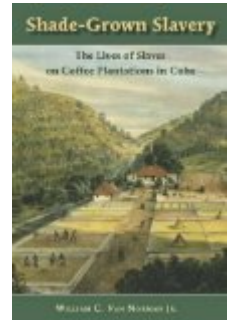


William C. Van Norman. *Shade-Grown Slavery: The Lives of Slaves on Coffee Plantations in Cuba.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012. 232 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8265-1915-3.



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Critics have long bemoaned the fact that sugar's relationship to the Caribbean has served erroneously as a "metonymy for the history of the whole region." In this "truly Caribbean metanarrative" of sorts, Pedro L. San Miguel has rightly asserted that "sugar and coerced labour are the keywords of a powerful paradigm that interprets the region's history almost in terms of the growth, maturity and demise of the plantation complex." [1] In spite of the region's commonalities, the Caribbean is inherently complex and remarkably diverse. Newer scholarship constantly enriches that story.

Perhaps no facet of Caribbean historiography is as intimately tied to sugar as that of Cuba. Part and parcel of the sweeping eighteenth-century fiscal reforms enacted by the Bourbon monarchy, sugar cultivation was one of several means promoted by intellectuals like Francisco Arango y Parreño that the Crown endorsed in order to achieve agricultural and economic transformations in Cuba. Sugar, however, would not achieve its prominence there until the nineteenth century.

Its meteoric rise coincided with production of other goods such as coffee, tobacco, and indigo in an era of unprecedented growth that Dale W. Tomich famously calls the "second slavery." [2]

In *Shade-Grown Slavery: The Lives of Slaves on Coffee Plantations in Cuba*, author William C. Van Norman Jr. argues that while sugar eventually came to dominate Cuba's economic life and historical narrative, "Cuba was always much more than just a sugar island." To demonstrate this, Van Norman shifts his focus to the origins of western Cuba's coffee industry and its iconic image of the coffee plantation, or *cafetal*. He suggests that the cafetales littering the *vuelta abajo* region southwest of Havana "were major contributors in expanding the frontier, populating the island, and broadening the colony's economic base." The author deals with the ways in which the daily lives of slaves conformed to the specific needs of the cafetales on which they lived and labored. While they shared much in common with other slaves throughout Cuba, he contends that there were significant differences as well that gave *cafetal*

slaves "a distinctive experience compared to those on other types of farms" (p. 1).

Chapter 1 traces the origins of the coffee industry and the developing plantation infrastructure of western Cuba, and introduces several recurring themes integral to the work as a whole. It was in the "often romanticized coffee zone" (p. 10) of Cuba's *vuelta abajo* that the daily lives of cafetal slaves had "layers of complexity" stemming from "the circumstances of their enslavement" (pp. 7-8). The first seeds were brought from Saint Domingue in 1748 by Jose Maria de la Torre. Coffee's growth was both slow and uncertain until about 1790. The crop was but one of many deliberate agricultural strategies implemented by the Spanish Crown to bolster its revenue in the years following Britain's occupation of Havana during the Seven Years' War. These plans, however, had clear limitations. For instance, the colony faced a glaring labor shortage. This deficiency was remedied in part by Charles IV's royal *cédula* of February 28, 1789, opening the African slave trade to Cuba. The move set the stage for the first phase of commercial coffee expansion in the wake of the revolt in Saint Domingue.

Much of the time Van Norman deals ambiguously with the Haitian Revolution's impact on Cuba's changing economic fortunes. He posits that the elements capable of producing a competitive market crop in coffee were well in place before the revolution created an opportunity both pivotal and exploitable. Tellingly, he claims that "planters in Cuba had their own variety of motivations to enter the arena of coffee production, which cannot be facily explained as a reaction to the revolution underway on the neighboring island" (p. 20). More was at work than the vague statement suggests. Van Norman does not acknowledge, for example, the "fundamental change in landholding and land use" underway that Franklin W. Knight argues is key to understanding "the entire structure of Cuban society" itself.[3] Such changes required a sense of urgency,

as they allowed for the critical expansion of the plantation system that Cuba needed to fully embrace its newfound opportunities. More importantly, as Louis A. Pérez Jr. notes, it was only because of the revolution that "Cuban producers inherited all at once rising prices, increasing demand, and mounting world shortages." [4] None of these vital factors appeared in Cuba before the Haitian Revolution changed that situation dramatically.

A more explicit sense of Haiti's impact came through information about plantation management practices. Local knowledge of the coffee crop came from many sources, which included refugees from Saint Domingue. A large influx of assorted foreigners brought diverse techniques and helped to disseminate the seminal works of Pablo Boloix and Pierre-Joseph Laborie throughout Cuban agricultural society. More often than not, according to Van Norman, contemporary observations indicated strong similarities in matters ranging from slave management, planting standards, shifting priorities, and practical strategies to the most general needs of the plantation.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the various agents responsible for transforming the coffee industry. The broad era from about 1790 to 1820 was a period "marked by sustained growