benficencia de Matanzas. Formulado por su junta de patronos y aprobado.* Por el excmo, Señor Gobernador General. En acuerdo fecha 15 de Abril de 1893. Matanzas: Imprenta y Librería "Galería Literaria" Ricla 41 1893. BNJM, Folleto C.95 No. 2. This quote is from regulation number 20. Regulation 30 indicates that even if both parents are living, the child can enter the orphanage if the parents are in a state of poverty.

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housed, raised to be good citizens, and given an education that would help them take their place in a well-ordered society.[229]

La Casa de Beneficencia was a showpiece institution for Cubans. The first facility, which was built just outside the city of Havana was designed by the military engineer Francisco Wambiteli and is believed to have been the first architectural work of a classical style erected in the island. It was built across from a garden on land that had been purchased by Bishop don Luis de Peñalver.[230] The inauguration ceremony for *La Casa de Beneficencia* took place in Havana on December 8, 1794.[231] The founders initially decided that the institution would admit only white children. This was justified by suggesting that mixing the races would compromise the work of forming a class of adults who would become contributing participants in the modernized city.[232] Later, the 1827 *reglamento* regarding its governance mentioned children of color, acknowledging for the first time that there was a population of color living at the *Casa.*[233] Eventually, boys were also educated at the orphanage but they were not housed there until 1826.[234]

La Casa de Beneficencia de la Habana would eventually be placed under the charge of the *Real Sociedad Patriótica* with a *junta* or board to directly administer the organization. This initial board was made up of some of the leading citizens of Havana.[235] As administrative procedures continued to be streamlined in the colony, in 1833 an organization called the *Junta General de Beneficencia y Caridad de la Habana* was created to oversee public health issues in the city. This organization worked with the

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[229] Mena, *"No More Common Folk,"* 107, Cabrera, *La Casa de Beneficencia,* 5.
[230] Hidalgo Valdés, *Real Casa,* 38.
[231] *Ibid.,* 41.
[232] *Ibid.,* 40.
[233] *Ibid.*, 64.
[234] *Ibid.,* 43.
[235] *Ibid.,* 37.

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Catholic Church but was not subject to the Church's direct management. Under the umbrella of the *Junta General de Beneficencia y Caridad de la Habana* various municipal branches were created which served to strengthen the way charitable efforts were run. The president of this *junta* was the captain general of the island and the vice president was the bishop of Havana. This brought the governor fully into the sphere previously dominated by the church highlighting the decline of the Church's authority in civic matters.[236]

The visibility held by *La Casa de Beneficencia* and the illustrious patronage it received made it a brilliant choice for *libres de color* bent on challenging their subordinate social status through charitable and philanthropic efforts. Aligning themselves with this charity allowed them to publicly display their own concerns about Cuba's social development. The charity was considered an integral part of the effort to bring progress to Havana and eventually to other urban areas such as Matanzas and it was strongly supported by white *criollos.* This meant that the free blacks who organized the performance were challenging the prevailing race-based assumptions that excluded them from the overall modernizing effort by identifying the management of progress and civilization as a "white" concern. Associating themselves with this prominent charity, which was itself associated with the most "progressive" element of Cuban society, could only reflect favorably on *libres de color* whose racial heritage made them socially inferior in the colonial hierarchy.

In 1827 the Economic Society established a commission in Matanzas that would oversee various projects in that city. The Society clearly intended to extend its modernizing agenda to other urban areas beyond Havana. One of the driving forces

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[236] Alejandro Bouza Suárez. "Propuesta," 68.

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behind the opening of a *Casa de Beneficencia* in Matanzas was a member of this commission, named D. José María Casal. Casal first proposed the founding of the Matanzas *Casa* in 1828 but it was not until the 1840s that this project finally became a reality. It began as a school for orphan girls and was the result of an enthusiastic fundraising effort, which included, "un vasto programa de espectáculos, bailes y diversiones públicas así como representaciones de dramas y comedias en las sociedades privadas." [a vast program of shows, dances and public amusements such as performances of plays and comedies in the private societies.][237] The school was opened on February 8, 1847 with an initial contingent of ten girls.[238]

Fundraising continued to be crucial to maintaining *La Casa de Beneficencia* in both Havana and Matanzas. One of the members of the *junta* that managed the Matanzas organization purchased a piece of land for the orphanage in the city from a woman named Gabriela Josefa Pimiento. Interestingly, this particular purchase indicates a link between *La Casa de Beneficencia* in Matanzas and the city's *libres de color*. This woman was the widow of the dentist Andrés Dodge who was a friend of the famous mulatto poet Plácido.[239] Both men had been implicated in the *La Escalera* purge and were executed as a result.[240] Plácido, whose real name was Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, was thought to have been raised in *La Casa de Beneficencia* in Havana, "Born in 1809 as the son of a Spanish dancer and a free Cuban mulatto, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés probably inherited his last name from the same orphanage that bestowed its name on Cirilo

[237] Julio V. Rivadulla, *Historia de la Casa de Beneficencia de Matanzas hasta el año 1926,* (Cardenas: Imprenta y Papeleria "El Dos Mayo," 1928), 18-19.
[238] Rivadulla, *Historia,* 30. Throughout this work the school was referred to as both the Colegio de niñas pobres and the Casa de Beneficencia. In the article entitled Propuesta it is referred to as *La Casa de Beneficencia de Niños Pobres de Matanzas.*
[239] Rivadulla, 39. See Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood,* 109, for more on the connections between prominent free people of color.
[240] Paquette, *Blood*, 6.

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Villaverde's fictional heroine Cecilia. Eventually his father recognized him and brought him up at his home."[241] Funds for the charity were also raised through the revenue received from the required licenses purchased in order to hold public dances and then apportioned for specific uses by local officials.[242] *Libres de color* were not allowed to gather together publicly but they were allowed to hold dances if they applied for – and paid for – the appropriate licenses from the colonial authorities.[243] The requirement for dance organizers to purchase licenses before hosting a dance was published in article 50 of the *Bando de Gobernación y Policía* of 1842. It states, "No se darán bailes ni conciertos en casas paticulares, ni establecimientos públicos sin espresa licencia del gobierno."[244] [Dances and concerts will not be given in private homes or public establishments without a license from the government.] While it is known that the *cabildo* leaders were required to purchase these licenses, it is difficult to locate the records of their payments that would add to our knowledge about *cabildo* social gatherings. Historian Matt Childs notes, "No single governmental institution supervised the associations for the nineteenth century. As a result, a concentrated corpus of records on the societies has yet to be found."[245] In his study of Matanzas *cabildos, Los Cabildos Afrocubanos en Matanzas,* Cuban scholar Israel Moliner Castañeda examined numerous periodicals that are difficult to access outside of Cuba. He found papers that, "refieren a lo recaudado por el pago de las licencias para bailes de negros, que los cabildos debían

[241] Sybylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed. Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), 79.
[242] Hidalgo Valdés, 54.
[243] Mena, 199.
[244] Bando de Gobernación y Policía de la Isla de Cuba, espedido por el ESCMO. Sr. Don Geronimo Valdés, Presidente, Gobernador y Capitán General, Habana, 1842, Imprenta del Gobierno y Capitanía General por S. M.
[245] Matt Childs, "'The Defects of Being a Black Creole' The Degrees of African Identity in the Cuban Cabildos de Nación, 1790-1820," in *Slaves, Subjects and Subversives: blacks in colonial Latin America.* Edited by Jane Landers and Barry Robinson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 215.

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pagar al precio de dos pesos por actividad."[246] [refer to the payments collected for licenses for black dances that the cabildos had to pay at the rate of two pesos per activity.] Other references mention an amount of four pesos and indicated the possibility that the license might not be granted unless the group requesting it made an offering to the *Casa.*[247] Funds were also raised through the controversial lottery system, which held a certain irony as the lottery was considered to be quasi legal and a thus form of gambling that could be seen as contradicting the goal of inculcating good customs in the society.[248] It seems the authorities found a way to explain this possible discrepancy as there developed a distinction between the lottery that was sanctioned by the authorities and provided funds for educational concerns, and lotteries that were engaged in without proper permissions.[249] Nonetheless, the lottery, with or without sanction, was popular in Cuba and this popularity made it a lucrative source of funds for charity.

Nineteenth-century travelers to the island made a point of visiting the Havana branch of the orphanage and writing about it in their journals indicating the orphanage had become a Cuban "showcase." In 1859, Richard Henry Dana called it, "a credit to the island of Cuba," and noted its cleanliness, orderliness, and healthy atmosphere located as it was near the ocean.[250] Bremer described it in 1851 as, "another noble institution of mercy at Havana." According to her, the institution, "receives many motherless children.

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[246] Moliner Castañeda, *Los Cabildos Afrocubanos,* 14-15.
[247] Hidalgo Valdés, 54. "las autoridades no concederían licencia para los bailes públicos sin que el solicitante hubiese contribuido con una limosna para la Casa de Beneficencia, estableciéndose la cifra de cuatro pesos por cada baile." [the authorities would not grant licenses for the public dances without the applicant having contributed an offering for the *Casa de Beneficencia* establishing the figure of four pesos for each dance.]
[248] Hidalgo Valdés, 54.
[249] Saco refers to lotteries that were played daily in certain cafés and distinguishes these from the lottery that existed to serve the "Royal House." Saco, *Memorias sobre la vagancia,* 51. The Bando de Buen Gobierno 1842 addressed the issue of governing the lottery and placed a fine on those who sold lottery tickets without a license. Bando 1842 articles 45 and 48.
[250] Richard Henry Dana, Jr,. *To Cuba and Back,* (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1859), 160-161.

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Here they are educated, and each one, on leaving the establishment, receives a dower of five hundred pesos with which to commence their own career in life."[251] It is noteworthy that Bremer refers to the children brought to this orphanage as being "motherless" because *La Casa de Beneficencia* appears to be similar to, if not one of the models for, the institution referred to by Cirilo Villaverde in his novel *Cecilia Valdés*. Villaverde's orphanage is called the Royal Foundling home[252] and many of the children brought to the home in the novel are the illegitimate offspring of white men and black or mulatto women, just as was the case for the actual *Casa de Beneficencia*. If these mothers of African heritage were acknowledged as the legal parent, the child would have entered society as a mixed race child. Placing them in the orphanage theoretically gave them a chance at entering society without the legal stigma of being a person of color. However, as Martinez-Alier notes, "The difficulties involved in social stratification along racial lines in an already racially mixed society emerge particularly clearly in the case of foundlings. By royal decree foundlings in Spain were of 'pure blood'. The enforcement of this disposition in the overseas possessions 'on account of the great variety of castes' posed many problems, for this prerogative rested, in the words of an official of 1786, solely on 'a fiction or privileged supposition.' Consequently, the request by a foundling of the Orphanage of Havana to be granted the privilege of nobility was rejected because 'he is known to be a foundling and therefore *in reality* of uncertain origin.'"[253] Clearly legal status did not always reflect public opinion.

[251] Bremer, *Homes,* 414.
[252] Villaverde. *Cecilia Valdés* (Barcelona: Linkgua Ediciones S. L., 2008), 18. In the novel it is referred to as the Real Casa Cuna. This reference is to the Spanish version of the novel.
[253] Martinez-Alier *Marriage, Class and Colour,* 72. Italics are Martinez-Alier's.

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Several travelers related a story explaining that the illustrious Spanish name Valdez or Valdés, known to be associated with Spanish noble families, was given to the children raised at *La Casa de Beneficencia* so their orphan status would not be so evident and they would have a chance to make a proper life for themselves when they grew up.[254] Another story related by Cuban scholar Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux indicates that males who left the orphanage were allowed to use the title of "don." He writes that when one former resident of *La Casa de Beneficencia* was hailed by the term *mulato,* he answered indignantly that, "yo no soy mulato, yo soy Valdés," [I am not a person of mixed race, I am a Valdes.][255] When Villaverde's main character, Cecilia, is questioned about her own parentage, she also proffers the illustrious surname replying, "I'm a Valdés from the Royal Foundling Home. I don't have a father."[256] Cecilia does in fact have a father, but he is a well-respected and very married white man of the Cuban planter class. Villaverde had Cecilia's father justify placing the baby girl into the orphanage by saying, "Espreciso que la chica lleve un nombre, nombre de que no tenga que avergonzarse mañana, ni esotro día, el de Valdés con que quizás haga un buen casamiento. Para ella no había más remedio sino pasarla por la Real Casa Cuna." [The child had to have a name, a name that she must not be ashamed of tomorrow, or another day, that of Valdés, with which perhaps she will be able to marry well. There was no other way for her to be named that, save to

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[254] Perez, Jr. *Slaves, Sugar,* 179-202. It seems that the practice of naming orphans "Valdés" was not confined to *La Casa de Beneficencia*. During the nineteenth century there was at least one other orphanage in Havana called *La Cuna* or the cradle. *La Cuna* is described by one traveler – John George F. Wurdemann in his 1844 *Notes on Cuba* – as being founded by "the illustrious Valdes," and where "the name of its founder is conferred on all infants left without one under its protection." Perez, Jr., *Slaves,* 198.
[255] Deschamps Chapeaux, *Economia,* 190.
[256] Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés,* 15, in the Spanish original the name of the orphanage is not mentioned in this sentence. Cecilia actually says on page 28 of the Spanish edition, "Yo soy Valdés, yo no tengo padre." Presumably the author did not think his Spanish-speaking audience needed to clarify what it meant when Cecilia announced her surname.

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put her in the Royal Foundling Home.][257] The sojourn in the orphanage seems to have provided a certain legal status that would allow mixed-race people to overcome the stain of illegitimacy and the racial connotations that went along with this status. Yet, it seems clear that skin color and other defining physical characteristics – and even having the name Valdés – could undermine this effort. As in the novel, in reality the orphans who were under the protection of *La Casa de Beneficencia* were often the offspring of relationships between whites and blacks. Cuba's *libres de color* were also, in large part, people of mixed racial heritage themselves – mulattos who were the result of white men's philandering or unions that did not have the blessing of the Church. Martinez-Alier refers to the Spanish law regarding racial status for foundlings when she writes,

> The assumed legitimacy of foundlings dates from a Bull of Pope Gregory XIV issued in 1591 to the orphanage of Rome establishing that foundlings were to be regarded as legitimate and of pure blood. Yet the condition of foundlings continued to be a topic of discussion among scholars in Spain until the end of the eighteenth century when Charles III by royal decree of 19 February 1794 declared them legitimate by royal dispensation on the basis of the legalistic argument that 'illegitimacy entails infamy and it is not just that when there is any doubt a person should be regarded as infamous when as a rule in law a person is presumed innocent as long as there is no evidence to the contrary.'[258]

The law made foundlings legitimate and assumed they were white (no reference to what they actually looked like appears to have affected this), yet by virtue of having been foundlings and carrying the surname, public opinion seems to have continued to associate orphans with a dubious racial heritage.

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[257] Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés,* Spanish edition, 18. The English translation was taken from the Oxford University Press edition, 6

[258] Martinez-Alier, *Marriage*, 168 n. 15. She cites Tomas de Montalvo, *Práctica política y económica de expósitos* (Madrid 1756), pp. 241-280. It is also important to note that in 1591 pure blood would have referred more to a family's religious rather than racial heritage.

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The public support of this charity by *libres de color* not so subtly pointed out this irony of whites attempting to restrict the social and economic advancement of the very people whose existence was, at least partly, a consequence of white male behavior. Some of the charity event's organizers might very well as children have called *La Casa de Beneficencia* home. While this opportunity to erase a past social "stain" may have been one goal of the orphanage, the main objective of *La Casa de Beneficencia* was to address the problem of the beggars that seemed to be everywhere in the city. "La Casa tenía como objetivo disminuir la mendicidad permanente que existía en la Ciudad." [The House had as its objective to diminish the (presence of) permanent beggars that existed in the city.][259] It would do this through education and through taking in orphans and raising them to be productive adults who would not have to carry the burden – at least legally – of an uncertain parentage.

I have argued here that *libres de color* opted to host a public charity event in part to show their intention to participate in Cuban society as equals. I have also argued that they were attempting to make themselves visible in a positive way as part of a slave society, which was divided about how to define itself. Associating with a charity that exemplified a progressive element within the island enhanced the status of those who participated. While the stakes for this were higher after *La Escalera, libres de color* had associated themselves with the charity in the years before as well. Former *pardo* militia member and owner of a funeral parlor, Félix Barbosa and his wife María Juliana de la Merced Reyes were members of a Catholic *cofradía*, but they also made donations to *La*

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[259] Hidalgo Valdés. *Real Casa,* 37.

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Casa de Beneficencia.[260] During the 1830s free black musician Tomás Vuelta y Flores, was named the "músico titular" (appointed musician) for *La Casa de Beneficencia.* His orchestra performed at parties to help raise funds for the charity. A notice indicates his orchestra performed at an event held at the Tacón theater, which raised funds in the amount of $5,053.00 in 1839.[261] Another notice in 1841 announces that his orchestra performed during carnival for the benefit of the orphanage.[262] Barbosa and Vuelta y Flores represented the upper tier – economically and socially – of Havana's *libres de color* and it is significant that while both appear to have been active members of black social organizations, they also consciously associated themselves with one of the most prominent examples of the modernizing effort in Havana. Their choice directly challenged the notion of philanthropy as being a "white concern."

Demonstrating Equality Through Dance

If the Matanzas dancers had been concerned solely with raising funds they could have taken advantage of the prevailing white attraction to Afro-influenced performance and the popular tendency to use stereotypes of "blackness" as a form of public amusement. They chose, however, to use public dance to challenge derogatory images of African culture rather than perpetuate them. The dancers did not simply emulate whites by hosting an event that mimicked typical European-styled entertainment. Instead, in spite of the fact that they were dressed "after the French mode" and they opened the performance by dancing minuets, they also took advantage of the captive audience to

[260] Deschamps Chapeaux, *Economia,* 75. Author indicates that the couple donated a series of lottery tickets to the orphanage in April 1839 as reported in the Diario de la Habana and that they were known to be a charitable couple.
[261] *Ibid.,* 111. Author refers to the March 1842 issue of the Diario de la Habana.
[262] *Ibid.,* 114.

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execute dances of their own style essentially expanding the parameters of what constituted a "civilized" performance. In addition to the minuets, they performed another dance with which Bremer does not seem to have been familiar. This dance had elements of both European and African cultures as well as local "Cuban" innovations. She depicts this dance by Matanzas' *libres de color* as a "wreath" dance, which involved, "innumerable artistic entanglements and disentanglements—the grouping and inwreathing themselves, in an infinite variety of ways. "[263] She saw this dance as something that revealed, "a type of civilized negro life," indicating this dance was not a recognizably European one but yet not an African one.[264] Her take on this dance indicates that from her perspective it had emerged from the experience of a "negro" life that was "civilized" rather than a "negro" life that was uncivilized or farther removed from European influences.

In his reading of Bremer's text, John Charles Chasteen identifies the dance described in Bremer's journal as an early version of the *danzón*.[265] He depicts the *danzón,* which would become very popular in the late nineteenth century, as being transgressive when it first began to be danced by young Cubans. The first *danzón* is attributed to the musician of color Miguel Faílde who was from Matanzas but who often performed in Havana. Faílde performed the *danzón* at an event to honor Santa Aurora and he later performed his composition called *Las Alturas de Simpson* (Simpson Heights – which was a predominantly black neighborhood in Matanzas) again at a New Year's dance held in 1879 at the exclusive *Club de Matanzas.* Faílde may have performed his first *danzón* composition in 1878, but *danzón* had been years in the making. Black carnival *comparsas*

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[263] Bremer, *Homes,* 308.
[264] *Ibid*., 308.
[265] Chasteen, *National Rhythms*, 75.

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were said to have performed a kind of "coordinated figure dance." These dancers carried arches covered with flowers and held ribbons which they entwined as they danced, similar to the performance Bremer witnessed in Matanzas.[266] The *danzón* was early on associated with black musicians and one reason this dance scandalized many Cubans was that it actually incorporated African elements such as syncopated bass movements that recalled African drums.[267] This dance shocked white Cubans because of its African elements, but when performed along with minuets in an elegant setting the version of the *danzón* as danced in Matanzas in 1851 seems to have elicited a different response. Bremer does not indicate that the audience with whom she attended the charity event was offended. This might simply be an oversight on her part but it seems safe to assume that she would likely have recorded a negative response had there been one. In a society that largely considered slave dances to be crude, this wreath dance seems to have been inoffensive and she herself found it to be "really lovely and picturesque."[268] While the *danzón* was transgressive because of its African elements, it was still a dance gaining popularity amongst whites and like the whites into whose society they were inserting themselves through their well-orchestrated public performance, the *libres de color* danced it as well. The Matanzas dancers had avoided presenting a stereotypical African dance but they were not merely imitating European minuets – at least not entirely. Instead, they were performing publicly a dance that was emerging from their communities and one that would eventually reshape the way Cubans danced.

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[266] Chasteen, *Rhythms*, 75.
[267] *Ibid.*, 157.
[268] Bremer, 308

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Libres de color in Matanzas in 1851 took advantage of performance as a site with nuanced meanings for both blacks and whites in order to participate in the *criollo* modernizing efforts in the mid-years of the nineteenth century. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, white Cuban intellectuals had been concerned about what they perceived as a deficiency in their society. Drawing on European and North American intellectual discourse that linked a modernized environment with a civilized population, as well as on North American examples of modernized cities, they engaged in efforts to "improve" their own urban spaces. The *criollo* men who sought to shape Cuba's social hierarchy looked upon free men and women of African heritage as a problematic class. As they took steps to modernize their urban areas and define their society as "civilized", white *criollos* had to address the role that *libres de color* would play in the emerging Cuban community. While *criollos* acknowledged that *libres de color* would play some role they did not conceive that this role would be one where *criollos* and *libres de color* would be equals.

Libres de color who had begun to build independent lives for themselves during the first decades of the nineteenth century were suspected of being amongst those who planned the 1843 slave rebellions and as a result they were subject to increased surveillance, and greater restriction and repression in the wake of *La Escalera.* The general air of mistrust against them prohibited them from participating in Cuban society on the same footing as that of white *criollos*. That is not to say that before *La Escalera libres de color* were full social participants. According to Luz Maria Mena, "In the 1830s and 40s there was little or nothing free blacks could have done at an institutional level to ameliorate discrimination against them. Instead, they refined old strategies and developed

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new ones that would allow them to move, congregate, organize, and advance economically despite the constraints of formal and informal discrimination."[269] One of these strategies was their effort to challenge the inferior social status whites were attempting to impose on them by associating themselves – through their social organizations – with philanthropic efforts launched by leading Cuban intellectuals.

From Bremer's account of the Matanzas ball hosted by *libres de color* in 1851, it seems clear that some members of this class held a view of their own social status within Cuban society that differed significantly from the views held by *criollos* such as José Antonio Saco. Saco sought them to be excluded altogether from the emerging notion of what it meant to be Cuban. However, *libres de color* made use of an activity in which they were traditionally allowed to engage – dance and musical performances – and offered an alternative image of what would come to be known as Cubanidad that was not dictated by Saco and the rest of the white *criollo* society. In defiance of the restrictions against them the *libres de color* who hosted the charity ball in Matanzas chose to flout their second-class citizenship and support a charitable effort, an action that placed them in the same social arena as the whites who sought to marginalize them. They selected the prominent *criollo* organization – *La Casa de Beneficencia* – and they linked themselves to the *criollo* modernizing agenda by associating themselves with the orphanage as philanthropic supporters no different from the white patrons who founded the charity.

While *libres de color* did not engage in collective armed resistance efforts between 1844 and 1868, it is clear that this did not signal an abandonment of their intention to participate as equals in Cuban society. *Libres de color* organized the public event to raise funds for *La Casa de Beneficencia,* which held special meaning for them.

[269] Mena, 163.

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At this event they boldly opened the proceedings by publicly dancing minuets, which, as Scarpaci has noted was a dance associated with the Cuban elite.[270] Moreover, while they danced minuets attired in “French” styled garments they also presented another dance that was most likely a version of the danzón to which they added their own movements. Not only were they declaring that they could perform as whites did, they were also flaunting the fact that the danzón: one of Cuba's most popular dances and musical styles, was one which had developed partly through the influence of their own modes of dance.

Some whites may have envisioned a "well ordered" and "civilized" environment organized by strict racial hierarchies, but at least one group within the free black community in Matanzas used music and dance to cross the line. Through their performance they demanded visibility, asserted their own sense of their social status, and shaped an alternate public image of “blackness” that contested the one celebrated in racist stage performances and white *Criollo* writings of the period. In this way they resisted efforts to relegate them to a black underclass. Through such public performances *libres de color* also managed to influence the island’s performance culture in a way that would ensure that whites alone did not dictate the image of Cuban society.

But not all *libres de color* in the mid-nineteenth century positioned themselves to attempt an entry into white society. Others used performance as a way of distinguishing themselves from "civilized" society by emphasizing masculinity and honor. In the next chapter I analyze how free men of color fashioned their own image of what it meant to be black men in a slave society in direct contrast to white *criollo* and *peninsular* notions of masculinity and honor. Rather than accept the mantle of subservience and powerlessness,

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[270] Joseph Scarpaci, Roberto Segre and Mario Coyula, *Havana. Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 31.

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the men of the Abakuá societies used public performances that incorporated elements of a subversive "street" culture to define their community and advance an agenda of economic power.

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Chapter Three

Leopard Men: Manhood and Power in Nineteenth-Century Cuba

A New Kind of Society

The town of Regla is situated across the harbor from Havana. It was here in this small village, in 1836, that a group of Cuban-born slaves formed the first Abakuá *juego* or society.[271] This society was distinct from the ethnically based African *cabildos de nación* that had had a presence in Cuba since the early years after the colony's founding. For one thing, in order to become a member of the *juego* initiates did not have to be from the same ethnic background or "nation". Another difference was that the founding members were *criollos* –blacks born in Cuba rather than in Africa as had been the norm for the *cabildos de nación.* Finally, the Abakuá group formed in Regla was a secret fraternal organization, while the *cabildos* had been social groups that welcomed both African men and women.

The men of the first Abakuá group were initiated under the guidance and with the blessing of the leaders of a *cabildo* whose membership was comprised of Africans brought to Cuba from an area in West Africa known as the Old Calabar region – they were referred to as the Carabalí. When the leaders of the Carabalí *cabildo* in Regla

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[271] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit. African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 228. The term Abakuá is thought to be a creolized reference to the Ngbe secret society that was active in the Old Calabar region of West Africa in the early nineteenth century. The Ejagham people who participated in these Ngbe societies had been called the Abakpa. Early references to the secret societies in Cuba use the term Abakuá. Later they would acquire another name, the ñáñigo. It is not clear from available sources at what point the term ñáñigo would become a pejorative title.

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sanctioned the first Abakuá *juego,* they entrusted the 25 enslaved founding members with a secret that provided the new brotherhood with authority to govern themselves within their organization and, which also required them to adhere to a strict code of secrecy and honor.

The founding members had status within their community as they were owned by some of the wealthiest and most prominent families in Cuba. These slaves were able to flout colonial regulations (sometimes) because they were under their masters' protection.[272] In spite of the fact that enslaved Cuban-born blacks founded the first Abakuá group, the organization did not remain a society of enslaved members for long. In 1839, just a few years after the first Abakuá *juego* had been initiated, an encounter between the police and a group of free black men in Havana caused Cuban authorities to become concerned about what they saw as extralegal behavior.[273] These men were thought to be in the process of forming a new social organization (much later understood by authorities to be a *juego*) without the appropriate permissions. Information about the Abakuá in the years between 1839 when this confrontation occurred and the late 1870s when the authorities took specific steps attempting to control these (by then) numerous societies is sparse and as a result constructing a reliable history of this group's activity is challenging. What is known is that by the year 1876, when the colonial government in Cuba enacted laws prohibiting membership in Abakuá societies the participants in these organizations had acquired a new name—

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[272] David H. Brown. *The Light Inside: Abakuá Society Arts and Cuban Cultural History.* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 15.
[273] Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit,* 228-229. The significance of this encounter will be discussed later in the chapter, but the dockworker had in his possession documents that caused the authorities to become concerned both about subversive activities and unexpected membership networks within the *juegos*.

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ñáñigos—and also a reputation (whether warranted or not) for criminality.[274] Indeed, the Abakuá penchant for secrecy and the group's association with violent public encounters had brought them to the attention of government officials. The composition of the membership too gave officials cause for concern. Initially Abakuá membership was to be limited to blacks of "pure blood" – an interesting twist on the Spanish notion of *limpieza de sangre* – meaning that they were not the offspring of racially mixed unions. This stipulation gradually changed as more mixed race men were allowed membership. By the 1860s *juegos* comprised of white and Chinese members began to proliferate in Cuba's port towns.[275]

In this chapter I argue that, in the years between 1844 when the colonial government increased restrictions against men and women of color and 1868 at the outbreak of the first Cuban war of independence, the men who comprised the Abakuá membership used the secrecy surrounding their private practices to challenge their status as powerless subordinates in the colonial social hierarchy. They did this by taking advantage of the seeming discomfort their activities engendered in the wider Cuban population, as well as by consciously shaping their public image through annual processions. In particular, I examine how these groups dominated the hiring practices on the Havana docks and meted out their own concept of justice through their fraternal networks. In this way Abakuá men defined the manner in which they would participate in the emerging Cuban public sphere during the mid years of the nineteenth century. In

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[274] Stephan Palmié, *Wizards & Scientists. Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity & Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 225. It is not clear if and when the ban against the Abakuá was officially lifted. Jorge and Isabel Castellanos indicate that while the fraternal society was still considered to be banned from the "fiestas de carnaval," in 1880, there were also new *juegos* being authorized in that year. Jorge Castellanos and Isabel Castellanos, *Cultura Afrocubana. Las religiones y lenguas, Vol. 3* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2002), 260 and 213.
[275] Brown, *The Light Inside,* 24.

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order to do this they appropriated practices from African secret societies that revered the qualities of the leopard, which embodied their notion of masculinity. They also perpetuated an existing urban masculine street culture that had engendered a certain level of fear and respect amongst both blacks and whites in Havana society. This subordinate culture drew on menacing images in constructing their public performances, which contributed to shaping their public image.

Abakuá notions of masculinity and honor do not appear to be so different from those of poor whites in urban Cuba whose code required men to respond to insults against their persons or their families, often with violence. Rather than seek to integrate into the dominant white society, however, by adapting their social behaviors to those of the white elites as other *libres de color* had, Abakuá members chose instead to draw on many aspects of the cultural traditions available to them while continuing to operate within their own sphere – a largely *extramuro* sphere – where it was difficult for Havana authorities to enforce colonial law. I suggest that Abakuá members appear to have built on an existing *extramuro* street culture as well as on the African traditions available to them that allowed them to construct an image of themselves as “men” – even dangerous men. Abakuá men appear to have combined these elements with notions of honor as understood in the Hispanic tradition and used them to wield real power in a slave society that was designed to deny them authority.

My concentration in this study is on public performances and thus I focus this chapter on the public processions of the Abakuá and what they signified to onlookers as far as it is possible to discern from the available sources. I also examine the known instances of violence later attributed to the Abakuá as a way of understanding these acts

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as performances of a sort that served to "enhance" the groups' reputation. The Abakuá members' ability to manipulate their public image in order to achieve economic power was closely linked to their existence as a largely urban group. I begin with an examination of the urban culture within which these men lived in order to give context to the traditions to which they were exposed and by which they were influenced.

Urban Street Culture in Nineteenth-Century Havana

The American naturalist, John Muir was not impressed with several aspects of Havana when he visited the city in 1868. "The streets of Havana are crooked, labyrinthic, and exceedingly narrow," he wrote. "The sidewalks are only about a foot wide. A traveler experiences delightful relief when, heated and wearied by raids through the breadth of the dingy yellow town, dodging a way through crowds of men and mules and lumbering carts and carriages, he at length finds shelter in the spacious, dustless, cool, flowery squares; still more when, emerging from all the din and darkness of the lanelike streets, he suddenly finds himself out in the middle of the harbor inhaling full-drawn breaths of the sea breezes."[276] Muir was ill when he visited Havana after his epic walk from Indiana to Florida. Known for his love of nature and solitude, it is understandable that he might have felt overwhelmed in the "dingy yellow town." Yet Havana's spatial layout and the interactions it encouraged as well as concealed were the milieu out of which a distinct street culture emerged around the turn of the nineteenth century. As Robin D.G. Kelley suggests, examining these "hidden social spaces that fall between the cracks of political

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[276] William Frederic Badé, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf,* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 155.

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history" can be revealing.[277] In Havana, enslaved and free people of color made use of this "labyrinthic" physical environment described by Muir to fashion a sphere in which they were able to exert some control over their otherwise constrained lives.

The organization of geographic space and place can determine how a society develops as much as any other element. The way a city is laid out encourages daily routines that lend themselves to certain kinds of relationships, or make certain types of actions or even particular kinds of protests and other behaviors more or less likely.[278] In her work examining urban space in Chicago, *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago, 1890-1919,* historian Robin Bachin is interested in how the physical layout of a city can shape civic culture. Chicago city leaders in the late nineteenth century had a vision for their society that they attempted to realize through urban planning and they attempted to build physical spaces that would encourage spheres of community interaction.[279] Bachin notes that some groups contested this vision and found ways to assign new meanings to spaces.[280] This late nineteenth-century process in Chicago is similar to that which took place in mid-nineteenth-century Havana, where city leaders also attempted to realize their own vision for a modern Havana through urban city planning.

Until the 1860s, a wall that was designed to protect the city from foreign invaders surrounded Havana. Begun in the 1660s, the wall was completed in 1740. The original design included space around the existing settlement to allow the town to grow, but by

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[277] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: culture, politics, and the Black working class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 52.
[278] Javier Auyero, "Spaces and Places as Sites and Objects of Politics", in *Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis.* Robert Goodin and Charles Tilley, editors, Oxford University Press, 2006, 573
[279] Robin F. Bachin, *Building the South Side. Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 6.
[280] Bachin, *South Side,* 8.

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the time it was completed, the city had already spread outside the walls. Conditions inside the wall surrounding Havana were extremely congested. When the city was finally fully enclosed, there were so many horses and mules and carriages and carts moving about the streets on a daily basis that congestion was a significant problem causing very differently positioned social groups to mingle to together by necessity. In addition to the physical layout of the streets, the typical style of Havana homes, where the work space, slave quarters, and family living quarters were located near each other, also encouraged a close social interaction.[281]

When Miguel Tacón took over the governorship of Cuba in 1834, he was concerned about addressing the city's numerous challenges. He and the leading intellectuals of the time saw a direct link between the layout of the urban space and the "quality" of populace that inhabited it. "The modern drive," according to geographer Joseph L. Scarpaci speaking of nineteenth-century Havana, "embraced sobriety, order, righteousness, straight avenues, and open spaces for the new middle class." In support of this effort to embrace sobriety and order, the Governor renovated the Captain General's palace and moved the jail to a new location.[282] He paved the streets and instituted a system for garbage collection. He also tried to make the streets safer at night by adding lights in the darker areas and instituting a system of security patrols.[283]

Tacón's projects were not limited to the *intramuro* areas of Havana. His theater, which he named for himself, was located just outside the western wall of the city. Wealthy residents took to riding in their carriages or strolling in the new public *extramuro* spaces designed for such purposes. Even though in the 1830s the residential

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281 Joseph Scarpaci, *Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis,* 55
282 Scarpaci, 32-33
283 Sublette, 128.

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areas outside the walls remained scattered, Tacón built a magnificent boulevard that ran west from the city wall past the governor's summer home.[284] American traveler Samuel Hazard describes his experience traveling west of the city in the late 1860s in the following way, "We have a very pretty view of the continuation of the Paseo [de Tacon], with its rows of trees that shade the road so nicely." He also mentions the "beautiful and comfortable residences of the fashionable and wealthy, for whom this, with its surroundings is the principle place of residence, particularly in the summer."[285] While the governor and the city's leading citizens were focused on improving the populace by improving the living environment, they were not able to control all aspects of the growing society and the wealthy did not have a monopoly on land use outside the walls. In fact, both inside and outside the walls the physical layout of the city enabled communities of men and women at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum including *libres de color* to conduct their lives under the radar of governmental authority. In this milieu men of color were able to congregate in informal groups that afforded them some clout amongst their peers.

For all of Tacón's careful urban planning and building efforts, both inside and outside the walls, the *extramuro* area in particular experienced growth in what was essentially unplanned development. Early extramural settlements teemed with people from many different backgrounds and classes. Problems that had existed inside the walls, and which Tacón was attempting to address, extended to these unplanned settlements. There was no indoor plumbing, dogs ran loose in the streets (in 1833 twenty-two people died of rabies), there was no sewers or trash collection, and streets

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[284] Scarpaci, 33.
[285] Hazard, *Pen and Pencil,* 141-142

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were unpaved so they were either muddy or dusty from passing carriages. Yellow fever was a constant threat.[286]

The barrios outside the walls continued to grow in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, as immigrants and visitors from the Caribbean basin and Spain's former colonies across Latin America poured into the area. Spain was in the process of losing all its colonies as independence movements spread and by 1824 Cuba and Puerto Rico were its last remaining "New World" possessions. As a result an influx of displaced military families from the former Spanish colonies moved into Cuba. Cuba also represented financial opportunity to those seeking to improve themselves in the larger colonial society. According to Sublette, “With the upsurge of sugar and coffee, and the money to be had in land speculation and trafficking in slaves and other contraband, fortune seekers rushed into Cuba. In this get-rich-quick environment, gambling blossomed; games were everywhere in Havana, at all times, even at the front doors of the churches. Fortunes were won and lost on the turn of a card.”[287] This was the situation in Havana and it was especially true in this *extramuro* community. Tacón estimated that there were about twelve thousand people who could not say how they earned their livings hanging about in the Havana gambling halls—many of them outside the city walls.[288] Scarpaci describes the general *extramuro* population as living in “shantytowns,” and he refers to them as “the indigent, thieves, assassins, army deserters, freed slaves, and beggars.”[289] Manuel Moreno Fraginals also paints a vivid picture of the barrios outside Havana’s walls. “Havana’s always large floating

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[286] Sublette, 127.
[287] *Ibid.*
[288] *Ibid.*, 128
[289] Scarpaci, 37

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population," he writes, "was swelled by people taking refuge in the slums which huddled under or overflowed the city walls. In all the sugar-terminal cities the large number of lumpen got steadily larger."[290]

Many of the people who Moreno Fraginals describes were trying to feed themselves and their families in any way they could. The narrow streets, in the *extramuro* neighborhoods, which were lined with buildings packed closely together, provided a physical space where some elements of this mass of people could conduct quasi-legal businesses. It was not unusual for military deserters, escaped prisoners, or even runaway slaves to disappear into the *extramuro* barrios. The congested environment also leant itself to the development of a specific kind of street culture. This culture thrived amongst those men and women who were trying to survive economically as well as create a level of autonomy amidst restrictions encountered in their daily lives.

Negros Curros

The chief participants in this street culture were young free black men who were known as the *negros curros* or the *curros de Manglar.* This was not an organized group such as the *cabildo* societies, instead they represented in Palmie's words, "a distinctly black lifestyle associated in the minds of the Cuban elite both with highly specific forms of gendered personal comportment and active engagement in Havana's exploding urban economy of crime."[291] To the Havana elite, the *curros* were the "bad boys" of colonial Havana and were easily identified by their flashy attire. They tended to live in the marshy area outside the walls, which was referred to as *El Manglar* because of all the

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[290] Moreno Fraginals, 139
[291] Palmié, *Wizards,* 149. Contemporary writings refer to them using these terms, but it is unclear how they referred to themselves. Palmié suggests that they did not self-identify in this way.

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mangrove trees growing in the area. According to nineteenth-century Cuban writer José V. Betancourt, the Manglar was a "pigsty" where a large population lived in small dirty houses. The Manglar was not the only place where the *curros* lived—they could also be found in the suburbs of Horcón and Jesús María—but because of their numbers and their misdeeds, those of the Manglar were most well known and the name given to this group became the one most associated with the *curros*.[292] The *curros* set up shacks that they used as taverns and sold rum and tripe to sailors who swarmed the area when they were in port. They also catered to the sailors by running gambling houses and brothels.[293]

The social origins of the *negros curros* are unclear. They were thought to have been the sons of slaves and not themselves Africans. It is possible that they were the free descendents of slaves who came to Cuba from Africa or from Andalusia.[294] The *curros* in Cuba were people of color; indeed, race was part of what made them distinct. They also tended to be free men because, as Ortiz explained, "fueron siempre libres ... eran incompatibles con la servidumbre," servitude was not compatible with being a *curro.* This was likely because the *curros* emphasized posture and style presenting an image of being in control, a stance that would have been difficult for a man who was subject to a master.[295] In his nineteenth-century novel, *Cecilia Valdes,* Cuban writer Cirilo Villaverde included a character based on a *curro.* This character rescues a man who has been attacked in a dark street at night. It is significant that the author chooses

[292] Fernando Ortiz, "Los Negros Curros," in *Archivos del Folklore Cubano,* Vol. 79 No. 3 & 4, 229-237 (La Habana: La Habana Cultural, 1928,), 214. José Victoriano Betancourt, "Los Curros del Manglar," in *Costumbristas cubanos del siglo XIX* (Salvador Bueno, Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1985), originally published in 1848.
[293] Sublette, 86.
[294] Ortiz, "Los Curros," 213
[295] *Ibid.,* 212

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this character to be present at a clandestine crime scene given the *curro's* popular association with crime and illegal activities. In this case Villaverde alludes to another association of this character when he describes his fictionalized *curro* in this way, "We are here tracing with broad brushstrokes a portrait drawn from life of a *curro* from El Manglar, on the outskirts of cultivated Havana, in that memorable era of our history. Our eccentric is not what is usually meant by a *curro,* an émigré from southern Spain who proudly flaunts his flashy Andalusian attire. He is nothing more or less than a black or a young mulatto, a native of the aforementioned barrio or of two or three others in the same city, a good-for-nothing troublemaker, an idler, a brawler by nature or by habit, a petty thief by profession, who grows up on the streets, who lives by plunder, and who seems to be destined from birth to the lash, to irons, or to a violent death."[296] So while the *curro* in Cuba was by the late eighteenth century, black, Villaverde refers to another historical image of a *curro* that harkened back to Spain and also seems to have informed the white *criollo* contemporary attitude that existed about the *curros* at the time of his writing.

In addition to his general rebellious nature, the *negro curro* in colonial Havana was instantly recognizable by the way he dressed. Villaverde's description, as well as other contemporary descriptions, present the *curro* as a man who wanted to stand out as a unique and recognizable individual. The *curro* wore a distinct kind of trousers described as being wider at the lower leg and "bell-shaped," covering very low-cut shoes more akin to slippers. Their shirts were also distinctive with jagged indents along

[296] Villaverde wrote his novel between the years 1839 and 1882 when it was published in New York. Villaverde, English version, 402. It is interesting to note that Villaverde contrasts his black character with one that he assumes his reader will think of when he uses the term *curro* indicating that there may have been an Andalusian character that bore this name prior to the *negro curro.*

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the collars. A "bramble patch of kinky braided locks," and large gold earrings completed the picture.[297] Villaverde's fictionalized version of the *negro curro* is not so far removed from other contemporary descriptions. Betancourt also mentions the distinctive dress of the *curro* in his work entitled *Los Curros del Manglar*, "Los *curros* tenían una fisonomía peculiar, y bastaba verles para clasificarlos por tales: sus largos mechones de pasas trenzadas, cayéndoles sobre el rostro y cuello a manera de grandes *mancaperros*, sus dientes cortados a la usanza *carabalí,* la camisa de estopilla bordada de *candeleros,* sus calzones blancos casi siempre, o de listados colores, angostos por la cintura y anchísimos de piernas, el zapato de cañamazo, de corte bajo con hebilla de plata." [The *curros* had a peculiar appearance and it was enough to see them to identify them: their long hunks of kinky braids, falling over their face and necks like big millipedes; their teeth cut to the *carabalí* style, their fine embroidered cloth shirts, their pants, almost always white or striped, narrow at the waist and very wide in the legs, the canvas shoes, cut low with silver buckles][298] The detailed descriptions both in Villaverde's fiction and Betancourt's scholarly works give the impression that this street character's visual presence was memorable. Clearly the *curros* were concerned about image and took the time to create what was essentially a distinct costume by which they were easily recognized. Not only were they identifiable by their clothing, they also affected a way of walking and speaking that made them stand out in the community. Betancourt notes that they moved with their arms swinging back and forth and had a kind of swagger as though they were hinged. Their diction too had a particular lilt or inflection and even included a kind of language of their own, "por el idioma particular

[297] Villaverde (English), 402
[298] Betancourt, "Los Curros del Manglar", 262. Betancourt practiced law in Matanzas for several years in the 1860s. He was also a costumbristo writer.

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que hablan."[299] At a time when there were few opportunities for black men to make a name for themselves, the *curros* used costume and style in order to distinguish themselves from amongst their peers.

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While they seemed to be fastidious about their style and dress, the *curros* were not just "pretty boys." They were prepared to defend themselves and were thought by some in the barrios where they lived to carry daggers hidden in the wide sleeves of their shirts.[301] It is also interesting to note, as Betancourt mentioned, that they filed their teeth into points as the many of the *Carabalí* men did. This suggests that at least some *Carabalí* practices were already circulating in the Havana culture years before the

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299 Betancourt, "Los Curros del Manglar," 262. English translations taken from Sublette, 87.
300 This image was painted by Spanish artist Victor Patricio Landaluze around 1875.
301 Ortiz, "Los Curros," 288.

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Abakuá were first initiated. According to Ortiz, this filing of the teeth was done without anesthetic and required "tying up the patient, so he wouldn't flee." Understandably, this procedure caused headaches for many days after it was done – adding to the mystique of the *curros* as tough characters who could endure as well as inflict pain. Ortiz suggests sharpening teeth was also a way for these men to circumvent the prohibition for carrying weapons in public areas as teeth filed to points in this way could prove deadly in a fight.[302] There were also women, called *curras,* who wore distinctive clothing and gold jewelry and associated with the *curros*, but this was mainly a male culture and it was one that drew on a menacing demeanor to inspire fear in the *extramuro* communities.

By the 1830s, when Tacón and members of the Economic Society had already begun to focus on modernizing the city, the *curros* as distinct characters had begun to fade away, but their impact on Havana street culture remained. In fact, a new tough street character emerged to take their place.[303] These new "bad boys" formalized their associations in the Abakuá *juegos*. Havana's *extramuro* male street culture had already defied social norms and this became an important part of this brotherhood's inscrutability. The *curro* had been a tough masculine character willing to use violence as a form of defense and the Abakuá men would also use violence to protect their members from attack or to respond to a perceived act that dishonored their reputation. Additionally, when processing through the streets of Havana, the Abakuá constructed an easily identifiable public image as had the *curros* in their *extramuro* domain. On religious holidays it was in part the Abakuá'a distinct costumes that caused them to be identifiable to the colonial audiences writing in the mid-nineteenth century. While I am

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[302] *Ibid*., 287
[303] Sublette, 88

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not suggesting that the Abakuá simply mimicked the *curros* it seems possible, even likely that, those early "tough" characters with such a visible presence would have impacted the imaginations of young boys growing up in the Havana barrios. Long after the *curro* disappeared as a distinct character in Havana society, both blacks and whites came to associate the idea of a menacing male presence in the city with the public and private practices of the Abakuá.

The barrio street culture undoubtedly impacted the boys who would later become Abakuá men, but the prevailing notion of masculinity as practiced by whites in Cuba also impacted Abakuá behaviors. The commitment to protecting masculine honor that was so important in Iberian culture, also found a place in Abakuá practice.

The Abakuá: Constructing Masculinity

In 1836 twenty-five black *criollos*—slaves of wealthy Havana families—became the first members of a Cuban Abakuá lodge or *juego*. The Efik Buton, as this *juego* was called, was formed in Regla, a small town across the harbor from Havana, under the sanction of the *Cabildo de Nación Carabalí Brícamo Appapá Efí*.[304] The residents of this town—mainly fishermen and sailors—tended to have jobs that were associated in some way with the sea.[305] Regla seems an unlikely location for the founding of a new kind organization of blacks as the town's population was predominantly white.[306] About 2,000 people lived in the village in 1812, and by 1846 the population had grown to over 6,500,

[304] Brown, *Light*, 14
[305] Rafael L. López Valdés, *Pardos y morenos esclavos y libres en Cuba y sus instituciones en el Caribe Hispano.* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 2007), 297.
[306] Palmié, *Wizards & Scientists*, 198.

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with whites comprising seventy six percent of that number.[307] According to Cuban anthropologist Rafael López Valdés the *libres de color* who lived in Regla worked, for the most part, as laborers on the wharves of both that town and nearby Havana—a significant factor in the history of the Abakuá as will be discussed.[308]

Membership in the Efik Buton *juego* grew rapidly drawing recruits from amongst the slaves of prosperous Havana residents and as additional lodges were formed expanding their membership to include free black men. The founding members were referred to as the Belenistas because their owners resided in the upscale Havana neighborhood of Belen. Shortly, after the group was formed in 1836, the colonial government took note of their activities because, according to David Brown, "the Belenistas committed every sort of "misdeed" under the cover of their "renown" and the protection of their wealthy owners."[309] Already by the 1840s an aura of criminality surrounded some of the members of this new group resulting from their public street brawls or acts of violence against rival groups. By the 1880s they were being referred to by the derogatory name of *ñáñigos*, however it is not clear when this term was actually first used to describe members of this group or whether the Abakuá members made use of it to describe themselves. Cuban anthropologist Lydia Cabrera refers to the behavior of the first *juego* membership noting, "Este primer juego que se formó ... alcanzó gran nombradía, porque todos los miembros eran esclavos de condes y marqueses ... y sucedió también que, atenidos a ese rango y confiando en la protección que les dispensaban sus

[307] Martinez-Alier, *Marriage,* 62. Martinez-Alier gives the following population breakdown for Regla in 1846 as follows: White men - 2,696, white women - 2,375, free men of color - 324, free women of color - 320, enslaved men - 519, and enslaved women - 428. Her figures are taken from *Cuadro estadístico de la siempre fiel islas de Cuba, correspondiente al año 1846,* (Havana, 1847)
[308] López Valdés, *Pardos*, 298.
[309] Brown, 15. Brown is citing a report written in 1881 by a man named as Alejandro Rodríguez which he indicates is the earliest known written report providing information about the members of the Abakuá were sometimes known.

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amos, cometieron muchos excesos y empezaron a adquirir mala fama los ñáñigos."[310] [This first set that was formed ... acquired a grand name, because all the members were slaves of counts and marquises…and it happened also that, attending people of such rank and confident of the protection of their owners, they committed many excesses and the ñáñigos began to acquire a bad reputation.] The challenge with understanding the early *juegos* based on twentieth-century testimony is the danger of back-projecting the authorities' awareness of the Abakuá as a distinct group, when we don't have confirmation of such recognition until the 1870s. By this time authorities were clearly aware of them as a group, but what authorities understood about the Abakuá in the 1840s is not clear.

Oral tradition holds that amongst the Carabalí Africans who arrived in Cuba in the early 1800s were some who had held great authority amongst the people of the Old Calabar region. According to one of Ivor Miller's informant, "Around 1800 they brought a cargo of Bríkamo Carabalí to Cuba, represented by a sovereign king named Efík Ebúton from Efí territory belonging to Calabar. With him came a prince from Efó territory named Anamerúto Ápapa Efó and nine wise men." While it is impossible to corroborate this specific oral testimony, Miller does indicate that amongst the enslaved Africans arriving in the New World during the Atlantic slave trade were those who had held great authority and prestige in their homelands.[311] In addition, Lovejoy describes a situation in Old Calabar at the turn of the century (late eighteenth – early nineteenth centuries) indicating that high-ranking individuals were sometimes erroneously shipped

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[310] Lydia Cabrera. *La Sociedad Abakuá. Narrada por Viejos Adeptos* (Miami, FL.: Editorial CR, 1970), 50-51, English translation Sublette's, 191.
[311] Ivor Miller, *Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 38-39

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to the Americas as slaves. He explains that African leaders and merchants who did business with English slave traders utilized a credit system, which allowed them to acquire goods on credit in exchange for a pledge. "This pledge consists of their own relations, who are detained till they come back."[312] Sometimes the slave ships sailed with these pledges on board and this occurred often enough for it to become a source of tension between African merchants and British slave traders.[313]

Even though the earliest African *cabildos* were originally organizations for African-born blacks, there is evidence that a large number of Cuban-born blacks who were able to pay an entry contribution and monthly dues were allowed membership, or at least the chance to participate in the *Cabildo de Nación Carabalí Brícamo Appapá Efí* – the *cabildo* from which the first Abakuá *juego* emerged. In fact, according to Brown by 1836 some amongst the leadership of this organization became concerned as the numbers of these Cuban-born members within their *cabildo* was growing. They stopped allowing them to purchase memberships out of fear that the secret, which Brown describes as the, "the sacred resources that undergirded their visible social power," would be discovered by people who should not have access to them.[314] Instead they permitted the *criollo* blacks to form their own lodge, which the African leaders initiated in the manner of their remembered African tradition. Since the Carabalí leaders sanctioned a *criollo* lodge in spite of concerns about their secrets being discovered, it appears that their worries were more about the desire to have the secrets passed on in a ritually acceptable way than about the secrets themselves being shared with *criollos*. It is significant too that the

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[312] Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, "Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History: The Institutional Foundations of the Old Calabar Slave Trade," in *The American Historical Review* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Vol. 104, No. 2, April 1999), 336.
[313] Lovejoy, 344.
[314] Brown, *The Light Inside*, 14.

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criollos did not simply found a group on their own initiative but instead approached the Carabalí *cabildo* leadership for permission to organize and for their sanction. For both groups there appears to have been a respect for the authority that came through acquiring the secrets in the proper way. Ritual authority seems to have been crucial to the fraternal leopard societies in Africa and the Carabalí in Cuba were careful to adhere to precise rituals when initiating new *juegos.* Miller contends that, "The Africans who created Efík Ebúton were initiated in Calabar; they possessed the *fundamento* [ritual authority] to give birth to Efík Ebúton [in Cuba]."[315]

Those who possessed the secret held to a longstanding belief that this knowledge brought prosperity and protection. It is understandable that black men—especially enslaved black men— would have seen this secret knowledge as valuable.[316] As the *juego* memberships became more and more diverse including free men of African, Asian, and European heritage who were competing for employment in Havana's limited job market, initiation into the network of *juego* memberships could in fact be parlayed into tangible opportunities for prosperity. Ones membership in a specific *juego* could mean the difference between being hired for a job and not being able to find a way to earn a living to take care of ones family. As discussed in chapter two, unemployed free men of color risked arrest for vagrancy, even as after *La Escalera* they faced severe employment discrimination. Thus, the brotherhoods could actually rectify the situation by helping their members to find jobs.

[315] Miller, 41
[316] Adriana Pérez Pérez and Norma García Cabrera. *Abakuá: una secta secreta* (Havana: Publicigraf, 1993), 14. "La esencia del ñáñiguismo la expone su mito: la captura y muerte del maravilloso pez que daría un destino de Gloria y prosperidad al pueblo que lo poseyese."

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It is unclear why, given the Abakuá's various altercations with the colonial authorities, the *juegos* were not suppressed earlier than 1876. Palmié suggests that it is possible that the authorities in the 1830s and early 1840s might not have been aware that the enslaved *criollo* men and later, free men, they were arresting for various public altercations and illicit gatherings were actually members of a new type of *cabildo*.[317] The disgust that many Habaneros of the middle and elite classes felt towards the men who would later be known as the Abakuá, "did not manifest as ... focused persecution—complete with systematic surveillance, raids, confiscations of property, court trials, imprisonment, and deportations—until the last quarter of the nineteen century (1875)."[318] Brown's assertion would suggest that Palmié's position is correct, and that the police did not grasp the nature of the new society as being a fraternal organization with its own internal rules about honor and justice. Had the authorities clearly understood at an earlier date that the Abakuá men were part of a distinctly new kind of social group that held authority over its members requiring them to respond to violence with violence, even to the point of death, and had they understood that leaders amongst the dockworkers were members of this group, they might have reacted differently when they arrested a free black dockworker named Margarito Blanco in 1839.

Blanco's arrest took place as part of a raid on an illicit gathering.[319] Whether or not they understood that the Abakuá differed from other *cabildos de nación*, the authorities were continually looking out for meetings or gatherings of blacks organized without proper permission from the local authorities. Ironically, just a few months before this raid reports about the island's "tranquilidad publica" indicated that, with the

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[317] Deschamps Chapeaux, "Margarito Blanco," 101.
[318] Brown, 134.
[319] Palmié, *Wizards,* 145-146

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exception of “dos asesinatos entre gente de color” the public peace was assured.[320] This assessment shifted somewhat five months later. On July 11, 1839, authorities had burst in on a “suspicious gathering” being held in the Jesús María home of a free black dressmaker named Dominga Cárdenas. Seven free blacks were arrested during this raid, and a few days later another free black man, the previously mentioned Margarito Blanco, was also arrested. Not only did this alert the authorities to the shocking reality that free men of color were involved in *cabildo* gatherings, it revealed an even more interesting connection. Blanco was a coachman and a dockworker and papers found in his house and seized by authorities were similar to those found in the initial arrest at the Cárdenas home. The papers included signs and symbols with which the authorities appeared to have had some familiarity because they considered them cause for concern. The documents also revealed that Blanco was in the process of forming a new *cabildo*. Not only did Blanco’s papers link him to the Abakuá by referring to him as the "Ocongo de Ultam", which authorities later understood to be some kind of leadership title, they also offered evidence that free black officers of the regiment called the *Morenos Leales* were involved with this “suspicious gathering.”[321] For authorities anxious about the threat of slave uprising evidence of free men of color and slaves coming together to form a social group - whether or not they understood it to be an Abakuá lodge - was cause for worry. When it was discovered that among these free men were those who were then or had previously been in the service of Spain as military protectors of the island, the concern heightened but still, as Brown notes, there was no systematic surveillance of the groups.

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[320] Ultramar, Gobierno, leg. 4610, no. 9, AHN.
[321] Palmié, *Wizards,* 145-146. There was a signature on one of Blanco’s documents made by José Nemesio Jaramilla, who was an officer of the *Morenos Leales.* Deschamps Chapeaux, “Margarito Blanco,” 102. Blanco's title [and spelling] taken from Ultramar, Gobierno, leg. 4610, no. 11, AHN. According to Palmié, this title refers to a leadership role within the Abakuá.

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The evidence they confiscated revealed networks between workers on the Havana docks, retired members of the black and mulatto militia units, and African leaders of *cabildos.* Yet, had the authorities been aware of the nature of the Abakuá brotherhoods and their code of justice, their concerns with regards to Blanco and the others they interrogated in the following years, especially after *La Escalera,* may have led authorities to ban the groups earlier than they did.

For the first twenty years after the initiation of the Efik Buton, more and more *juegos* were founded until the numbers of *juegos* actually eclipsed the numbers of *cabildos* in Havana.[322] During this time Havana police continued to make arrests confiscating documents and artifacts, including costumes and items used during Abakuá ceremonies, which they held as evidence. They did not, however, appear to have understood the significance of the items they held and exactly how they were used during ceremonies. It was not until the 1880s that official police reports, such as that of Havana's chief of police José Trujillo y Monagas describing the group, were published. Once Trujillo y Monagas' report had been published more reports began to focus on Abakuá practices in the latter years of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth century. For example, police commissioner Rafael Roche Monteagudo's work on crime in Cuba from the early 1900s targeted the group's supposed criminal practices. Other twentieth-century scholars began to take note of this group and several focused their studies on the groups' ritual activities. When Fernando Ortiz, after seeing some of the confiscated items that had been sent by Cuban authorities to Spain, began studying the group in the 1920s, he was the first to suggest a connection between the Cuban group and that of the Ngbe in Old Calabar. Cabrera's 1958 work on the Abakuá represented

[322] Palmié, *Wizards*, 15.

المنارة للاستشارات
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years of conversations and interactions she had with Cuban blacks who observed the Abakuá in their communities as well as possibly with Abakuá members themselves. Studies done in the 1960s by historian Rafaél López Valdés and later in the 1980s by Enrique Sosa Rodríguez continued to add to the production of knowledge about the group.[323] The information from the late nineteenth-century police reports attempted to speculate about the society's local origins and activities, while Ortiz' work sought to identify an African source for this group. Cabrera's work and later that of López Valdés and Sosa Rodríguez provided important details that helped in the understanding of the Abakuá by examining the secret society's ritual ceremonies and internal hierarchy.

Much information about the origins and early practice of the Abakuá is based on oral testimony taken by twentieth-century scholars. As a result, conclusions drawn about the original *juegos* are often somewhat speculative. Yet, oral testimony is often one of the only means to gain historical knowledge of subaltern populations such as the Abakuá and these narratives are themselves an important locus of analysis and interpretation. Abakuá men prided themselves on staying true to the teachings of the early *juegos* in order to pass on important knowledge through succeeding generations of the membership. As a result, the testimony of contemporary practitioners coupled with late nineteenth-century police reports and eyewitness accounts of the groups' public performances from travel journals can be cautiously combined to better understand the society and its practices in colonial Cuba.

The Abakuá *juegos* appear to have provided a sense of "family" or community through their brotherhoods, one bound by its own code of honor. A man had to meet

[323] Stephan Palmié and Elizabeth Pérez, "An All Too Present Absence: Fernando Ortiz's work on Abakuá in its Sociocultural Context," in *New West Indian Guide,* Vol. 79 No. 3 & 4 219-227 (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies/KITLV, 2005), 222 – 225.

المنارة للاستشارات
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certain requirements before being allowed to undergo the process of initiation.[324] Abakuá men's behavior was said to embody qualities of respect such as treating parents, especially mothers, well, being good parents themselves, not interfering with the relationships between their lodge brothers and their wives, and not making sexual advances towards a lodge brother's sister. In addition, Abakuá members were expected to exhibit qualities they associated with manhood, including those of physical strength and courage. They had to defend at all costs their own honor and the honor of their brothers. It was understood that any perceived dishonor against individual members or the group as a whole required violent payback. Within this context Abakuá members might even be called upon to commit murder – as Havana police reported investigating on numerous occasions. Their primary allegiance was to the Abakuá *juego* and this allegiance required them to respond to any actions or behaviors against them or their brothers that could be interpreted as being disrespectful.[325]

This code of honor was in direct conflict with the expectations of the Cuban dominant classes in which black men – whether free or enslaved – were expected to adopt an attitude of deference to whites that included submission to the laws instituted by whites. Defending their manhood and honor inevitably led to public conflicts between the *juegos* flouting the legal system by taking justice into their own hands. According to one Abakuá practitioner with whom Lydia Cabrera spoke in 1940s, "Una *potencia ñáñigo* es eso, el gobierno de la República, un estado en chiquito, que debe ser un modelo. Por esto se impone el orden en nuestro baroco. Y para que pueda haber orden, solo admitimos

[324] Miller, *Voice,* 63.
[325] Brown, *Light,* 28.

المنارة للاستشارات

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hombres serios y dignos. ¡ Dignos de ser ñáñigos!"[326] [A *potencia ñáñigo* is this, the government of the Republic, a state in miniature, which must be a model. That is why we impose order in our *baroco.* And so that we can have order, we only admit serious and worthy men—worthy of being ñáñigos] This practitioner, though participating in his *juego* over 100 years after the initial formation of the Abakuá, saw himself as carrying on a tradition that had begun in the nineteenth century. While this does not suggest a direct continuity from how the colonial era *juegos* were operated, there are indications from twentieth-century testimony such as this that remaining true to the founding principals of the original *juegos* was of great importance amongst the Abakuá members throughout their organizations' history. The internal order referred to by Cabrera's informant was seen by the brotherhood as a form of government. Like the government authorities, Abakuá leaders imposed order on their membership, and they made decisions about who was considered worthy of membership, and how infractions of the rules would be dealt with. One of Cabrera's sources explained that if an Abakuá member from one barrio insulted one from another barrio every member of the *juego* from the insulted barrio would take revenge. "¿Que un ñáñigo del barrio de Colón apuñaleaba a uno de Jesús María? Todos los de Jesús María tomaban represalias."[327] This Abakuá governance provided an alternate system of control than that administered by the colonial government—a subversive situation in colonial Cuba, especially after *La Escalera*.

According to the police commissioner Rafael Roche y Monteagudo, writing in 1908, there was a period of calm following the *La Escalera* crack down on the liberties of

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[326] Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (La Habana: Ed. Letras Cubanas, 2006), 201. The English translation is taken from Christopher Winks, *Symbolic Cities in Caribbean Literature* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 63.
[327] Cabrera, *Monte*, 197.

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libres de color. He writes that for a time it seemed to the authorities that the Abakuá – or the men they perceived as having been troublemakers amongst the *libres de color* whether or not they understood them to be Abakuá – had disappeared. But during the 1850s and 1860s reports of what were later thought to be Abakuá related crimes once again increased. The police at the time attributed the death of their chief killed on the night before Christmas in 1853 to the ñáñigos. Roche notes that, "en que motivado por una reyerta entre juegos contrarios, fué asesinado el Celador de Policía don José Esquival." [motivated by a quarrel between opposing *juegos,* the Chief of Police José Esquival was assassinated.] The Epiphany processions of 1865 in Havana were bloody. The killings - again attributed to the Abakuá - continued through September of the following year. In an attempt to end the cycle of retribution many of the men who had been arrested were deported to the Spanish held island of Fernando Po (sometimes referred to as Fernando Poo or Fernando Pó) off the coast of West Africa in the Gulf of Guinea.[328] These public conflicts combined with the fraternal orders' commitment to secrecy—they do not appear to have defended themselves publicly against accusations against their society—contributed to the groups' reputation for criminality. Earlier the *negro curro* had used his flashy dress and very public presence in the *extramuro* barrios as a means of soliciting recognition and fear.[329] Through an interesting combination of public performances on the Day of the Kings and secrecy in their private rituals, the

[328] Roche y Monteagudo, *La policia,* 52. Again, Roche y Monteagudo was writing much later and using terms that indicated by the late nineteenth century officials were aware to the Abakuá as a distinct group. It is unclear who the officials in the 1850s thought they were arresting during the festival disturbances. It is possible that they were simply using the term ñáñigo to refer to men of color who were causing these disturbances and that the term later became associated with this fraternal organization.
[329] Palmié, *Wizards,* 152

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Abakuá attempted to define their image and secure their role in Cuban society. In this way they garnered some semblance of power in the work environment of the thriving Havana ports.

Secret Societies

The Abakuá represented a new form of social organization for blacks in colonial Cuba, but secret fraternal organizations were not new amongst the enslaved Africans on the island. The Africans known as the *carabalí* in Cuba came from the ethnically diverse Old Calabar area in West Africa.[330] These Africans had been funneled through a slave port in Old Calabar but many of them were captured elsewhere.[331] Like other *cabildos* those formed by the Carabalí shared aspects of their remembered African traditions. In describing Carabalí groups in nineteenth-century Matanzas, historian Israel Molinar Castañeda indicates that these groups were formed under the auspices of a larger organizational structure called the *Cinco Naciones Congas de Matanzas.* This meant that while each *cabildo* had its own internal hierarchy, it was subject to the *capataz* or overseer of the *Cabildo de los Congos Reales.*[332] According to one of historian Ivor Miller's informants, Andrés Flores, a descendent of blacks from Old Calabar, there were enslaved Carabalí men and women in Cuba as early as the 1750s.[333] It was one of these

[330] Farris Thompson, *Flash,* 228
[331] Lovejoy and Richardson, "Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History," 339.
[332] Moliner Castañeda, *Los cabildos,* 35.
[333] Miller, *Voice*, 39. Much of the information on which Miller bases his study is drawn from interviews he conducted with modern-day Abakuá practitioners in Cuba such as Flores. According to Miller, Flores and other Abakuá members still active at the time of his study, claim to have received the oral history of the Abakuá as passed from father to son from the mid-nineteenth century. While there are obvious difficulties with the reliability of information passed down orally over a period of over 100 years, Miller has noted many similarities between the Abakuá rituals in Cuba with leopard society rituals in West Africa's Cross River Delta despite little contact between the groups.

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colonial Carabalí *cabildo* groups with its gender-mixed membership that eventually served as a patron to the Abakuá *juegos* that formed beginning in the 1830s.

Many of the men who came to be known as the Carabalí seem to have been part of secret male societies in West Africa. Among these societies the Ngbe or leopard societies would later become important for Cuban blacks.[334] "The Egbo or Leopard Society," writes anthropologist Daryll Forde of the African groups, "was the most important men's association and consisted of several grades, each possessing a distinctive costume.... Under the aegis of the chief and the important elders of the town, the Leopard Society promulgated and enforced laws, judged important cases, recovered debts, protected the property of members, and constituted the actual executive government of the Efik."[335] These groups were referred to as the leopard societies because the members sought to emulate this animal's elegance and strength in their own behavior.[336] In Cuba, some rituals and traditions practiced by the West African Ngbe societies were also practiced within the Carabalí *cabildos* as well as, after the 1830s, in the Abakuá societies. For example, Ngbe men in West Africa were committed to guarding a secret and so too were the Carabalí who established *cabildos* in Cuba as well as the Abakuá men.

The origins of the secret Ngbe society are shrouded in legend, much of which came from stories surrounding the Ejagham people living in the area of West Africa that today is southwestern Cameroon and southeastern Nigeria. This was the same area surrounding the slave port at Old Calabar from which nineteenth-century Africans were

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[334] Brown, *Light,* 6. Also referred to as Ekpe societies or [by Europeans] Egbo societies, A. J. H. Latham, *Old Calabar 1600-1891. The Impact of the International Economy upon a Traditional Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 35.

[335] Daryll Forde, ed., *Efik Traders of Old Calabar* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 16.

[336] Brown, *Light,* 11. Leopard societies of the Efik were called Ekbe. Brown notes that these societies were commodities in and of themselves and as such they could actually be sold to other nations who wanted the secret in order to govern their own people. Thus the societies spread through the Old Calabar region and were heavily involved in the slave trade.

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forcibly transported to a life of enslavement in Cuba. In his study of Ejagham-influenced rituals and organizations in Cuba Thompson suggests a powerful continuity between Africans in West and Central Africa and those of African descent in Cuba. He actually refers to the leopard societies in Cuba as being "chapters" of the African leopard societies, "There men of Calabar-area descent founded Cuban chapters of the male leopard associations of Calabar."[337] While such arguments —seeming to imply complete cultural continuity— have been critiqued for being ahistorical understanding rituals and cultural practices amongst West African groups can be useful in recognizing how African-born men living in Cuba drew on remembered customs to adjust to their harsh new reality.[338] African born men and women may have brought knowledge of secret societies to Cuba, yet in Cuba, it was the *criollo* (Cuban born) blacks who first approached the African Carabalí *cabildo* leadership about forming a fraternal order celebrating the leopard.[339] Understanding practices that enslaved Africans may have engaged in makes it possible to understand some of the mores Cuban Abakuá men had at their disposal in 1836 when they founded their fraternal organization.

Besides understanding the African tradition of secret fraternal organizations, it is important to study the particular milieu out of which the Abakuá in Cuba emerged. While the Cuban leopard men saw value in the practices and traditions of the African groups, their world was significantly different from that of the Ejagham. In Cuba, while the ritual practices of the leopard societies might have been similar in form to those of the African societies they would have been shaped by circumstances specific to the plight of black men – and eventually mixed race, white and Chinese men – in a colonial slave society.

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[337] Farris Thompson, *Flash,* xvii.
[338] Brown, *Light,* 13-14.
[339] *Ibid.,* 15.

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Brown writes that leopard society knowledge was "regathered and incubated within Cuba's Carabalí *cabildos*."[340] What emerged within the Abakuá *juegos* represented a new form of secret fraternity, which broke with the past on a number of levels. The *criollo* blacks in Cuba who first approached the Carabalí *cabildo* elders seeking to be initiated and who then formed the first Abakuá *juego* seem to have been determined to be properly initiated, rather than simply form a group on their own. Their commitment to continue guarding the Carabalí's secrets indicates that they also understood that the Carabalí traditions could provide them with the means to wield authority and even to construct social power in their restricted urban community.[341]

Black men in colonial Cuba rarely had the power to protect themselves and their families from the dangers inherent in a system that degraded them because of their race. Even for *libres de color* who had achieved some economic success and social mobility, life in nineteenth-century Havana was often precarious. Many of the men who were tortured, imprisoned and executed after *La Escalera* and who had their property taken were free men of color.[342] Life was even more uncertain for enslaved men and women. The Abakuá brotherhood provided a powerful element of security, especially for free men of color, that helped insulate members from the unstable existence they experienced. Rather than attempt to integrate themselves into the dominant (white) culture, free men of the Abakuá *juegos* separated themselves by withdrawing into their secret society. Within this fraternal community they constructed a notion of masculinity that was in direct

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[340] *Brown*, 13.
[341] In explaining the "secrets" Thompson focuses heavily on the Ngbe myths of origin, which tell of a sacred Voice that guided the Ngbe leaders, see Thompson, 241-243. Other scholars such as Lovejoy indicate the Ngbe power came from secret knowledge the leaders held such as understanding English and thus being able to dominate trade with British slavers, as well as the knowledge and use of the nsibidi signs, see Lovejoy, 349
[342] Paquette, *Blood*, 6.

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opposition to that being imposed on them by the colonial enslaving order. These men appropriated elements of Ngbe ideology as well as many of the practices that percolated within a vibrant urban and largely male street culture in Cuba in order to shape a structure of authority independent of that under which they were being forced to live. In this way Abakuá membership allowed black men in nineteenth-century Cuba to define the manner in which they would conduct their lives in Cuban society—a power that was evidently not lost on men of other social groups.

Initially, the members of the first *juegos* respected their patrons' desire that members should be of "pure" African blood and thus whites and people of mixed races were prohibited from knowing the secrets.[343] However, as time went on, this restriction against men who were racially mixed or not of African descent was not always enforced and in fact, on Christmas Eve in 1863, the first "white" Abakuá *juego* was initiated**.**[344] Adherence to a particular code within Abakuá *juegos* was important, but the presence of mixed race men in leadership positions well before 1863 suggests the *juego* leaders claimed some autonomy with regards to how they would run their individual organizations.

The white group that formed in 1863, called Ocobio Mukarará, was sponsored by another Havana *juego* known as the Awana Bakokó Efor. The chief impetus behind this sponsorship – the man who had been bringing together men to form this white lodge – was Andrés Facundo Cristo de los Dolores Petít, who was described as being "a fair-

[343] José Trujillo y Monagas, *Los criminales de Cuba: narración de los servicios prestados en el cuerpo de policía de Havana* (Barcelona: Estab. Tip. De F. Giró, 1882), 265.
[344] Roche y Monteagudo, 4-5. The idea of a 'white' lodge is complex because as Brown notes, "The binary rhetorical construction of 'white' and 'black' lodges belies the process by which Chinese, Filipinos, and Canary Islanders 'became white' Abakuá through the social and cultural 'alchemy of race.'" Brown, *Light,* 24.

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skinned *mulato.*" The white Abakuá initiates represented a wide spectrum of social classes. Many were poorer men of the working class, but some were from among more privileged groups such as military men, men in politics, and even sons of elite Spanish families.[345] Abakuá men of all backgrounds seem to have appropriated elements of African leopard society ideology in order to justify their own diverse goals and membership had become, by this point, a locus of social power and authority. While it is difficult to understand why Spanish descended men formed their own Abakuá *juegos*, Miller suggests that for some of these young men joining a *juego* could have been an, "expression of creole consciousness, part of a wider movement pushing for separation from Spain."[346] Either way, the young white men who formed *juegos* represented an element within the white community that openly embraced *cosas negras,* a development that was problematic to colonial authorities bent on limiting the black influence on colonial Cuban society and maintaining a race-based social hierarchy.

The Abakuá were groups of men bound together as brothers. The close relationships within the individual *juegos* and their commitment to repaying dishonor or perceived dishonor against their membership led many in the later colonial society to identify them as a criminal syndicate. The officials' fears may have hinged in part on the empowering concept of manhood —closely linked to vengeance in defense of ones honor—that the Abakuá societies seem to have appropriated from their African forebears. These fears may also have been based on how Abakuá men exerted control over aspects of their community in ways that challenged local authorities. These challenges were made both directly, through physical clashes with the police, and

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[345] Brown, *Light,* 22.
[346] Miller, *Voice,* 103

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indirectly, by controlling who was hired on the Havana docks and in various other urban work environments. Men of these *juegos* who already worked on the docks ensured that their own members had access to dock work and they reportedly used violence to discourage challenges to their authority in this area. It is significant that the first known arrest of an individual later associated with the Abakuá was a man who made his living working on the docks of Havana.[347] Their mode of participation in the urban society emphasized a certain kind of masculine prowess and honor in a population that had been emasculated under the slave system.

Cuban whites of the elite class may have been concerned about black men who were in effect making decisions for themselves regarding issues of justice and employment within their communities. Their concerns may also have centered around issues of honor—specifically who could claim honor and how this impacted their status as white men in a multi-racial society. Honor in colonial Latin America was based on appropriate behaviors for both men and women. Men were expected to be assertive, courageous, authoritative, and dominant in relation to women.[348] Women were to be modest and subordinate to men. Women who did not protect their honor could reflect badly on the men in their lives.[349] The traits upon which men depended to showcase their honor were closely linked to their family status. Johnson notes that these included, "European birth or descent, legitimacy, family social status, and personal attainments such as social influence, wealth, education, reputation for honesty, courage and

[347] Deschamps Chapeaux, "Margarito Blanco," 101.
[348] "Dr. Gonzalez," in *The Faces of Honor. Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 45.
[349] Richard Boyer, *Lives of the Bigamists: Marriage, Family and Community in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 89.

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restraint."[350] From the elite perspective black men, (and even poor whites) whether enslaved or free could not have honor as they did not have the inherited family status that bestowed it. Yet, scholars such as Lyman Johnson have shown that the populations at the lower end of the colonial social structure did in fact possess a sense of honor. Johnson, in writing of free blacks in the Hispanic Americas, argues that free blacks took actions to defend their honor as a way to separate themselves from the "debased condition of male slaves, who were incapable of asserting honor or protecting the reputation of their families."[351] For the colonial authorities and those intellectuals seeking to define an acceptable social hierarchy and seeking to confine free blacks to specific places within this hierarchy, an empowered class of black men with their own definition of masculinity and their own vision of justice represented a significant threat to maintaining order in the city.[352]

Abakuá men did not appear to be directly challenging the honor of men of the elite classes. There is no indication that the violence associated with the Abakuá was directed outside their own social environment, and while it is true that they might have been competing with whites for jobs on the docks, there is also no direct evidence of this. And yet by claiming honor for themselves and the right to defend it, the Abakuá were indirectly challenging whites' honor. In their attempt to claim honor as men, they were rejecting the subordinate role being imposed on them as free black men and sending a clear message that they were men capable of having and defending honor.

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[350] Lyman Johnson, "Dangerous Words," in *The Faces of Honor. Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America,* eds. Lyman Johnson and Sonya Lippsett-Rivera (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 128.
[351] Johnson, "Dangerous Words," 143.
[352] Deschamps Chapeaux, "Margarito Blanco," 105. Margarito Blanco's case was reviewed by one Dn José Anillo y Rico who was the Fiscal de la Comisión Militar Ejecutiva y Permanente de la Isla de Cuba indicating a high level of concern regarding Blanco's arrest.

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When colonial authorities began to understand that there might be of networks of black men claiming honor, and doing so in the context of secret societies, the Abakuá became even more problematic as a group in colonial Cuba.

Power On the Docks

Until the 1560s Havana had been little more than a "sleepy town," but when a convoy system was organized as protection for the ships returning to Spain from the New World colonies, Havana's port became the meeting point where the fleet stopped for provisions before beginning the long and dangerous voyage across the Atlantic.[353] Historian Alejandro de la Fuente writes, "By 1610 it [Havana] had become an impregnable port city and one of the most important shipping and trading entrepôts of the Spanish Atlantic."[354] By the 1860s, Havana was considered a "thriving commercial and port center."[355] The docks themselves were busy places as foreign ships arrived with goods to trade, and sugar poured in from the Cuban plantations and was loaded onto ships bound for the United States and other important foreign markets.[356] Many members of Abakuá, like Blanco, had some association with the docks in Havana and Matanzas. [357]In fact, in writing of the colonial period, Lydia Cabrera notes their presence by referring to the violence that erupted between the different groups, "En los almacenes de azúcar moscavada del puerto donde había tantos ñáñigos como hoy, las venganzas eran espantosas. Desde muy antiguo los estibadores, todos los obreros del

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[353] De la Fuente, *Havana and the Atlantic,* 51.
[354] *Ibid.*, 6.
[355] Staten, *History of Cuba,* 28.
[356] Pérez, Jr., *Slaves,* xv.
[357] Jesús Guanche, *Procesos Etnoculturales de Cuba* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1983), 417.

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puerto eran ñáñigos."[358] [In the port warehouses of raw sugar where there were as many ñáñigos as there are today [1957], the vengeance was frightful. From early on the stevedores, all the workers of the port, were ñáñigos.]

The business on the docks was not limited to commercial activities. Nineteenth century Havana was a popular destination for travelers with about 5,000 arriving each year from the United States alone adding to the chaotic activity on the wharves.[359] Many of these visitors left their written impressions of the Havana ports in their published travel journals. In 1859, the American lawyer and writer Richard Henry Dana traveled to Havana and made note of the many boats in the harbor. "What a world of shipping! The masts make a belt of dense forest along the edge of the city, all the ships lying head into the street, like horses at their mangers; while the vessels at anchor nearly choke up the passage-ways to the deeper bays beyond."[360] Dana also describes the many smaller boats that surrounded the ship he had arrived on. The boatmen carried fruits such as bananas and oranges for the arriving visitors and offered to bring the passengers and their luggage to shore. Adding to the hubbub on the docks, Cuban officials traveled out to the anchored ships to check passports and passenger lists.[361] Samuel Hazard arrived in Cuba in the late 1860s and also wrote of his ship's entry into Havana harbor, "Still swiftly gliding on up the bay, passing as we go the Spanish men-of-war and vessels of all nations sailing in and out, we see to great advantage this far-famed beautiful bay; a turn to the right and we see

[358] Cabrera, *La sociedad secreta,* 39. Translation Sublette's, 205. According to Badé, 167, on his visit to Cuba, Muir took note of the dockworkers who made an impression on him. He wrote, "In Havana I saw the strongest and ugliest negroes that I have met in my whole walk. The stevedores of the Havana wharf are muscled in true giant style, enabling them to tumble and toss ponderous casks and boxes of sugar weighing hundreds of pounds as if they were empty. I heard our brawny sailors after watching them at work for a few minutes express unbounded admiration of their strength, and wish that their hard outbulging muscles were for sale."
[359] Staten, *The History of Cuba,* 28.
[360] Dana, *To Cuba*, 20.
[361] Dana, *To Cuba*, 20-21.

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the long line of covered wharves, with the shipping of the world lying side by side, waiting the completion of their cargoes … and farther in front of us we see the little town of Regla, with its immense warehouses of solid stone and corrugated iron for storing the sugar of the island, as substantial and handsome in their structure as any in the world can show."[362] The travelers paint a picture of a busy, crowded port filled with ships arriving and departing and a dock where workers were engaged in constant activity. Clearly the work that occurred on the docks was of crucial importance to the Havana economy and those men who were able to acquire and keep jobs on the wharves had a guaranteed income. Job security was especially important for free men of color who, after 1844, faced increasing restrictions in their quest for social and economic advancement. Seen in this light, the fights and violence that erupted at the ports between rival Abakuá groups can be understood as a way of protecting a scarce resource and ensuring that the available jobs remained within particular brotherhoods.

Working in a port city and being employed in the actual work of the docks such as loading and unloading the ships, meant that dockworkers, including those of color, were connected to a maritime network of sailors many of whom were also black. These black sailors traveled from port to port throughout the Caribbean and North America bringing news. In his work, *Black Jacks*, historian Jeffrey Bolster writes, "Black seafaring men were newsmongers central to the formation of black America and a multi-dimensional racial identity."[363] Abakuá men who worked on the docks in the midst of this activity were conduits to information that passed to and from black seamen from all parts of the

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[362] Hazard, *Cuba with Pen,* 32.
[363] Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks. African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 36.

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Atlantic. Moreover they could see first-hand how black men from other regions were able to create independent lives for themselves as sailors.

Even though some of the *juegos* initiated men of different professions—such as the group called Usagaré Munanquere in the barrio of Los Sitios, which was composed of musicians, tailors, and tobacco rollers—one of the elements that bound the Abakuá together was their work on the docks.[364] The workforce on the docks and the system of labor organization there had been in place for many years before the Abakuá came together as a distinct group. Since the eighteenth century the dockworkers, both enslaved men rented out by their masters, and free black men who were employed as contract workers, were organized into groups or gangs referred to as *cuadrillos.*[365] By the late eighteenth century many of the dockworkers were Carabalí men, and some had actually been soldiers in the colored battalions that served the Spanish government in Cuba. Military service familiarized them with the same sort of hierarchy that facilitated labor discipline and the free workers generally worked under a particular leader or captain who made use of this kind of military discipline.[366] The system of labor which required the captains to recruit and enter into contracts with the workers of their *cuadrillos,* enabled the Carabalí leaders and later the Abakuá men gradually to dominate the hiring practices on the wharf by selecting men of their own *juegos*.[367] The docks were dangerous places during colonial times especially when the men fought each other to protect their jobs.[368] There was no requirement for dockworkers to be Abakuá members in order to be

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[364] Guanche, *Procesos Etnoculturales*, 420.
[365] Guanche, 444.
[366] Guanche, 417.
[367] Rafael López Valdés, "La sociedad secreta 'abakuá' en un grupo de obreros portuarios," in *Etnología y Folklore* (La Habana: Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, Instituto de etnología y folklore, 1966), 2: 5-26, 9.
[368] Cabrera, *La sociedad secreta,* 39.

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employed in a port position, but the reality on the wharf was that when there were fights over jobs the men who could defend themselves in the bloody altercations between *juegos* were the ones who got the positions.[369] Abakuá membership meant job security as well as status within the black community.[370]

These wharf fights troubled the authorities and yet what constituted criminal behavior in the eyes of the colonial government may have been an effort by black men (initially) to craft a definition of masculinity that could be parlayed into social and economic power within the colonial urban community, especially on the Havana docks. They pushed back against the restrictions against their freedoms by participating in secret organizations where their own leaders held authority over the membership. The internal hierarchy of an Abakuá *juego* was not subject to colonial authorities who likely did not understand the nature of these societies until late in the nineteenth century. Violent attacks against enemies, which were clearly in defiance of the civil laws designed to maintain order in the city, were mandated by the Abakuá leadership and carried out by members who were more mindful of their codes of honor within the brotherhoods than they were of the colonial police. On the docks, in the market places, and between neighborhoods in the streets Abakuá men were seen by many in the larger Havana population as being unruly thugs, but rather than protest against the derogatory labels being imposed on them, the Abakuá remained silent. Their silence left an opening for others to speculate about their activities both public and private and added to the mystique and even fear that surrounded their community.

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[369] López Valdés, "La sociedad," 10.
[370] Johnnetta B. Cole, "Women in Cuba: The Revolution Within the Revolution," in *Anthropology for the Nineties: Introductory Readings* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 536.

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"Fear and disgust" The Public Face of the Abakuá

El Día de Reyes, or the Day of the Kings, is a Christian feast day that celebrates the visit of the three Eastern kings called the Magi to the infant Jesus. Known as the feast of the Epiphany, the event is generally celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church on January 6th. In Spain the celebration was especially popular in rural towns and villages, but it was also celebrated with lavish processions in cities throughout the Iberian Peninsula. After 1492, when the Spanish established a presence in the New World, the friars who had accompanied the original conquerors on their voyages used Catholic feast days such as Epiphany in order to teach Catholic precepts to the indigenous people and eventually to the enslaved and free African workers who formed a large part of the populations. Government authorities, too, for the most part tended to support the festivities that occurred on religious feast days. In her study of religious festivals in colonial Mexico, historian Linda Curcio-Nagy suggests that Spanish officials in Mexico "sought to utilize festivals and their message as a means of social control."[371] No doubt Cuban officials, determined to limit or at least monitor recreational gatherings amongst the city's people of color, also saw religious festivals as a means of social control. But as I will show, there was a kind of balance of power in the streets of Havana during the religious celebrations that called into question exactly which group held control.

There is fragmentary evidence from as early as the 1850s of Abakuá members on visual display before a public audience during the January 6th Epiphany celebrations in Havana. On this day blacks, regardless of their status, were allowed time to

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[371] Linda A. Curcio-Nagy. *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico. Performing Power and Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 3.

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participate in the popular festival.[372] They left their places of employ, gathered together and made merry in the streets of Havana. As a January 6th, 1852 entry in the Havana newspaper, the *Gaceta de la Habana,* notes, the city's white population was as aware of the "big day" as were the people of color who would bring the sights and sounds of Africa to Havana's streets. The sarcastic entry reads,

> "Ha llegado al fin esta día tan deseado por la gente de color y por los sordos de nuestra raza, que sin necesidad de trompetilla pueden ejercitar el segundo de los sentidos corporales. El estruendo de los tangos públicos y las figuras grotescas que en ellos ofrecen los *diablitos* aturden á la población entera y la hacen presentar un cuadro de costumbres digno del pincel de Goya. El aspecto de la Habana en este día es singularísmo y contrasta admirablemente con el que todo el año ofrece por su civilización y su opulencia. Los viajeros aficionados á los contrastes fuertes tendrán ocasión de gozar ampliamente, recorriendo hoy nuestras calles." [The day so desired by the people of color, and the deaf people of our race, has finally arrived, when without the necessity of trumpets they are able to exercise the second of the corporal senses. The great noise of the public dances and the ridiculous figures offered by the *diablitos* stun the whole population and present a picture of customs worthy of Goya's brush. The appearance of Havana on this day is unique and contrasts admirably with that which is offered by its civilization and opulence throughout the year. The travelers who are fans of the strong contrasts will have ample opportunity to enjoy traveling our streets.][373]

The article goes on to note that the writer – and presumably his readership – was accustomed to the "Ethiopian eruption" and suggests that the events of the day helped showcase the government's benevolence as well as guarantee public order. From this writer's perspective, the carnival-esque atmosphere served as a kind of safety valve for the system.

On this day of high expectations, the members of African social organizations processed according to their "nations" from their meeting places outside the city walls

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[372] The participants in Havana's Epiphany processions appear to have been largely of the black population. If there were whites amongst the celebrants they were not mentioned.

[373] "Dia de Reyes," Gacetin Local in *Gaceta de la Habana,* Martes 6 de Enero, 1852, 2, CHC.

المنارة للاستشارات
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and through the city to the Plaza de Armas where they expected to receive an *aguinaldo* or monetary tip from the governor or his representative. One French traveler wrote of his experience in 1851 "On King's Day each tribe appears in Havana in its national dress and with its musical instruments ... Within the precincts of each city I have had before my eyes a show of primitive African costumes and it is not possible to imagine a more comical group of scenes."[374] With the city streets filled with festive people of color Epiphany provided a perfect opportunity for the governor to publicly display his benevolence and generosity. From all accounts, however, the gift of the *aguinaldo* was, at least by the mid-nineteenth century, not optional. It was part of the lavish performance that constituted the interplay between the blacks in their finery and the highest authority resident in the island. In spite of the governor's power, his monetary gift was by no means a gift, but an expected payment.

Given that Epiphany was a remembrance of the coming of the Magi to the Christ child, it is striking that there is no mention in the surviving eyewitness reports of Catholic iconography being present during the processions on this day. Instead there was much dancing, including dancers prancing high on stilts. The different *cabildo* groups often stopped their processing and, "formed circles and broke out into energetic nation dances, accompanied by drums and singing."[375] Participants were creative in crafting their costumes wearing feathers, various fibers, masks, men painted tattoos on their bare chests, women wore "clothes of extremely lively cloth; a flower in their hair,

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[374] Sublette, 114-115. He is quoting from Xavier Marmier, 1851, *Lettres sur l'Amerique*. 2 vols. Artur Bertrand, Paris, 2:39-40.
[375] Brown, *Light,* 133.

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a cigarette in their mouth, a coat of red, green, or white paint on their cheeks."[376] The entire event would have seemed unusual and exotic even to those natives of the city who were, as the newspaper reference indicated, used to witnessing it each year.

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The feast of the Epiphany was celebrated with boisterous processions and from 1836 with the founding of the first Abakuá *juego*, men of this secret fraternal order also took part in the festivities.[378] Before this date, the Carabalí *cabildo* members – those of the same ethnic heritage as the group who sanctioned the first *juego* – joined with the other groups of *cabildos de nación* making their way in procession towards the Plaza de Armas. The Carabalí had been distinctive amongst the throng because of their unique costumes, which were made of animal skins and these men and women could possibly have been amongst those the French traveler, Marmier, described.[379] Yet the behavior of the members of the Abakuá *juegos* who joined the festivities after 1836 and who continued to participate until the 1876 ban on their activities, seems to have stood out

[376] Sublette, 114-115. He is quoting from Xavier Marmier, 1851, Lettres sur l'Amerique. 2 vols. Artur Bertrand, Paris, 2:39-40

[377] "Día de Reyes. The Holy King's Day," Done by the French artist Frederic/Federico Miahle, who lived in Cuba from 1838 to 1854, Image reference Album-16, as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

[378] Ortiz, *Los cabildos y la fiesta,* 50.

[379] Brown, *Light,* 133.

المنارة للاستشارات

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amongst the other groups processing through the streets on the Day of Kings – even when compared with the exotic Carabalí. "Las demás tribus llamaban la atención por lo pinturesco y exótico de sus cantos, trajes y bailes: en los ñáñigos toda era feroz, sombrío, nauseabundo."[380] [The other tribes called attention by their picturesque and exotic songs, clothing and dances: in the *ñáñigos* all was fierce, shady and sickening.] Unfortunately Ortiz does not specify what he means by "fierce, shady, and sickening," but onlookers who viewed the processions after 1836 would have seen uniquely costumed characters moving amongst the Abakuá group.[381] These were the *diablitos* or little devils called *íremes.* The *íreme* was central to the Abakuá rituals. He represented the ancestors (*antepasados*) and always took an active part in public and private rituals. The *íreme* wore a close fitting costume that covered his whole body except for his hands and feet. He wore a headdress that had a pointed conical shape completely disguising the dancer's face and lending an element of the unknown. Around his waist hung a belt adorned with cowbells and he twisted and gyrated his body in order to jingle the bells. He carried a wooden staff in one hand and a leafy branch in his other hand. The *íreme* made slow, sinewy, distinct movements suggesting the advance of a leopard, which the membership attempted to emulate. It can only be imagined what emotions the slow, sinuous movements of the masked man might have elicited from the audience and perhaps this is what Ortiz' informers were trying to describe when they referred to the *ñáñigos* as being fierce and shady. At times the *íreme* struck silent poses – the only

[380] Ortiz, *Los Cabildos*, 30
[381] Ortiz, *Ibid.,* 25.

المنارة للاستشارات
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sounds he made came from the bells dangling from his waist and some depictions show a rooster also dangling from his belt.[383]

In addition to physically separating themselves from the other reveling men and women of color, the costumes the Abakuá wore and their mode of dance during the procession seem to have made them stand out amongst the other performers. Roche y Monteagudo writing in 1908 describes the dance movements of the Abakuá men as being, "como reptiles humanos." [like human reptiles.][384] While the display of African nations appeared quaint or comical to the Havana populace as well as to the travelers watching the processions, the *ñáñigos* evoked quite a different set of feelings, which Brown describes as "fear and disgust."[385]

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[383] Brown, *Light,* 116 and 129. See the illustration taken from Rafael Roche y Monteagudo's 1908 work, 39.
[384] Roche y Monteagudo, 4.
[385] Brown, *Light,* 134.

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In contrast to these negative accounts of the Abakuá participants in the nineteenth-century Epiphany processions, Lydia Cabrera offers a more tempered view of their activities in the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing from her sources and from her own experiences working with Afro-Cuban religious practitioners in the Havana barrios in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, Cabrera describes the public performances of Abakuá dancers as follows, "El andar, los gestos rigurosamente estilizados —cada gesto es una frase— de los ocobios vestidos de diablitos, que representan a los iniciados muertos en tiempos lejanos, la máscara inmemorial en función religiosa y en todo su valor que los transforma en abstracciones, en seres irreales y sagrados; su mímica y su danza contemplada a la luz de la mágica noche de Cuba, es un espectáculo de una belleza extraña, tan fuera del tiempo, tan remota y misteriosa que no puede dejar de impresionar fuertemente a quien lo contemple."[386] [The walk, the rigorously stylized gestures – every gesture is a phrase – of the *ocobios* dresses of the little devils, that represent the dead initiates of times before, the mask in its religious function that stretches beyond memory and in all its importance that transforms them into abstractions, into sacred and unreal beings; their pantomime and their dance contemplated in the light of the magical night of Cuba, is a spectacle of a foreign beauty, so outside the time, so remote and mysterious that it cannot help but leave a strong impression on those who contemplate it.] Cabrera's description of a mid-twentieth-century performance cannot be viewed as representative of the nineteenth-century dances, yet her observations are similar to other earlier ones especially with regards to the deliberateness of the dancers' movements and the sense of mystery evoked in the watchers. Another description written by Cuban writer Ramón Meza was

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[386] Cabrera, *El Monte*, 217.

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published in the Havana periodical, *La Habana Elegante* in 1891. It offers a very visual account of the Day of Kings celebration showing that the celebrations that occurred in Havana on this day of festivity practically took over the city for the entire day. While he does not indicate whether he is describing the Epiphany celebration for a specific year or simply offering a composite description of events he had witnessed over a period of many years between 1836 when the *juegos* first formed and 1876 when they were banned from the processions, what emerges from his description and is important for this study is that on this day many African-influenced traditions were revealed to a diverse public. Habaneros and international visitors to the city would have had many opportunities to encounter blacks on a daily basis in the streets of Havana, but the processions that took place on the Day of Kings until those festivities were banned in 1884 exposed a world that usually remained private.[387] This was especially true for the very secretive Abakuá organization – the members of which clearly stood out from amongst the other revelers during the years they joined the throng.

The diversity among nineteenth-century Cuban blacks' mode of self-expression is clearly evident in Meza's descriptions of the Congo in their distinctive costumes and the Arará with their dramatic facial markings. For example he writes of these two groups, "Los *congos* ... con sus con sus grandes sombreros de plumas, camisetas de rayas azules y pantalón de percal rojo; los *ararás* con sus mejillas llenas de cicatrices de cortaduras y de hierro candente."[388] [The *congos* with their big feathered hats, shirts streaked with blue and pants of red clothe; the *arara,* with their cheeks covered with scars from cuts and the branding iron] Meza also describes individuals who chose not to

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[387] Brown, *Light,* 134.
[388] Ortiz, *Los cabildos,* 27.

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celebrate their African heritage and who selected instead costumes based on European styled clothing such as “los figurines de París,”[389] [fashionable Parisiennes] further underscoring the diversity of expressions and identifications amongst the celebrating people of color. These men and women of color set themselves apart from the other groups by their choice of attire and their decision not to participate in dancing accompanying the African-styled music.

All of this activity brought the city to life and it is telling that amidst this throng, the Abakuá still managed to stand out. Meza's chronicle indicates the Abakuá traveled apart from other groups on the quieter streets "en los barrios extremos y calles menos concurridas."[390] Presumably the busy thoroughfares would have been lined with spectators providing a captive audience for the Abakuá to display themselves in costume performing their public rituals. Authorities concerned about keeping the throng in check would also likely have carefully policed the main streets. Choosing to process along the less traveled roads may have been an opportunity for another kind of performance that Meza's description hints at. He writes that "La horda repleta de navajas y puñales, marchaba a paso lento, no agrupada, sino apiñada." [The horde, replete with knives and daggers marched at a slow pace, not grouped, but crowded together.] Marching in costume and presumed to be carrying weapons rival *juego* groups seemed to have used these side streets to settle their grievances against one another resulting in wounds and even deaths, "asesinaban feroz y cruelmente."[391] While displaying one kind of performance during the Epiphany processions, the Abakuá made use of the opportunity for traversing the streets disguised in costume to orchestrate

[389] Ortiz*,* 30.
[390] *Ibid.*, 30.
[391] Oriz, *Cabildos* 30.

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another kind of performance. These men following their *diablitos* seem to have been carrying out their own leaders' requirements to avenge perceived dishonor, right under the noses of the colonial authorities who thought they had orchestrated the day's proceedings to showcase their benevolence.

It can be argued that – writing his memories of the Abakuá celebrations he had seen over fifteen years earlier and after they were banned as a social organization – Meza deliberately chose to draw attention to his memories of this group's violent actions while ignoring similar actions that had been performed by other groups. Yet, when considered in conjunction with earlier reports it seems likely that the Abakuá's public persona did distinguish them from other groups on the Día de Reyes. In fact, the members of this group took great pains to set themselves apart from the rest of the throng on public display during the Epiphany processions. Their slow sinuous movements, unique body and face concealing costumes, and the suggested menace of their daggers as described by Meza seemed to have been deliberately calculated to create a sense of mystery, perpetuate the secrecy surrounding their rites, and shape an image that could be parlayed into social and economic power. According to José Trujillo y Monagas, writing in the 1880s about the activities of the Abakuá as chronicled by the Havana police during preceding decades, the men would go to the public market or wait for a feast day such as the Día de Reyes and arrive armed and ready to fight.[392] Meza also wrote of witnessing altercations that resulted in "ferociously cruel wounds" play out in the streets.[393] Festival days with all the ensuing chaos also provided an opportunity for Abakuá men who had a vendetta to settle.

[392] Trujillo y Monagas, 274. Palmié and Pérez mention police records starting after 1839 but indicate that it was not until the 1880s that official accounts began to appear.
[393] Ortiz, *Cabildos,* 30.

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When police commissioner Roche y Monteagudo published his treatise on police cases drawn from the colonial era, he included visual images of conflicts designed to depict the *juego* members as criminals. One picture shows a street fight between rival Abakuá groups, which features a large image of a *diablito* pointing a finger at the victim as though sanctioning or mandating the criminal act.[394] The emotions of fear and disgust that onlookers may have experienced when they watched the Abakuá process through the streets would have been reinforced by the police attitude towards these men, one of increased vigilance in anticipation of violence. Yet, at the same time the negative image could have worked to these men's advantage: especially when it is considered that they were demonstrating a view of black masculinity that contrasted with the submissive role many whites believed blacks should be displaying. In fact, what was labeled as criminal activity by contemporary society did not appear to be seen as such under the precepts of the Abakuá. *Juego* members were practicing a form of honor when they returned violence with violence.[395] The aggressive actions taken by these men in responding to instances of dishonor, while committed on quieter streets during Epiphany, were not hidden from the public and in fact if the testimony of witnesses such as travelers and local authorities can be taken at face value, their dance performances during processions very much incorporated aggression and violence. As secretive as the Abakuá were about some aspects of their rituals, there appears to have been no requirement that this meting out of justice be undertaken clandestinely. This unapologetically public aggression was part of the image the Abakuá members presented year after year, until they were banned. It indicates

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[394] Referenced in Brown, 27, also Palmié and Pérez, 221.
[395] Brown, *Light,* 28.

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perhaps that the members of this secret society were aware of the sense of anxiety their presence elicited from their audience and were in fact manipulating it.

Because what authorities understood about the Abakuá is unclear until the late 1800s, accurate descriptions of the private ceremonies that had been practiced within the *juegos* during the mid-nineteenth century were difficult for scholars in the early twentieth century to obtain. In fact it was partly due to this mystery about the ritual practices that led to the eventual circulation of a number of fantastic beliefs about Abakuá men in Havana society.[396] Not withstanding the fact that essential elements of the Abakuá rituals were conducted privately, some aspects of the rituals did take place in a public environment. The ceremonies often began at midnight, which was considered to be the sacred hour amongst the Abakuá. "In Cuba the Abakuá always performed their *plantes* [ceremonies] at night," indicated El Chino Mokóngo, one of Miller's informants, "as they were done in Africa. One would begin at night by worshiping the stars, and would finish in the morning by worshipping the sun."[397]

The Abakuá practiced animal sacrifice as offerings and also used a number of drums in their ceremonies—as evidenced by the police confiscations of drums of different sizes during the mid-1800s. Later research revealed how some of these drums were employed. One opened and closed all the rituals and it was also used to impose discipline within the temple. It was called the *tambor de orden* (drum of order). Another,

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[396] In Fernando Ortiz' study of the Day of Kings celebration, the belief that the *ñáñigos* "gorged on cane spirit and cock's blood," and "could swear a mortal wound on any human breast," came not from a particular eye witness source that we know of, but rather from "public hearsay." Jean Stubbs, "Race, Gender, and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Cuba," in *Blacks, Coloureds, and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Latin America,* ed. Nancy Priscilla Naro (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, 2003), 5. While authorities may not have understood the nature of the Abakuá, it seems possible that in spite of the secrecy surrounding these men's activities, their neighbors, co-workers, friends, and relatives might have had an understanding of the groups' activities and tenets and that the "hearsay" might have originated from within their own social sphere.
[397] Miller, *Voice,* 63

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the *enríkamo* was the drum "used to convene the iremes, or "little devils," that represented the spirits of the deceased."[398] The beats of the drums were associated with parts of the groups' founding myth and told of the struggles between two combative groups that initially tried to hold the secret for themselves.[399] The most sacred of all the drums, Ekué, was kept behind a curtain in a sacred place called the *famba.* It was "played" by using a rubbing motion to create friction as opposed to being played as the other drums were.[400] As Cabrera explains concerns about masculinity were paramount within the society, "The wood of Ekué cannot be made from a female tree, because nothing in Abakuá can belong to the feminine gender."[401]

The rituals concealed crucial aspects of their ceremonies and fueled the fears Cubans associated with Abakuá men. Cabrera quotes one of her elderly sources saying this about the Abakuá of the colonial era, "They were bad. The carabalí was evil down to his guts. And the ñáñigos from back in the day, when I was a chick, weren't like the ones today, speaking in public about their religion and singing their songs in the bodegas or in the café. Those people didn't talk. They kept their secret, like in Africa, where the least slip of the tongue would cost them their life. Truly evil!...For a yes or a no they would stab someone."[402]

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[398] María Teresa Vélez, *Drumming for the Gods: the life and times of Felipe García Villamil, santero, palero, and abakuá* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 19

[399] Alan West-Durán, "Abakuá Music," in *Africa and the Americas: Culture Politics, and History,* vol. 1, eds. Richard Juang and Noelle Anne Morrisette (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clio Inc., 2008), 328.

[400] West-Durán, "Abakuá Music ," 327. Also Margarite Fernández Olmos, Joseph M. Murphy and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds., *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: an introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 93.

[401] Cabrera, *El Monte*, 116.

[402] Cabrera, *La Sociedad Secreta*, 42. Translation taken from, Sublette, 200.

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In spite of the increased vigilance directed towards their social organizations during the years just prior to and following *La Escalera* people of color continued to gather together in their various social groups. Their organizations were restricted but they were not outlawed—even after 1844—and *libres de color* took advantage of what limited mobility they had to contest restrictions levied against them. Members of the Abakuá *juegos* joined, eventually, with whites of all classes within secret fraternal organizations and through this union constructed an image of masculinity that empowered them socially. Their associations linked them with a network of men who could be counted on to stand by them as brothers. This in turn empowered them economically.

By forming secret fraternal orders in nineteenth-century Cuba, at a time when men and women of color were facing increasing restrictions of their already limited freedoms, members of the Abakuá *juegos* used the public aspects of their rituals to display the alternative social authority and power they constructed, embodied, and performed. Rather than simply recreate their ancestors' secret societies, they made use of an African system to address their circumstances in slave-holding Cuba. Within their secret brotherhood men were committed to defending their honor to the death, which made them a force to be reckoned with on the streets of Havana. Their rituals had public and private elements that fed the negative image their groups elicited. As a result they claimed a power denied them elsewhere – the power to move through the streets of Havana and other urban areas such as Matanzas on their own terms until the groups' ban. They were also able to exercise this power in a tangible way by controlling the hiring practices on the docks of Havana during the 1850s and 1860s. Abakuá membership

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afforded these men some economic security. Members were willing to protect their territory on the wharves, with violence if necessary, and this enabled them to maintain a monopoly on this type of work. They constructed their own image of masculinity, which placed great emphasis on honor and physical prowess. Not only did they challenge prevailing notions of race and gender, the Abakuá accomplished this outside the colonial power structure by claiming an African legacy of manhood. Their ancestors, not their masters, nor the colonial elite, provided them the authority under which to act.

The numerous reports of violence in the streets combined with the secrecy of the Abakuá rituals and the discomfort experienced by some onlookers during the Epiphany processions led to a perception on the part of the white colonial society in the latter years of the nineteenth-century of the Abakuá as secret clans even syndicates of homicidal criminals that needed to be wiped out in order to protect the social order. Yet in spite of, or because of, these attitudes towards their group, Abakuá brotherhoods empowered their members and helped them define their own mode of participation in the colonial society.

As the Abakuá men stood apart from members of other societies through their secrecy and constructed image of masculinity, so too did another type of society's membership cultivate a distinct image in nineteenth-century Cuba. These "French" blacks who settled in Santiago de Cuba and the surrounding regions were originally associated with immigrants fleeing Saint-Domingue in the late eighteenth-century. *Libres de color* who had been among this immigrant population formed *cabildo* groups shortly after their arrival in Cuba. As with the Cuban groups, members of these "French" cabildos practiced music and dance during their meetings and they also participated in public Roman Catholic religious feast day processions. That these early Saint-Domingue immigrants

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performed French Creole dances during public events is understandable, yet even in the mid-nineteenth century groups of their descendants were still being identified as *francesas* largely due to their own performances. My study suggests this population of blacks purposely held onto French Creole dance and music styles in order to continue to define themselves as French long after they had planted deep roots in Cuban society.

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Chapter Four

The *Tumba Francesa:* "French Blacks" Define Themselves

On April 17, 1861, the Havana elite arrived at the Tacón Theater for an evening of entertainment. The New Orleans-born pianist, Louis Moreau Gottschalk, was in Havana and had prepared for their pleasure one of his well-known "monster concerts."[403] On the evening in question, the program opened with a short comedy performance followed by a musical piece accomplished by one of Gottschalk's most promising young students, and then came a four-minute presentation by the master himself. Designed for full dramatic effect, the first performances were staged in front of the closed curtains. According to one of Gottschalk's biographers, "He [Gottschalk] was still thrilling the audience with his roulades and trills when the curtain rose revealing thirty-nine pianos, a performer standing before each."[404]

Gottschalk had been introduced to monster concerts—stage performances where an unbelievably large number of musicians with their instruments were brought together —when he attended one while studying in Paris.[405] A consummate performer, he was drawn to these lavish productions. Habaneros devoted to the theater would have remembered his concert just a little over a year earlier on February 17, 1860, where he had staged a previous "grand festival." He wrote about this earlier concert that, "I made an arrangement with the director of the Italian company, then in possession of the Grand

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[403] Louis Moreau Gottschalk. *Notes of a Pianist,* ed. Jeanne Behrend (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 33.
[404] Vernon Loggins, *Where the World Ends. The Life of Louis Moreau Gottschalk.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 182.
[405] Sublette, *Cuba and Its Music*, 148.

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Tacón Theater. He contracted with me to furnish his chief performers, all the choruses, and his whole orchestra on condition of having an interest in the result." Gottschalk further describes the event as follows, "My orchestra consisted of six hundred and fifty performers, eighty-seven choristers, fifteen solo singers, fifty drums and eighty trumpets— that is to say, nearly nine hundred persons bellowing and blowing to see who could scream the loudest. The violins alone were seventy in number, contrabasses eleven, violoncellos eleven!"[406] Clearly his concerts were designed to capture the audience's complete attention, hence the great number of musicians on stage. But with his concert in 1861, Gottschalk inserted an element previously unheard of in the history of former Governor Tacón's namesake theater – he included a coterie of black performers.[407]

It is unclear exactly how the Havana elite responded when faced with African-descended performers on the stage of what was considered their city's most visible example of "progress and civilization." However, the fact that in 1861 Gottschalk was able to locate a black musical group that was defined as "French" well over half a century after the first wave of immigrants descended on the island in the wake of the 1791 uprising in northern Saint-Domingue is particularly interesting, and is the subject of this chapter. These French immigrants or *francesas,* as Cubans referred to them, arrived in Cuba during successive waves beginning in the last decade of the eighteenth century and

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[406] Gottschalk, *Notes,* 26-27.

[407] It is not clear at which Havana concert Gottschalk introduced the *tumba francesa* group. According to historian Ned Sublette citing Loggins, the group appeared at the Tacón theater in 1860 (Sublette, 151.) Gottschalk's biographer, S. Frederick Starr cites the 1860 performance as the event at which the black Santiagueran musicians performed at the monster concert (Frederick S. Starr, *Bamboula! The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 291.) But while he does refer to a number of extant newspaper reports about the successful concert, these reports do not mention the African-descended group. Starr makes no mention of the black performers in his description of Gottschalk's 1861 concert (Starr, 299 and 305.) When Gottschalk describes the 1860 event in his *Notes of a Pianist,* he does not mention the *tumba* musicians. Further, the editor of Gottchalk's autobiography, Jeanne Behrend, refers to the 1861 event as having been the occasion when Habaneros saw the 'French' blacks on stage. "He also imported from the eastern tip of the island, at Santiago, the king of the Association of French Negroes, with a whole arsenal of drums." (Gottschalk, *Notes,* 33.)

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continuing throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.[408] The term *francesa* came to refer not just to the people of French heritage who immigrated from Saint-Domingue, but also described their dances, instruments and societies, which "llevaron siempre este sello distintivo." [always carried this distinctive mark][409] The label *francesa* identified these people as being French Creoles regardless of whether they were descended from European or African backgrounds or some mixture of these two groups. In identifying them with the Saint-Domingue refugees, the term could also be a dangerous marker because throughout the nineteenth century, Cuban colonial authorities saw Haiti as a center of subversion.[410] Yet long after the *francesas*—who were actually born in Saint-Domingue or later Haiti—had arrived in Cuba, some of their descendents were still identified, and identifying themselves, through terms that distinguished them as being associated with the original French immigrants.

What the Saint-Domingue immigrants established in the Southeastern city of Santiago de Cuba, shaped that city's society. This legacy is indicative of a distinct and tenacious culture that continued to embody elements of the refugees' French Creole background. My focus in this chapter is on *libres de color* in Santiago de Cuba who were of French Creole heritage and how they used public performance to shape the way they would participate in the emerging nineteenth-century public sphere. My study suggests that when "French" blacks held onto their distinct performance traditions as they created new lives for themselves in Santiago de Cuba they created cultural boundaries between themselves and black Cubans who might otherwise have been considered a similar social

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[408] The French immigrants from Saint-Domingue are variously referred to as *francesas* or *franceses* without seeming regard to gender. For purposes of this study I refer to them as *francesas.*
[409] Olavo Alén Rodríguez, *La música de las sociedades de tumba francesa en Cuba* (La Habana: Casa de las Americas, 1986), 10.
[410] Alén Rodriguez, *La música*, 10.

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class. By the mid-years of the nineteenth century, blacks with an association to the Saint-Domingue immigration were still identified as *francesas* in Santiago de Cuba in spite of the fact that few would have had direct experience of Saint-Domingue and many had changed their names to more Hispanized ones, married Cubans, and even pledged allegiance to the Spanish monarch. One of the central questions addressed in this chapter is: why did later generations of mixed race people who were descended from Saint-Domingue immigrants continue to practice their forebears' traditions and embrace them as their own? Maintaining their cultural traditions does not appear to have been an attempt to resist assimilation into the Cuban society where they settled. Instead, their continued practice of versions of the French Creole style dances and music they brought with them from Saint-Domingue seems to have grown out of a determination to hold on to "who they were" even while embracing their new lives. This seems to indicate that these cultural practices remained an important aspect of their sense of self that they were unwilling to relinquish. I suggest, then, that some *libres de color* from Saint-Domingue were able to maintain their distinct cultural heritage through public presentations of *tumba francesa* performances—French Creole dances, songs and music played on conical drums and other instruments— in a way that created a legacy for themselves as a separate social group within the Santiagueran community.

This study is driven by a number of questions that will be difficult to answer definitively. Some of these include uncertainties about this community: were they newly emancipated, artisans, or landowners? And what was it about the *tumba francesa* musical style itself, beyond the name, that identified the participants as "French"? In addition, because my overall study explores how *libres de color* used their public performances to

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address restrictions placed on their community in the aftermath of *La Escalera*, this chapter is concerned with how the *La Escalera* purge against *libres de color* played out in the eastern or Oriente region of Cuba. For example, did the increased restrictions against the daily activities of the *libres de color* in the western side of the island after 1844 also impact the *libres de color* in Santiago de Cuba and, for the *francesas,* their *tumba* performances?

One of the difficulties in answering these questions is the lack of firsthand accounts about the experience of *libres de color* in Santiago de Cuba during the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition, the Saint-Dominguan refugees who descended on Cuba after 1791 represented a diverse spectrum of people. From the wealthy to the poor, the French-born versus the Creole*,* whites and blacks of all shades, the immigrants are difficult to define as a group. While it is known that *libres de color* arriving in Cuba from the neighboring French colony formed social organizations in Cuba which practiced the *tumba francesa* traditions, it is difficult to ascertain how large their numbers were or their economic status. When referring to the arrivals from Saint-Domingue contemporary observers often identified them simply as *francesas* without specifying their race, a significant fact in itself. As will be seen, Cuban *criollos* in the nineteenth century held French style and culture as standards of a progressive and civilized society. It may be that, for Cubans, the immigrants' French connection overshadowed race and led Cuban *criollos* and even travelers who recorded their impressions of the *francesas* to overlook African heritage and to use the term when describing the entire Saint-Domingue refugee

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population. What is known is that the immigrants' appearance in Cuba's Oriente region radically changed race and class dynamics in Santiago de Cuba forever and left an indelible mark on that city's culture.

If the voices of *francesas* are few and fleeting in the primary sources, their musical legacy is strong. For this chapter I have drawn upon Louis Moreau Gottschalk's account of the impact French/Haitian culture had on his own musical style as well as on what he observed during his stay in Santiago de Cuba. I have also examined nineteenth century writings by travelers to the island. These include the journals written by the American Samuel Hazard who documented his observations of Santiago de Cuba, and Walter Goodman an English painter who lived in the city for several years and who chronicled his experiences during the lively Carnival celebrations and other public religious festivals.

The *Francesas* Arrive en Masse

The impact of the slave uprising that took place in Saint-Domingue in August of 1791 had a far reaching effect throughout the Caribbean but for the population of the town of Santiago de Cuba on Cuba's southern coast the uprising impacted their city in a particularly direct way. With each successive military campaign during the conflicts in Saint-Domingue more immigrants fled Hispaniola, both from the French-held side of the island and the Spanish side, and many of them sought refuge in one of the Cuban cities closest to their abandoned homeland. "Those settlers who could find a passing boat went to New Orleans," wrote Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier. "But, for those who only had a

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schooner at their disposal, the Cuban coast offered surer and closer refuge."[411] A graphic example of what they were fleeing can be understood from this account written by British historian and Jamaican plantation owner, Bryan Edwards, as he arrived in Saint-Domingue from Jamaica in 1791. "We arrived in the harbour of Cape François in the evening of the 26th of September, and the first object which arrested our attention as we approached, was a dreadful scene of devastation by fire. The noble plain adjoining the Cape was covered with ashes, and the surrounding hills, as far as the eye could reach, and everywhere presented to us ruins still smoking, and houses and plantations at that moment in flames."[412] The revolt had taken whites in Saint-Domingue by surprise. Groups of slaves from across the island's northern plain attacked their masters or overseers and set fire to the sugar plantations. These first uprisings were part of a vast conspiracy that had been planned through a series of nighttime meetings attended by slave representatives from various plantations.[413] At first the whites could not conceive that this uprising would possibly sustain itself, but by the time Edwards arrived at Cape François it was clear that this was a revolt to be taken seriously and people began to flee the island.

The Saint-Domingue refugees fled their homes in various states of preparedness. Some had time to gather their goods and transport them with them, others simply left with what they were able to put their hands on at the last minute before their sudden departure. Historian Francisco Ponte Dominguez writes that, after the slaves rose up in Saint-Domingue, "Primero marchan los hacendados con sus cuantiosos tesoros, y luego

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[411] Alejo Carpentier, *Music in Cuba,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 146.
[412] Bryan Edwards, *A Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 originally published in 1797), preface, v.
[413] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World. The Story of the Haitian Revolution.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2004), 94.

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innúmeros fugitivos en frágiles botes, todos hacia las costas orientales de Cuba." [First the landowners proceed with their quantities of treasure and afterwards numerous fugitives in fragile boats all make for the eastern coasts of Cuba][414] Some of those who came as fugitives in fragile boats were "in the utmost misery, and depended on public charity for a while."[415] The immigrants who flocked to Santiago de Cuba in the various migrations throughout the conflict represented different classes of people who had practiced various professions. Along with those who had been wealthy landowners or rural workers were artisans, sailors, tailors, bakers, carpenters and people with a diverse array of other skills.[416] As a group the refugees also represented many different levels of society from the enslaved and the poorest of the poor to those with great wealth. Many of the immigrants who were white were fleeing the wrath of the enslaved leading the rebellion, but among the new arrivals were those of mixed races and who, along with the whites, also brought with them their own slaves. In the last years of the eighteenth and the first years of the nineteenth centuries, then, Cuba's Oriente region and in particular the towns on Cuba's southern coast saw a sudden increase in the population that represented people with diverse racial mixtures and whose status on arrival was spread along a spectrum from destitute to financially wealth off.

Some refugees sought only a temporary asylum in Cuba in the hope that conditions in Saint-Domingue would improve, allowing them to return. Historian Richard Gott notes that the first refugees who arrived in Cuba had hopes that they would be able to return to their homes shortly. But as fighting continued the immigration became more

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[414] Francisco J. Ponte Dominguez, *La Huella Francesa en la historia politica de Cuba* (Habana: Imprinta "El Siglo XX," 1948), 48.
[415] Carpentier, *Music in Cuba,* 146.
[416] Olga Portuondo Zúñiga, *Santiago de Cuba. Desde su Fundación hasta la Guerra de los Diez Años* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1996), 109-110

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desperate.[417] In a dramatic description of one arrival scene shortly after the uprising began, the Cuban historian José María Callejas wrote that, "Empezaron a desembarcarse aquellos imágenes de la muerte, tirándolos sobre las arenas de la playa mientras se aprestaban carros en que subirlos ... Muchos fallecieron en la propia playa y en el tránsito para el hospital." [Those images of death began to disembark, throwing themselves onto the sands of the beach while people prepared carts to take them up in… Many died right there on the beach and on the way to the hospital.][418] Those refugees who perished on the beach and the others who had to be taken up in carts had clearly suffered some trauma as they left Saint-Domingue and were in no shape to care for themselves. Such arrivals posed an immediate challenge to city officials and residents that would have been impossible to ignore. After the turn of the century, especially in 1803, Santiaguerans again faced an influx of new arrivals on their shores when the immigration spiked again. In late 1803 a large French force that had been sent by Napoleon Bonaparte to reestablish French rule in Haiti was forced to admit defeat, capitulating to Jean Jacques Dessalines, the commander of the black army. It was for the French more than simply a military defeat as they were forced to acknowledge that they had lost their former colony and the prospect of an expanded "American empire." In addition to those residents of the territory who decided on their own that it was time for them to flee, Dessalines also sent many into exile as well as launched a massacre of the remaining French people in Haiti to purge the island of all connections to France.[419]

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[417] Portuondo Zúñiga, *Santiago de Cuba*, 109.
[418] José Millet and Rafael Brea. *Grupos folklóricos de Santiago de Cuba.* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1989), 17.
[419] Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution. Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic.* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 169.

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While it is difficult to categorize the various groups of arrivals to the island it is clear the impact was great, especially in the town of Santiago de Cuba and the mountainous Oriente region where that city was located. Shortly after the first waves of immigrants began to arrive in the early 1790s the city felt the strain of the rapid population increase. Such basics as fresh drinking water and places for the sudden mass of arrivals to sleep caused governor Sebastián Kindelán to write, at last, to Cuba's Governor General Someruelos begging for assistance and suggesting that the Governor General could help ease the pressure on Santiago de Cuba by redistributing the French arrivals to other areas – even overseas.[420] Kindelán and Santiago de Cuba's other municipal officials were not only taxed with regards to providing basic sustenance for the refugees; they were also, during the period of fighting in Saint-Domingue, concerned about the defense of their own city. Kindelán kept a constant watch for the appearance of foreign ships in the harbor that could represent military threats. Callejas y Analla writes in his *Historia de Santiago de Cuba*, "El Gobernador Kindelán tenía siempre fijada su atención en la colonia de Santo Domingo, especialmente después que las tropas francesas volvieron á ocupar sus puertos principales fortificados á nombre de República Francesa." [The Governor … had always fixed his attention on the colony of Santo Domingo, especially after the French troops returned to occupy the principal fortified ports in the name of the French Republic.][421] The atmosphere in the city was one of heightened tension as those who came to be called *francesas* and the Santiaguerans attempted to adjust to their new reality.

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[420] Laura Cruz Ríos, *Flujos inmigratorios Franceses a Santiago de Cuba, 1800-1868* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2006), 41-42. [Someruelos held office from 1799 through 1812]
[421] José María Callejas y Analla, *Historia de Santiago de Cuba* (Habana: Imp. "La Universal," 1911), 63.

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The waves of immigration understandably disrupted life in the small town of Santiago de Cuba and the responses to these new arrivals were varied. There had been a French presence in Cuba prior to the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue so family members of those fleeing the colony were undoubtedly happy to assist their relatives in establishing themselves. Some Cubans with great compassion were likewise moved to help. A story is told of one woman named María de Belén who lived near the Marina in Santiago de Cuba. At the sight of the new arrivals lying destitute on the beach she took care of many of them in her own home. As the tale is related by Callejas y Annala, "Corrió á su casa, mató cuantas aves tenía para su subsistencia y vino, sin tardanza, la primera de todos, con varias calderas de buena sustancia y tomando en sus brazos á aquellos desgraciados, los reanimaba y condujo á algunos á su casa, para quitarlos de aquella inclemencia." [She ran to her house and killed a quantity of birds that she subsisted on and came without delay, before everyone else, with various good substances and taking in her arms those wretches, she reanimated them and took some of them to her house to get them out of the inclement weather or conditions.][422] In his history, Callejas y Annala indicates that on one occasion – for which he does not give dates – over 300 *francesas* arrived over the short space of eight days. Many of these set up thatched roof homes around the bay. The governor allowed them to settle in this area around the bay near the pier of the port in Santiago de Cuba and eventually the location came to be known as the Barrio Francés.[423]

While people such as María may have rushed to help the refugees, it seems there was also a certain stigma associated with these destitute arrivals because of the humble

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[422] Callejas y Analla, *Historia,* 66.
[423] Cruz Ríos, *Flujos,* 52.

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circumstances in which some of them initially lived in the first months after they came to the city. It is entirely possible that the stigma may have been race- and or class-based as it seems unusual that they would be stigmatized for living conditions that were out of their control, but as there are few references to whether the arrivals were white or black or of mixed racial background, other than to indicate that the disembarking *francesas* were a diverse group, it is difficult to pinpoint the source of the negative attitudes.[424] There were, undoubtedly, free black and mixed race men and women amongst the immigrants and even some who had come from means in Saint-Domingue. In his study of the elite free coloreds or *gens de couleur* in Saint-Domingue's southern peninsula, historian John D. Garrigus notes that access to land ownership played a large part in the elevated social status of this class.[425] By the eighteenth century there were many notable families of color throughout the French colony who were headed by men educated in France and whose landholdings and other ventures had brought them economic success. Some of these families owned land in the mountainous regions in Saint-Domingue and were well placed to take advantage of the opportunities to establish plantations when coffee became a lucrative industry in the island. They not only owned the land on which to establish these coffee plantations, they also had extensive family networks that allowed them to avoid having to pay employees to work in positions on their coffee plantations they might otherwise have had to hire men to fill. Historian Laurent Dubois points out that, "From generation to generation many free-colored families secured plantations and grew into wealthy owners of land and slaves."[426] It is reasonable to imagine that some of these free

[424] Callejas y Analla, 66.
[425] John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 5.
[426] Dubois, *Avengers,* 63-64.

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(slave holding) blacks, already wealthy coffee planters in Saint-Domingue, were among those who fled the slave uprising in Saint-Domingue. Like the whites those who did may have been among those who established new coffee plantations in Cuba's Oriente region or established businesses in Santiago de Cuba. Many of the urban free black "French" were small business owners and artisans and they came to represent a significant sector of the of the city's population in the early years of the nineteenth century.[427]

Understanding the motives behind a *gens de couleur* migration during and after the 1791 slave uprisings is complicated. On the one hand, by the time of the rebellion in the French colony, free blacks in Saint-Domingue had been experiencing increasing levels of racial discrimination since the mid-eighteenth century that might have caused them to empathize with the slaves. On the other, many were educated (had in fact been educated in France) and well-off and considered themselves French men and women. Even though some amongst this class may have had enslaved family members, others of these men and women of color shared an attitude towards emancipation that was similar to the attitudes of the white *francesas*.[428] According to La Rosa Corzo "The French and the slaves and free blacks who came with them were fleeing from a revolutionary process that put an end to slavery on that neighboring island. Far from being receptive to emancipating attitudes and ideas, all those émigrés spread lies about the emancipation process and whipped up fear of it."[429] La Rosa Corzo's blanket statement about the immigrants' attitudes towards emancipation in Saint-Domingue is clearly presumptive. Though there were undoubtedly some slaves whose loyalty to their masters may have put

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[427] Guanche, *Procesos,* 270.
[428] Guanche, 270.
[429] Gabino La Rosa Corzo, *Runaway Slave Settlements in Cuba* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 83. Orig. 1988.

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them at odds with the rebels, others who might have sympathized with the revolutionary struggle would have been unlikely to speak up publicly given their enslaved position in Cuba. Even the free blacks, who to some extent shared the economic interests of the white elite class in Saint-Domingue rather than the experience of poor blacks, both enslaved and free, may have been conflicted in their attitude towards the struggle for emancipation and later the revolution that led to independence.

Whether the refugees were welcomed or ostracized, Gott makes it clear that this was no ordinary immigration, noting that, "All told, some 30,000 French refugees came to Cuba in the decade after 1791."[430] In 1808 the population of Santiago de Cuba was estimated to be around 33,000. Of these 7,500 considered themselves to be French.[431] Compared with earlier population figures for Santiago de Cuba, the 1808 numbers reveal the demographic explosion that resulted after the waves of French-Haitian immigration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[432]

Choosing a "French" Identity

Many of the French planning to remain permanently in Cuba pledged loyalty to the Spanish Crown as required by the Spanish government and gained the rights of other

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[430] Gott, *Cuba,* 45. Gott does not give a source for his figures.
[431] The breakdown of the 1808 population figures is as follows: Whites – 2,651, free blacks and mulattoes – 2,341, black slaves – 2,457. (Judith Bettelheim, "The Tumba Francesa and Tajona of Santiago de Cuba," (1993), in *Cuban Festivals. A Century of Afro-Cuban Culture* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001), 145.
[432] There was a census sent to the king from Cuba in 1605 indicating the population of Santiago de Cuba to be comprised of 661 inhabitants with 641 living in the city and 20 in the rural areas. Of those in the city there were 205 white men, 129 white women, 131 black men, 98 black women, 41 Indian men and 37 Indian women (La Rosa Corzo, *Runaway*, 37.) The population figures for Santiago de Cuba taken from the 1792 census are as follows: Whites – 8,212, Free blacks – 6,512, Enslaved – 6,037 for a total of 20,761 (La Rosa Corzo, 81.) Santiago de Cuba even in the years before the last three decades of the 18th century was considered to be a rural place. The inhabitants led a simple and placid lifestyle (Cruz Ríos, 30.)

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Spanish subjects.[433] As they established themselves those who had originally settled in the northern side of the island tended to gravitate towards the less populous eastern side of the island and the towns in this region. This was in part because Havana officials thought that the city was too populous to absorb them without creating conflict and hardship for those who already lived there. Another reason the immigrants settled in the rural east was because of land. As Cuban anthropologist Gabino La Rosa Corzo indicates land was cheaper in the east so presumably the immigrants with some economic means had greater opportunities to begin new lives in this region without encroaching on, and possibly causing dissension among land-owning Cubans.[434] From the perspective of economic development, the revolution in Saint-Domingue occurred at an opportune time for Cuba and for the Oriente region in particular. In 1793 the Spanish monarch had ordered a review of the economic situation in the Oriente region in order to develop a proposal for promoting agriculture and industry in the eastern side of the island. Some of the suggestions for developing this territory included promoting small coffee, cotton, and indigo farms, building a system of roads, and expanding the port at Santiago de Cuba. In light of the colonial government's goals for the island's eastern region, the revolt in Saint-Domingue, "greatly favored those interests."[435] For these reasons, in spite of the Oriente officials' concerns, the island's governing authorities thought that it would be easier to absorb the French immigrants in the east "with the least damage to the colonial authorities' and slave owners' interests in the region."[436] The Saint-Domingue immigrants and their descendants would eventually contribute greatly to the economic

[433] Portuondo Zúñiga, *Santiago,* 111. Those French who were naturalized were eligible for political office. See also Guanche, *Procesos,* 278.
[434] La Rosa Corzo, 84.
[435] La Rosa Corzo, 81-83.
[436] La Rosa Corzo, 84.

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development of the Oriente region with their French-modeled coffee plantations.[437] By the mid-1800s there were over 600 *cafetaleras* in the rural areas of the Oriente region. This represented a population of around 27,456 people, who were connected in some way with the coffee plantations.[438]

At first glance one might assume that the *francesas* would have been particularly eager to assimilate into Cuban society given the many tensions surrounding their presence in Cuba, but it is notable and even surprising that some of the *francesas,* especially those in Santiago de Cuba, seem to have gone out of their way to cultivate and perform a sense of "French" particularity. One reason it might have seemed prudent for *francesas* to embrace a Cuban persona in all areas of their lives was the stigmatization directed towards them shortly after the first waves of arrivals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. During this early period both colonial officials and Santiaguerans viewed the various waves of immigrants moving into the urban areas as a drain on local resources in the East and there were cases of violence directed against the *francesas*. In fact, at one point during the first decade of the nineteenth century, some Santiguerans even began burning the homes of the immigrants. Presumably these acts of violence were an attempt to vent frustrations against the inconveniences caused by the unexpected population increase the immigrants' presence had caused. Callejas y Analla, the historian who recorded this information, does not give a date for these attacks but indicates that they occurred during Sebastián Kindelán's governance of Santiago de Cuba from 1799 through 1810. In order to maintain the peace and protect the new residents from aggressive acts against them the governor established patrols to monitor the barrios

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[437] Gott, 45.

[438] Millet and Brea, *Grupos,* 26.

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comprised of the *francesas* themselves. Callejas y Analla gives an account of one unsuccessful attempt by the "French" patrolmen to protect their property. "Rodearon sus casas con tinas y canoas llenas de agua. Formaron lámparas de estopas ó filástica enastadas en baras y desde el niño hasta los más ancianos todos eran unos centinelas y, sin embargo, á las cuatro de las mismo tarde, se presentó el fuego en dos casas diferentes de la misma manera que los primeros." [They surrounded their houses with bathtubs and canoes filled with water. They formed hemp lamps or ropes with twigs for handles and from the boys to the old ones all were sentries, and never-the-less at four that same evening the fire appeared in two different houses in the same way as the first.][439]

Attitudes towards the Saint-Domingue/Haitian immigrants were also influenced by French actions in Europe that centered on France's apparent intention to dominate the continent. In 1808 Napoleon Bonaparte sent troops into Spain and removed the king – Ferdinand VII – from his throne. In his place Napoleon appointed his own brother to rule the country.[440] The Junta Suprema, Spain's displaced governing body, now installed in Sevilla, declared war on the French Emperor.[441] In retaliation, across the Atlantic any French residents in Cuba who had not pledged allegiance to the Spanish monarch were ordered to leave the island that year. This applied to all the French who were living in Cuba without an "express letter" from the Captain General.[442] Possibly as a result of, or in anticipation of, this order, over 100 Saint-Domingue immigrants living in Cuba were naturalized in August of 1808.[443] Many of those who fell under the requirement to leave

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[439] Callejas y Analla, 76-78. Callejas y Analla does not give a date but indicates that this occurred during the leadership of Sebastián Kindelán (when he governed Santiago de Cuba) which was from 1799 through 1810.
[440] White, *Encountering,* 171.
[441] Callejas y Analla, 71.
[442] *Ibid*., 81
[443] Cruz Ríos, *Flujos,* 199-200.

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went to cities such as New Orleans, but others who had the "express letter" referred to in the expulsion order remained behind and continued to make their presence felt in the island. Later, once peace was reached between France and Spain in 1813 many of those who had left were, in spite of the decree, allowed to return and as early as 1814, Spain actually invited the expelled immigrants back.[444] Numerous free blacks who had been living in New Orleans but had maintained economic and social ties with Cuba, accepted this invitation and returned to the island.[445]

Cuban attitudes towards the *francesas* included unease about the immigrants perceived associations with Haiti subversives. In 1812, when a series of slave revolts spread across Cuba, Spanish authorities were shocked to find out that the conspiracy had been a united effort between slaves and *libres de color.* They were even more disturbed when a free black man, José Antonio Aponte, whom they considered to be the leader of the rebellion, was found to have material suggestive of a link to Haiti.[446] These anxieties about Haitian-influenced insurrections continued in the 1840s when Spanish authorities searching for conspirators behind the Cuban slave uprisings in 1843 uprisings also identified links between British abolitionist and consul to Cuba, David Turnbull and Haitians.[447] It would seem that after the 1843 uprisings and the resulting investigations that seemed to single out *libres de color* this suspicion would have been of particular concern for refugees of color. Yet the increased restrictions against the activities of *libres de color* in the west appear to have been minimally enforced in the eastern side of the island. Historian Robert Paquette, whose *Sugar is Made With Blood* focuses on the *La*

[444] Guanche, 273-274.
[445] Shirley Elizabeth Thompson, *Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Colonial New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 79.
[446] Childs, *Aponte*, 3.
[447] Paquette, *Blood*, 246-247.

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Escalera response to the slave uprisings in 1843, mentions that in the first months of 1844 the systematic investigations carried out by a Military Commission, centered on the "sugar heartland." The resulting purge and the associated increase in surveillance of the activities of the free black population seem to have been confined to the western side of the island and Paquette makes little mention of the Oriente when discussing the work of the military commission.[448] This was in spite of the presence of large numbers of blacks from Haiti whose association with revolution might have led authorities to be vigilant of their activities.

In this context it is difficult to understand why the Saint-Domingue immigrants were not subject to greater surveillance and restrictions against their social activities. Given the Haitian connection it seems striking that *tumba francesa* societies in the Oriente did not experience specific sanctions. One possible explanation may be that in spite of the success of the Haitian Revolution, Spanish authorities were more concerned about the wider interconnections alleged during investigations of the alleged conspiracy of 1843. Correspondence dating from 1842 indicated that authorities in Cuba knew of possible subversive activities against their country planned by members of organizations in Jamaica as well as by individuals in Venezuela and Peru who had been involved with the independence movements in those countries.[449] Another explanation might be that Cuban authorities viewed the *libres de color* residing in Santiago de Cuba and other parts of the island, as having fled from the Revolution in Saint-Domingue and therefore from an uprising that first sought to end slavery and then ultimately French colonialism. They

[448] Paquette, 219-220
[449] Ultramar, legajo 4617/ no. 5 signed by Geronimo Valdes. AHN.

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would not then, from the Cubans' perspective have been thought to favor ending challenging the systems of labor and governance in their new home.

Given the tense situation for *libres de color* after 1844 it might be expected that the *tumba* groups would have adopted a low public profile during the 1840s and 1850s. This does not seem to have been the case, however, as the *tumba francesa* presence during the public celebrations in Santiago de Cuba continued to be observed and commented on throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Clearly officials did not deem the *francesas* in Santiago de Cuba enough of a threat to include them in the restrictive environment that surrounded blacks further west. The immigrants in fact appear to have been confident that they were not under suspicion. Families associated with Saint-Domingue and the post-Revolution exodus continued to actively and publicly practice cultural traditions that distinguished them as *francesas.* In fact the immigrants, in particular those in the free black community and their descendants' continued practice of French Creole traditions appears to have been motivated by the desire to maintain a continued distinction as a "French" social group.

The Benefits of Being "French"

Elite Cubans had long regarded French culture as the standard for civilization and by the early years of the nineteenth century their appetite for French style was firmly established. Geographer Joseph Scarpaci highlights this attitude by noting, “In the early nineteenth century, Havana’s elite drew on French culture for ideas and models to emulate. *Habaneros* danced and dressed like the French elite before the immigration of

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French and Spanish residents who had resided in Haiti and Louisiana."[450] Reinforcing this attraction to French ways were the enthusiasms of the wealthier Saint-Domingue immigrants themselves who lost no time in creating a cultural environment in Santiago de Cuba that enabled them to continue many of the social activities they had practiced in Saint-Domingue.

Starr notes that Santiago de Cuba during the mid-years of the nineteenth century had its own character.[451] The once sleepy town began to reflect the energized presence of the *francesas* and the businesses they established were akin to a shot of caffeine for the economy of Santiago de Cuba.[452] In his journal, American traveler Samuel Hazard mentions some of the hotels and guest houses run by *francesas.* He describes an establishment called "La Suss," which happened to be owned by a "Frenchman" as being the best hotel in town. Later he is told the best hotel is really another establishment also owned by an immigrant, a "French" woman named Madame Adele Lescailles. While he does not mention Madame Lescailles' race he includes an illustration of her in his chapter and depicts her as having a dark complexion. According to him her establishment was, "one of the cleanest and pleasantest houses I saw in Cuba."[453]

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In this case Hazard appears to be more taken with the fact that Madame Lescailles is a *francesa* than that she is of African descent. This is consistent with Cuban writings

[450] Scarpaci, *Havana*, 31.
[451] Starr, *Bamboula!*, 188.
[452] Guanche, 275
[453] Hazard, *Pen and Pencil,* 428-429.
[454] This image of Madame Lescailles was sketched by Hazard, 438.

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about the *francesas,* raising the question of why there were not more references to skin color in contemporary Cuban accounts of the Saint-Domingue immigrants. The fact that sources rarely identify *francesas* of African descent as such suggests that French cultural heritage was seen by Cubans as being superior enough to dominate negative associations with African birth or African parentage. It also suggests that that for these writers the primary "difference" and defining characteristic of these immigrants was their "Frenchness." In his biography of the Saint-Domingue-born enslaved man, Pierre Toussaint, journalist and author Arthur Jones makes a similar observation about the reception of Toussaint who settled in New York with his owners after the uprising in Saint-Domingue. He writes, "It was as an entertaining and capable 'Frenchman' in New York that Toussaint would gain acceptance in the parlors and boudoirs of the important families. Quite simply, his slave status was secondary among educated New York whites; it was his French refinement combined with his skills as a coiffeur that provided his entreé."[455] This argument provides one plausible explanation not only for why race is rarely highlighted, but also for why the *francesas* of color may have held onto performative activities that recalled their French Creole traditions as a way of highlighting their affiliation with France and therefore with a culture that Cuban *criollos* held in high regard.

In the town, the immigrants appear to have been aware of the Cuban attraction to French culture, and often played up their French backgrounds in order to better position themselves to earn a living.[456] Capitalizing on this Cuban attraction to French ways, many immigrants opened schools where they taught dances and offered music classes,

[455] Arthur Jones. *Pierre Toussaint.* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 58.
[456] White, *Encountering,* 22

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drawing and language lessons and even sewing.[457] Spaniards and *criollos* were learning to speak French and French Creole and with so many Saint-Dominguan immigrants and descendants of these immigrants living in the city, French Creole became part of the "identidad santiaguera."[458] At the time of his writing in 1857, Gottschalk mentions that French Creole was the preferred language in Santiago de Cuba.[459] French traveler Ernest Duvergier de Hauranne who visited the island in the 1850s further supported this view writing, "C'est presque autant une ville française qu'une ville espagnole. Notre langue est comprise de tout le monde, sauf de quelques nouveaux colons espagnols obstinés à ne pas l'apprendre." [It is almost as much a French town as it is a Spanish one. Our language is understood by everyone, except a few new Spanish colonists, determined not to learn it.][460]

The wealthier immigrants imported books for their libraries and for the schools that were being built. During his stay, Samuel Hazard visited a club in Santiago de Cuba called the San Carlos where he notes the members were mainly "French." In his journal he wrote that, "They have a very good library of French, English, and Spanish books, as well as most of the principal periodicals and papers of the day. The rooms are also furnished with a piano and billiard tables."[461] His description evokes a genteel establishment that contrasts with earlier descriptions of Santiago de Cuba as a provincial town. This new image of the city was clearly linked to the presence of the immigrants from Saint-Domingue. In addition, to building admirable libraries for their homes and

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[457] Carpentier, *Music,* 146.
[458] Cruz Ríos, *Flujos,* 124 and 129. The author mentions only that they were learning French and does not indicate if they also learned French *creole.*
[459] Gottschalk, 12-13.
[460] Yvon Joseph, *Four French Travelers in Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 22.
[461] Hazard, 438

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social spaces, the elite *francesas* also impacted the educational opportunities in Santiago. For those who wanted to give their children a "French" education numerous French professors taught subjects such as geography, literature, history, languages, geometry, music, dance and more.[462] The *criollo* landowners who could afford it, even sent their sons to French universities on the continent, so influenced were they by the French culture of their neighbors in Santiago de Cuba.[463]

Almost immediately after the first waves of immigration, the physical layout of the city of Santiago de Cuba began to be transformed by the French presence. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the city was divided into two parts or *partidos,* Catedral and Santo Tomás, which were further divided into eight barrios.[464] The French settled throughout the city but they tended to congregate in certain barrios. Two of these, numbered 1 and 8 located in the western part of the city, mainly in partido Catedral, had the largest numbers of *francesas* in the early nineteenth century and it was here that many French-owned businesses and social spaces frequented by the immigrants emerged.[465] In addition to the guest-houses, these businesses included bakeries, hairdressers, dressmakers, tailors, and cafeterias and they helped to integrate this growing urban space and fill it with a French Creole atmosphere and spirit. Streets and neighborhoods began to ring with the sound of spoken French and French Creole, music and the daily activity of the flourishing new businesses being established by the new arrivals.

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[462] Guanche, 277
[463] Guanche, 278
[464] María Elena Orozco Melgar, *Presencia francesa e identidad urbana en Santiago de Cuba* (Santiago de Cuba: Ediciones Santiago, 2002), 16.
[465] Orozco, *Presencia,* 19.

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One establishment in particular became quite well known throughout the city. This was the hugely popular coffee house and theater called El Tivolí.[466] The rapid appearance of the Tivolí in Santiago de Cuba during the first years after the immigrants began to arrive en masse, was an indication of the importance of public cultural activities to this expatriate population. In Cap Français the theater had also been very popular and this sort of entertainment offered at least three times each week.[467] Martin Munro, notes of the planters in the French Caribbean colonies, "There was also constant awareness of the latest developments in French music, because Parisian music teachers, poorly paid in France, came to the islands to teach the children of the colonial elite contemporary dances, airs, and the rules of musical art."[468] Munro goes on to say that the French colonists made it a priority to follow the most recent trends in music. The French elite in Saint-Domingue, then, who migrated to Cuba, had likely listened to the latest music from Europe and danced the latest Parisian dances.[469] It seems they continued to pursue and patronize the arts in their new home and they set about creating the environment they needed to facilitate this love of the theater, music and dance in Santiago de Cuba.

Built shortly after the immigrants began to settle in Santiago de Cuba, El Tivolí was instrumental in popularizing the culture of the *francesas* in a very public way and became a well-known fixture in the city. Designed with a seating capacity for around 300, this theater appears to have provided a place for people to congregate informally to

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[466] Cruz Ríos, 53.
[467] White, 19.
[468] Martin Munro. *Different Drummers. Rhythm and Races in the Americas.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 7.
[469] Peter Manuel, "Cuba: From Contradanza to Danzón," in *Creolizing Contradance in the Caribbean,* ed. Peter Manuel (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 52. French references refer to this dance style as the *contredanse* while Spanish references use the word *contradanza*. For purposes of uniformity I use the French spelling.

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have a drink or something to eat, as well as listen to music.[470] Eventually, too, audiences could enjoy pantomimes or plays and even operas.[471] The Tivolí was such a fixture in colonial Santiago de Cuba, that Carpentier used it to symbolize the city's central gathering place in his 1949 novel, *El reino de este mundo* [The Kingdom of this World]. In describing the expatriate culture in that city after the Revolution in Saint-Domingue he writes, "The best tables [at El Tivolí] were occupied by old friends of his [M. Lenormand de Mézy who had left Saint-Domingue with his slaves], landowners who, like himself, had fled from the machetes whetted with molasses."[472] Carpentier placed his characters in actual settings and took great pains to attempt to recreate the spirit of the times about which he wrote. He drew on facts to create his fictionalized version of history and in doing so he highlighted the importance of El Tivolí in the developing society of nineteenth-century Santiago de Cuba. The painter, Walter Goodman actually lived in the area of El Tivolí during his four-year stay in the city (1864-1868) and made mention of the numerous festive parties and dances that took place in the area.[473]

El Tivolí was the first of several theaters or musical establishments that the immigrants would sponsor in the city after their arrival and throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition to this popular coffee-house, the Academia de Música de

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[470] Guanche, 276. See also Millet and Brea, 34. Specific details about the actual performances are difficult to identify. No doubt there were French-Creole performances, but Callejas y Analla (69) indicates that at least some of the performers were from France rather than from Saint-Domingue and it is likely that these presentations would have been French.
[471] Portuondo Zúñiga, 168
[472] Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of this World* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989 (originally published in 1949), 77. In the introduction to Carpentier's novel, Haitian author Edwidge Danticat writes, "Through the eyes of Ti Noël ...[the main character in the novel]... we get an intimate view of the key players in an epic story that merges myth and lore with meticulously detailed facts and astonishing lyricism."
[473] Walter Goodman, *The Pearl of the Antilles; or, An Artist in Cuba* (London: DoDo Press, 1873), 108-109.

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Santa Cecilia, an academy of music was formed in 1816.[474] In 1823, another theater was completed. It was described as being, “bajo la administración del empresario francés Santiago Cándamo, centro cultural que llenaría su cometido hasta 1844 en que fue demolido.” [under the administration of the French theater manager, Santiago Cándamo, and was the cultural center fulfilling this role until 1844 when it was demolished][475] On June 30, 1850 El Teatro La Reina was established.[476] Santiguerans of the elite class in the mid nineteenth century were very enthusiastic about classical music.[477] Over the course of the first half of this century French artists came to the city attracted by the immigrants' enthusiasm for the arts and, in the process, exposing many of the Spanish *criollos*, especially those who were not of the elite classes, to this French culture.[478] Because of the immigrants' presence, the city of Santiago de Cuba continued to reflect a more French and French Creole aura in its language, street names, and entertainment than other urban areas in the island, which had not had such a great infusion of new residents from Saint-Domingue.

Despite the early challenges that arose as the town's residents and the Saint-Dominguan immigrants attempted to adjust to the new social reality, a community eventually emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century, which was greatly influenced by the "French." Even in the mid-nineteenth century the descendants of the Saint-Domingue immigrants were still publicly identifying as "French" in certain contexts, and *tumba francesa* performances seem to have been a particularly privileged way in which they constructed that Frenchness. It is significant that over sixty years after

[474] Scarpaci, 31
[475] Portuondo Zúñiga, 168.
[476] Cruz Ríos , 127.
[477] Carpentier, *Music,* 235.
[478] Guanche, 276.

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the first Saint-Domingue immigrants settled in Santiago de Cuba, Louis Moreau Gottschalk saw and heard a distinctly French Creole/Haitian musical group singing and dancing in that city in a way that distinguished them from the numerous other groups celebrating during public performances.

The *Tumba Francesa*

Scholars have utilized the terms "tumba" and "tumba francesa" in a number of ways when referring to African-derived music and performance in Cuba. Before the refugees from Saint-Domingue arrived in the island *tumba* was used to refer to the drums played by blacks living in the island's eastern regions.[479] In Santiago de Cuba the word was sometimes used to describe a gathering of black slaves dancing around their instruments.[480] Eventually the term *tumba francesa* came to refer to the groups or societies of "French blacks" who dressed, danced, and performed according to French Creole traditions they had practiced in Saint-Domingue. *Tumba francesa* also seems to have referred to the styles of music and dance movements associated with the *francesas* and it is not clear if there was a specific kind of dance or if the term was a gloss for a variety of different styles that featured a similar rhythm. Thought by scholars to have emerged from amongst the activities of the enslaved coffee plantation workers in the Oriente, these distinct French Creole dances spread from the enslaved immigrant blacks into the communities of the urban areas in this region in the early nineteenth century.[481]

On the coffee estates established by the "French" immigrants in the rural Oriente, the wealthy white, and presumably free colored immigrants, initiated an elegant culture

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[479] Millet, 28
[480] Alén Rodríguez, *La música,* 45.
[481] Millet and Brea, 19.

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building grand mansions with libraries and billiard rooms, and throwing "...elegant soirees as they had done in Saint-Domingue, at which black musicians played in pretty sounding ensembles of violin, cello, harp, and flute."[482] While the masters cultivated their elegant lifestyle in the grand plantation houses, the blacks in the coffee plantations' slave quarters were also engaging in their own social gatherings, which prominently featured music and dance. "The black *frances* formed cabildos. They called their dances *tumbas,* and from that came the groups known as *tumba francesa*."[483] The *tumba francesa* dance events became so popular that others besides the enslaved - such as the *libres de color* and even some whites - began enjoying the performances on the rural estates. Duharte Jiménez explains that these plantation parties often drew a racially diverse crowd. "Un grado más elevado de comunicación entre los negros y mulatos libres y los blancos parece haberse logrado a través de las fiestas en los cafetales." [An elevated level of communication between the free blacks and mulattos and the whites appears to have been achieved through the fiestas on the coffee plantations.][484] The *tumba francesa* dance and music style performed at plantation gatherings seem to have facilitated interactions between people who were positioned in very different ways in plantation society.

The coffee plantation parties may have spread the popularity of the *tumba francesa* performances from the slave barracks to other social classes in the Oriente, but they did not remain rural. When coffee workers brought the crops down from the hillside plantations to the port at Santiago de Cuba they interacted socially with other French/Haitian immigrants already living in the city. In fact, the French-dominated barrio of Los Hoyos was located near the port where black laborers mingled as they worked or

[482] Sublette, 117
[483] Sublette, 117.
[484] Duharte Jiménez, 95.

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conducted personal business.[485] It is not clear exactly how the *tumba francesa* passed from the coffee plantation *fiestas* to the streets of Santiago de Cuba, or whether there had been some versions of these dances already being practiced amongst the *francesas* in the town. Many free "French" blacks who had settled in Santiago de Cuba, had formed their own *cabildo* groups where they played music and danced as well as took care of members' needs much as other Cuban blacks were accustomed to doing in their *cabildos de nación*. Cuban music scholar, Olavo Alen Rodríguez, mentions the social groups and suggests that while early Saint-Domingue immigrants and their first generation descendants founded the *tumba francesa* groups, some Cuban *criollos* also eventually associated with them in some capacity. He writes, "The associations thus incorporated the contributions of black slaves and freedmen, both Cuban and African, and the descendants of Haitian immigrants, who retained the family name of the French master of their ancestors in Haiti."[486] Possibly these Cuban *criollos* were husbands, wives, children, or in-laws of the *tumba* society members. What bound members of the *tumba francesa* societies together and defined the way they were perceived during the colonial period was their identification with Haitian-influenced dance and music styles as practiced in Cuba. These urban *francesa* societies came together during their Sunday gatherings and on the feast day celebrations and performed dances. Performing these cultural traditions was instrumental in displaying their unique musical style to the larger community as a very public form of self-fashioning and self-identification.[487]

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[485] Bettelheim, 146

[486] Alén Rodríguez, "The Tumba Francesa Societies and Their Music," in *Essays on Cuban Music: North America and Cuban Perspectives*, 79-80.

[487] Guanche, 279-280 According to Guanche, not all French blacks were incorporated into these tumba groups. Some joined other societies in their respective zones. These did not retain their French culture and traditions. Instead they learned the Spanish. Their children became incorporated into Spanish culture

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Tumba francesa dances appear to have been easily identifiable during the nineteenth century for their unique musical rhythms, yet references to the actual dance steps tend to be vague. In the work entitled, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* attributed to the former Cuban slave, Esteban Montejo, Montejo who claimed to have French ancestry, is said to be describing dances he remembered being performed by "French" blacks when he recalls: “Cantaban en *patuá* y tocaban dos tambores grandes con las manos. El baile se llamaba ‘el francés.’” [They sang in patois and played two large drums with the hands. The dance was called 'the French' (dance)][488] He is also said to have recalled that these "French" black dancers danced in pairs and made slow turns around each other while remaining about an arms length apart.[489] Montejo was around 103 years old when he recounted his life story to Cuban anthropologist Miguel Barnet so he was drawing on distant - and likely faded - memories. Yet his account is useful because while we can imagine what the nineteenth-century *tumba francesa* dancers might have looked like based on performances by the *tumba* societies still practicing the cultural traditions in Cuba, eye witness descriptions of the performers - even those as far removed from the events as Montejo's - in the colonial period are sparse. His recollections of a "French" dance performed by descendents of French blacks (probably around the 1860s and 70s) indicate that there continued to be an identifiable population of blacks who were practicing cultural activities that associated them with being *francesas.*

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through the cabildos. They retained only their French names which they “Cubanized” “cubanizando” in the way they wrote it and pronounced it. Guanche, 282.

[488] Esteban Montejo, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave,* ed., Miguel Barnet (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 36. Montejo claimed to be a slave of French descent, 19.

[489] *Ibid*.

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A hand-colored lithograph created in the 1830s by Jamaican artist, Isaac Mendes Belisario, offers a visual image of what the *tumba francesa* dancers in Cuba may have looked like.

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His lithograph depicts a group of people of color from Saint-Domingue who were then living in Jamaica, dancing in gaily-colored clothing. The work is named "French Set-Girls," and shows four female dancers wearing elegant low cut white dresses with blue flounces on the hem, jewels, and elaborately tied headdresses in the French Creole style. One equally gaily dressed man joins the women in dance while the two drummers sit astride their drums beating the surfaces with their hands. The tradition of the "French Set-Girls," as they were referred to in Jamaica, dancing in the Jamaican masquerades began

[490] This copy of the image of Isaac Belisario's lithograph "French Set-Girls" is taken from *Art & Emancipation in Jamaica. Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds.* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art, 2007), 37.

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with the immigrants who fled to that colony from their native Saint-Domingue. The dictionary of Jamaican English describes "French Set-Girls" as being, "Troupes of young women who celebrated Christmas in the French Creole fashion."[491] While there is no direct link between the French Set-Girls illustrated in Bellisario's lithograph and the *tumba francesa* dancers in Santiago de Cuba, the picture does provide—especially in the absence of other extant visual records—an opportunity to envision the performative style of French blacks who left Saint-Domingue during the same exodus that brought the *tumba* dancers to Cuba. Of particular interest is the enormous drum being played with the drummer sitting astride as was also the case with the *tumba* drummers in Cuba. Bettelheim references this lithograph in her research and indicates that the large drum on the right of the image is similar to the drums played by *tumba* groups in Cuba in 2001 at the time of her study.[492] Starr refers to the *tumba* drums in this way. "Some of the drums were so big that the players placed them sideways on the ground and sat astride them. Others were smaller and had bells on them." He explains that these instruments were similar to drums played by the Bantus and the Carabalí of West Africa.[493]

Tumba francesa music of the early 1800s had a particular beat called the *cinquillo* that made it recognizable as the music of the refugees.[494] This particular cadence, described as a kind of syncopated beat by Sublette, was the foundation for a number of dance and music styles including the *cocoyé* of the *tumba francesa* groups.[495] Manuel makes a point of noting that the *cinquillo* rhythm arrived in Cuba with the refugees from

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[491] Frederick Gomes Cassidy and Robert Brock Le Page, "French Set-Girls," in the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 189.
[492] Bettelheim,148
[493] Starr, 188.
[494] Starr, 188-189.
[495] Sublette, 134-135.

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Saint-Domingue.[496] Sublette describes the *cinquillo* rhythm in this way, "If you're counting the measure as a 1-2-3-4, it's a bump on the *and* of two and a smack on four."[497] Carpentier tells us that the French Creole melodies sung by the *tumba francesa* performers used this *cinquillo* as a base for their songs and it was this rhythm, in part, that identified the performance as being French Creole derived.[498] "It has the rhythmic regularity, the symmetry of certain percussive rituals of voodoo," wrote Carpentier in discussing the *cinquillo*, and it was the basis for such music as the Haitian *méringue*. While minuets were *de rigueur* in the elite drawing rooms of Santiago de Cuba, after the immigration began the conical drums and *cinquillo*-based musical styles of the immigrants of color found a place amongst the other Afro-Cuban performances during the city's celebrations. As in other urban areas in colonial Cuba, public Catholic religious festivals in Santiago provided opportunities for the entire populace to take to the streets to celebrate. One popular religious holiday that brought the populace of Santiago de Cuba out of their homes to dance in the streets was the feast referred to as the Día de San Juan celebrated on June 24. Cuban scholars José Millet and Rafael Brea, writing in 1989, describe *tumba francesa* societies participating in the Día de San Juan celebration in 1800 as playing their drums and dancing in a distinct style.[499] It is not clear if the performance in 1800 referred to by Millet and Brea was the first time the *tumba* groups had participated publicly in the religious street processions, but their presence on celebratory feast days continued to be noted during the first half of the nineteenth century.[500]

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[496] Manuel, "Contradance and Quadrille Culture in the Caribbean," in *Creolizing Contradance in the Caribbean*, ed. Peter Manuel (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 22.
[497] Sublette, 135.
[498] Carpentier, *Music,* 149.
[499] Millet and Brea, 35.
[500] Bettelheim, 142. In1845 there is mention of the *francesas* processing during the carnival celebration. Bettelheim does not provide a reference regarding this incident. Much of her information about twentieth-

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The street parties and religious processions were not simply disorganized impromptu gatherings, though there were undoubtedly some of those. On this festival day all classes came together in the public arena of the city to dance and make music and to process through the streets in groups known as *comparsas*. These *comparsas* came together months beforehand to choose the theme, costumes, and dances for the season's celebration.[501] In his 1937 work, Fernando Ortiz, describes Havana *comparsas* as follows: "La *comparsa* habanero consiste, simplemente, en una compañía de mascarados con un plan común para representar conjuntamente un tema colectivo, como un episodio folklórico, un acto de teatro ambulante o un paso de proceión." [The Havana comparsa simply consists of a company of masqueraders with a common plan to represent together a collective theme of a folkloric episode, a traveling theater act or a passing procession][502] *Comparsa* groups existed in Santiago de Cuba participating alongside other groups that enthusiastically joined in the street processions.[503] Sublette writes, "We know that there were already *comparsas*—groups that went out parading in uniform costume on festival days; the first known mention of such a group is in Santiago de Cuba in 1679. Blacks also participated in these *comparsas*, though they were not allowed to go out masked."[504]

In Havana, the public street processions associated with carnivals or other religious festivals introduced onlookers, both those who lived in Cuba as well as travelers to the island, to music they might not otherwise have been privy to on a regular basis. So

century *tumba* groups comes from oral history and it is possible that this information is amongst the stories she collected as part of the direct communication with participants.

[501] Portuondo Zúñiga, 242

[502] *Las comparsas populares del carnaval habanero: cuestión resuelta* (Havana: Molina y Cia, 1937), 11.

[503] Portuondo Zúñiga, 242.

[504] Sublette, 85. See also Chasteen, *National Rhythms,* 62.

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too did the black *francesas* in Santiago de Cuba use street processions to signify performatively what they wished to emphasize about themselves. This was a time when the *cabildos de nación* came together dressed for celebrating, much as they did in Havana, to dance and sing in the streets and the black *comparsa* groups that were formed by *libres de color* ("en particular los estratos compuestos de negros libres quienes organizaban las comparsas y los bailes," [in particular the layers (levels/classes) made up of free blacks who organized the comparsas and the dances]), took advantage of these festival days to celebrate the *tumba francesa* music.[505]

Public street processions provided a unique occasion for whites and blacks to mingle together in celebration. Walter Goodman the British artist who lived in Cuba from 1864 through 1868, experienced the mingling of the different classes on festival days during his stay in Cuba, "Here is another and a better comparsa, of mulattoes, with cheeks of flaming vermilion, wigs of yellow tow, and false beards... They are preceded by a band of music: a big drum, hand tambours, basket rattles, conch shells, and a nutmeg grater."[506] Goodman does not indicate whether the dancers and musicians themselves are "French" but he describes them as stopping at the doorways to flirt with "French" mulatto girls who they know by name. Eventually the entire group, including some of the spectators pressed their way inside the house, on this particular occasion, to continue the party.[507] In addition to the minuets being performed in private drawing rooms and the

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[505] Portuondo Zúñiga, 168
[506] Goodman, *Pearl,* 99-100.
[507] Goodman, 100.

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operas enjoyed at El Tivolí and other public venues, it was especially this music with both French and West African elements that would also become a part of the *identidad santiaguera*.[508]

A Distinct Rhythm

The public processions brought attention to the *tumba* groups, but it was their *cinquillo*-based musical style that really distinguished them. Describing an incident that took place in Santiago de Cuba, novelist Alejo Carpentier writes of one nineteenth-century musician, “One night in 1836, finding himself at the café La Venus, the excellent Catalan musician Casamitjana (author of Cuban songs well loved in Santiago) witnessed the passing by of a noisy carnival procession, led by two mulatto women, María de la Luz and María de la O., who were singing the *Cocoyé.* On the spot, astounded by the revelation, he wrote down the verses and the rhythms.” During the tumult of Carnival day, with numerous groups processing through the streets singing and playing many different kinds of music, it is significant that the *cocoyé* melody sung by the Marías stood out as distinct. In spite of the fact that this Catalan musician was already well known as the author of many songs popular in Cuba, something about the songs he heard on this occasion struck him in such a way that he recorded details about them. A few days later Casamitjana played this melody at a concert and while some in attendance were outraged at the obviously African influenced rhythms embodied in this tune, others were not and the “applause filled the plaza.”[509] What Casamitjana likely witnessed was a *tumba francesa* comparsa singing and performing the *cinquillo*-based *cocoyé* melodies already

[508] Portuondo Zúñiga, 168.
[509] Carpentier, *Music,* 150-151

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associated with the Saint-Domingue immigrants and their descendants. The name of this mulatto woman he observed, María de la O, has been preserved in a popular song title, which would later become a well-loved Carnival song. Starr writes, "Long a fixture of carnival celebrations in Santiago, the singer María de la O had acquired a legendary fame throughout the island. Among the street processions in Havana's carnival in 1853 had been a figure representing the renowned Afro-Cuban woman from Santiago, accompanied by several dozen masked blacks, a brass band from the local garrison, and masqueraded horsemen."[510] While it seems she was actually dancing in the streets in 1836, by 1853 she was being portrayed in the processions by the Carnival revelers who clearly remembered her and her *cocoyé* music.

In the 1850s *tumba francesa* groups were still well known and active in the Santiagueran public festivities and their music was unique enough that when played for street audiences the style was easily connected to the descendants of the Saint-Domingue immigrants. Louis Moreau Gottschalk was enamored with the *francesa* rhythms he encountered in Santiago de Cuba. The descendent of immigrants from Saint-Domingue himself, Gottschalk grew up in New Orleans where he had heard the African music that was performed in the city's Congo Square.[511] The Congo Square performances in New Orleans were held in a cleared area on Rampart Street. Here hundreds of Africans and people of African heritage, enslaved and free, gathered together on Sundays to play music and dance.[512] While Gottschalk's formal music studies took place in France, his early musical influences including the Congo Square performances were infused with the sounds of Africa. Gottschalk first visited Cuba in 1854 and he attended the carnival

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[510] Starr, 180
[511] Sublette, 148
[512] Walker, *No More*, 2-3.

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celebrations of that year in Santiago de Cuba. He arrived in July just when the entire city was getting ready for the festival. "Gottschalk arrived at the very moment Santiago was throwing itself into its annual three-day festival, a religious event accompanied by an explosion of balls, wild street dancing, and madcap parades involving the entire population, both black and white."[513] All the activities geared towards the Carnival gave Gottschalk an opportunity to observe the many musical styles circulating throughout Santiago de Cuba in the mid-nineteenth century. Among the groups he saw was a *comparsa* of the *tumba francesa* "he heard the drummers of the *tumba francesa* playing in a comparsa."[514] In fact he was said to have, "encountered a rollicking street aggregation of Creole-speaking blacks who were to seize his imagination: the *Tumba Francesa*."[515]

Gottschalk spent much time in Santiago de Cuba absorbing the interesting cultural mix of the city. When he first encountered the distinctive *tumba francesa* groups during Carnival of 1854, he was so taken with the musical style, that he composed a song based on the popular carnival tune *Maria de la O*.[516] On his return to the island for a second trip he remembered his Oriente experience well enough to undertake the daunting task of bringing the *tumba francesa* group to Havana to perform in the Tacón theater as part of his ambitious "monster concert."[517] Aside from the audacity of placing an African-descended group onstage before an elite audience, the effort just to transport this group from Santiago to Havana was monumental. Sublette points out that *"Habaneros* and *Santiagueros* scarcely knew each other; the journey between the two cities was long and

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[513] Starr, 188.
[514] Sublette, 149
[515] Starr, 188
[516] Chasteen, *National Rhythms,* 4.
[517] Starr, 291

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arduous."[518] To illustrate the difficulty of travel in 1850s Cuba, Gottschalk describes taking a much shorter trip by train from Cárdenas, where he had given a concert, back to Havana and even that comparatively easy trip was arduous. He writes that, "The locomotive scarcely makes six miles an hour and advances with the worst possible will, now and then uttering lamentable groans." The trip took him three days![519] Yet he was impressed enough with the *tumba francesa* music, or delighted by the prospect of shocking his Havana audience, that he endured the challenges of including them in his concert.

Gottschalk's monster concert in Havana was apparently organized in order to honor the Spanish captain-general Francisco Serrano y Domínguez' on the occasion of his inauguration. "In spite of the fact that he already commanded a veritable army of musicians," writes Gottchalk's biographer Frederick Starr, "he now had the inspired idea of supplementing his ensemble with the entire band of Afro-Cuban drummers, La Tumba Francesa, whom he had heard six years earlier at the Carnival in Santiago de Cuba." Gottschalk was insistent that this group be brought to Havana to perform because there were no *tumba francesa* groups to be found in that city.[520] While we can only speculate the audience's response to the *tumba* group on stage we can assume that it was varied.[521] The *tumba francesa* performers of Santiago de Cuba were already considered distinctive amongst the other black musicians of the 1850s and their influence had begun to impact

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[518] Sublette, 151.
[519] Gottschalk, 32.
[520] Starr, 291.
[521] Because it is not clear whether the *tumba francesa* performers took the stage at Gottschalk's February 17, 1860 concert or the one he staged on April 17, 1861 audience reaction is unclear. Starr indicates that the 1860 concert (where according to him the "French" blacks performed) was a huge success writing that, "the Havana reviewers judged the Festival a huge success, unprecedented in the annals of Cuban music." (Starr, 294) The concert staged in 1861 was, according to Starr, a failure. Starr writes of this performance, "There was no hiding the total humiliation that he [Gottschalk] had inflicted upon himself." (Starr, 306)

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other dance styles enjoyed by white Cubans. By 1856, elite Cubans were openly enjoying the *contredanse* with its African rhythmic influences. In fact, during a formal dance in Santiago to honor General Concha, Carpentier notes that the most aristocratic elements of society, "furiously surrendered themselves to the rhythms of a *contredanse* titled 'Tu madre es conga.'"[522] Elite attendees at Concha's dance who had "surrendered themselves" to this African-influenced *contredanse* were likely also sitting in the audience when Gottschalk threw back the stage curtains to reveal the leader of the group or the *tumba* "king." "Nothing like this had ever occurred before," writes Starr. "To heighten the exotic effect, he [Gottschalk] placed the leader of the Tumba Francesa directly in front of the orchestra, behind his enormous drum."[523] By the time of the concert at the Tacón this enthusiasm for the rhythms of the Oriente appear to have been strong enough to compel Gottschalk to undertake the project of bringing the *tumba francesa* musicians across the island to present them in concert in honor of the captain general.

The *tumba francesa* traditions in Cuba have continued well into the twenty-first century. Ned Sublette refers to two well-known *tumba francesa* societies still practicing dances and playing music associated with the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century immigrants at the time of his writing in 2004. In addition, he writes that "In 1977, in a nearly inaccessible region of the foothills of the Sierra Cristal, some miles from the town of Sagua de Tánamo in the province of Holguín, a local investigator discovered a third, previously unknown *tumba francesa* group—elderly Haitian-descended coffee workers who conserved the memories of the old songs, which they still sang while working, and who had the old drums. The only known rural *tumba francesa*, it had been tucked away

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[522] Carpentier, *Music,* 157.
[523] Starr, 291

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all that time in the isolation of the mountains of Oriente."[524] The traditions and practices of these groups in spite of how they may have developed in Cuba under the various musical influences that likely impacted the performances over the years indicate the tenacity of the Saint-Domingue immigrants' cultural style. Throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and even twenty-first centuries, societies claiming some kind of association with a French antecedent continue to exist in Cuba.[525] The people who participate in these groups are continually referred to as the *francesas* and what makes these groups stand out is not just their association with Haiti but rather their specific identification with the immigrants from Saint-Domingue who had arrived in Cuba after 1791.

Bettelheim also mentions two modern day carnival groups—possibly the two that Sublette refers to but does not name—the Tumba Francesa and Tajona groups. She indicates that during Carnival when the various societies compete for popularity amongst the crowds, these groups do not compete with the other groups – they perform alone, "as a tribute to a special and vital aspect of Santiago history, the presence of a strong Haitian French culture in eastern Cuba."[526] Ongoing migrations and interactions between Cuba and Haiti and the Haitian diaspora continued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and no doubt infused the early dance traditions with ever evolving styles, yet the modern *francesa* groups still perform dances blending both old French-styles as well as African-styled movements during Carnival for eager audiences. The

[524] Sublette, 118-119
[525] See Bettelheim, 142 and Guanche, 282,
[526] Bettelheim, 141

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dancers wear costumes that recall 18th century French ballroom attire and perform to the sounds of drums and other African-styled musical instruments.[527]

In spite of the fragmentary documentation of this long history, during which there were subsequent waves of migration from Haiti to Cuba, what can be understood about the *tumba* groups and the cultural traditions they practiced is that some of the descendants of the French immigrants of color who came to Santiago de Cuba from Saint-Domingue after the slave uprising at the end of the eighteenth-century, continued to perform dances and play music that associated them with Saint-Domingue. Their efforts to hold onto some version of their memories of a Saint-Dominguan culture in their new home seems to be linked with the "moment" in history of their arrival in Cuba. These were not just immigrants with a yen for a new life in a new land. These were people who had left the colony under duress and who were forced to recreate themselves and their lives in a foreign environment. They may have left behind most of what had been significant to their lives, but what they were able to bring, emerged in cultural activities they practiced in their new home. In discussing sacred rituals in her work, Haitian Vodou, Karen McCarthy Brown writes, "When a song has been forgotten but we still know the steps to the dance, we can usually dance that song back into consciousness."[528] Members of the *tumba francesa* groups' determination to continue performing French Creole traditions and possibly "dance their songs back into consciousness" was a part of their “settling in” process and this act of establishing roots in their new home helped define them as a distinct group within the Cuban social hierarchy.

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[527] Sublette, 117. In his article, Alén Rodríguez mentions that modern tumba groups use "three large single-headed drums." These drums are in varying sizes with the largest one called the *premier*, the next in size is called the *bulá,* and the smallest is the *bulá segón* or just the *segón.* From his article, p 81

[528] Karen McCarthy Brown. "Serving the Spirits. The Ritual Economy of Haitian Vodou." In Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002), 217

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Throughout this study my research has focused on how Cuba's *libres de color* used their social organizations to address their more restricted situation after 1844. *La Escalera* resulted in a more proscribed existence for many of these men and women who had begun to experience some economic advancement during the 1830s. Rather than acquiesce to these limitations free blacks used their social organizations to advance their various agendas. I have shown how some *libres de color* in Matanzas aligned themselves with *criollo* philanthropic efforts, which I argue was an opportunity to position themselves within the social hierarchy of the emerging public sphere. I have also examined how the Havana Abakuá organizations provided a means for black men to acquire economic power on the docks of Havana and manipulate their image through the public performances they participated in during the processions on the *Día de Reyes*. In Santiago de Cuba and, to a lesser extent, other cities on the southeastern coast of the island, families associated with the Saint-Domingue immigration were perceived as being a recognizable community with a distinct culture. This was in large part due to this group's continued practices of French Creole dance and music styles. At a time when colonial authorities had increased their surveillance of the activities of Cuba's *libres de color* in the western side of the island, this class found that their social organizations provided a means for them to shape the way they were perceived in Cuban society.

The "French" immigrants who settled in Santiago de Cuba and the surrounding area married and had families, established rural plantations and urban businesses, and were employed in agricultural and other industries. They participated in the region's

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public celebrations especially those that allowed for dancing and processing through the streets, infusing these events with new life. At these times, the *francesas* as many Cubans referred to them, publicly displayed dance and musical styles that were a part of their private social gatherings. Just as in Havana where observers commented on what they assumed were ethnically distinct African nations amongst the processions on the Día de Reyes, so too did the *tumba francesa* Carnival performers in Santiago de Cuba display themselves as a group distinct from other black dancers. Observers pointed out the French-styled dresses worn by the women performers, the enormous drums their musicians played, and the unique rhythms and *cocoyé* song melodies undergirded by the *cinquillo* cadence performed by black *francesas* and constructed them as the culture of French-descended blacks. And yet the immigrants in Santiago de Cuba whose public dance performances resulted in the emergence of a distinct "French" culture, do not appear to have been shaping their performances in response to the restrictions against their communities resulting from the *La Escalera* purge. In fact, while directed against all *libres de color* throughout the island, the restrictions do not appear to have been enforced in the Oriente region of Cuba.

Unlike *libres de color* in other parts of the island who made use of their social organizations to push back against these increased restrictions against their freedoms, the Saint-Domingue immigrants and their descendants seem to have been performing publicly for other reasons—they used their social organizations as a means of asserting their identity as former Saint-Dominguans associated with a French culture that many Cuban *criollos* held in high esteem. This action could have gone a long way towards counteracting the potential negative stereotype of their blackness. Their deliberate choice

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to practice French Creole performance styles while recreating their lives in a new country indicates a determination to shape the nature of their participation in Santiagueran cultural activities on their terms. In doing so they managed to define themselves as a distinct group within the social hierarchy in nineteenth-century Santiago de Cuba. The French "stamp" that permeates Santiagueran identity is due in part to the impact of the immigrants from Saint-Domingue. Amongst this group, *libres de color* who perpetuated aspects of the Saint-Domingue culture through *tumba francesa* performances maintained their integrity as a cultural group.

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Epilogue

In the first half of the nineteenth-century Cuban *libres de color* faced significant legal restrictions that hindered their access to education and employment opportunities. They also faced significant social constraints that impacted their ability to live their lives as they chose. Hugely popular stage performances and writings of the period ridiculed African-based cultural practices further constraining their ability to participate in the emerging public sphere as equals with whites. This study has examined how urban *libres de color* responded to legal and social boundaries whites placed on their advancement in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba. *Public Performance* reveals that *libres de color* used their social organizations to present public performances that challenged restrictions as well as negative images of their community, and asserted their intention to participate in urban society on their own terms.

Free blacks had been subject to social and legal restrictions in the island since soon after Spanish conquest, however by the second half of the eighteenth century when Cuban plantation owners, spurred on by the developing sugar industry, began to import more and more African slaves into the colony these restrictions increased. The rapid rise in Cuba's population of blacks coupled with the long-established practice of *coartación* meant that Cuban towns filled with enterprising free black men and women who became well entrenched in the urban economy. The social hierarchy of the time did not easily accommodate this group because many whites equated blackness with subjugation and thus viewed *libres de color* as social inferiors. In addition to rejecting the notion of free blacks as their social equals, many whites were concerned about collusion between *libres*

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de color and slaves, especially after the success of the large-scale slave insurrection in northern Saint-Domingue in 1791. Added to this, the economic advancement of some free blacks and the visible presence of armed black militia members created tension between *libres de color* and whites during the 1820s through the 1840s.

During this period there had been debates amongst intellectuals and authorities about how best to deal with the threat of slave uprisings – especially with regards to the potential role played by free blacks. *Libres de color* were targeted in the *La Escalera* purge and suffered violent reprisals as well as tremendously increased restrictions to their freedoms as a consequence. Afro-Cubans who had gained freedom and expected that this would eventually lead to social equality found instead that their ethnically organized *cabildos* and other associations were placed under increased surveillance. I have shown how blacks, faced with limited options for circumventing these restrictions, used these very organizations to present public performances representing themselves in their own terms. They were able to do this because of the strong tradition of self-organizing and the significance of music and dance to their communities, and also because performance had become a highly politicized site used by whites as evidence of black inferiority.

From the first centuries after the Spanish arrived in Cuba, masters had encouraged enslaved blacks who shared a common ethnic or linguistic background to form associations. Enslaved and later free blacks were allowed to meet together in these organizations where they practiced religious rituals often involving music and dance. Many whites held a fascination for African cultural activities that ranged from curiosity to repulsion or, frequently, combined both. White *criollos* mocked African culture in newspaper articles and through popular stage performances in the first half of the

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nineteenth century. Performers blackened their faces and created caricatures of black "types" making fun of how blacks spoke, dressed, and danced. Regardless of what whites thought of black public performances, the fact that they were taking notice of these activities and even incorporating them into their own performances worked to Afro-Cubans' advantage. Some blacks used their performances to fashion images of themselves that they controlled. They did this not just by declaring their abilities to participate as equals in Cuban society but they showcased their intentions publicly through with music and dance.

By examining the public performances of three types of Afro-Cuban associations I have examined the diversity of free people of color in urban areas as they shaped their images in the face of restrictions. The Matanzas group hosted a formal dance to raise funds for the charitable organization *La Casa de Benificencia* formed by white *criollos* as part of their modernizing agenda. This group seemed to be declaring to Cuban elites determined to define "civilized" Cuban society as white that they did not intend to take a subordinate role. They too could dance minuets and dress in fashionable European-inspired garb and they too had the same desire to "improve" their environment that whites did. They used their public performance to shape an image of themselves as being equal to whites.

By contrast the men of the secret Abakuá societies embraced a tough street culture to fashion an image of manhood in a society that sought to emasculate them. The Spanish notion of masculinity was closely linked to honor and from the white perspective black men, slave or free, had no power and certainly no honor. Members of the Abakuá defined themselves differently. As African-descended men they had their own strict

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notion of honor and masculinity, which they displayed on the streets of Havana during public processions on the Day of the Kings. In spite of increased surveillance of *cabildo* activities in the post-*La Escalera* period they used their music and dance events on the Roman Catholic feast day *El Día de Reyes* to announce their intention to follow their own code of justice and honor rather than that of the colonial authorities, and they parlayed this performed power into real economic power on the docks of Havana.

French culture was considered by whites in nineteenth-century Cuba to be the standard of civilization. French music, French dances, and French fashions were all sought after by those hoping to present themselves as "civilized," and in Cuba French Creole culture signified as French. Even as they settled into Cuban communities the Saint-Domingue immigrants and their descendants continued to practice French Creole traditions that defined them as *francesas.* An important part of this was the distinctive forms of music and dance they performed publicly, the *tumba francesa.* So successful were they at maintaining a separate culture that by 1844 when few of this population had actually been born in French-held territory and many had taken oaths of allegiance to Spain and married Cuban *criollos* they continued to showcase their "French" culture through their public dance performances. The *francesas* appear to have been self-defining through public performances in ways that associated their communities with "French-ness."

Between 1844 and 1868, in spite of restrictions against their freedoms, free people of color continued to participate in their associations and to sponsor public performances. Through these music and dance events, diverse groups of *libres de color* found ways to

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define themselves in the manner of their own choosing and create opportunities to participate in the emerging Cuban public sphere.

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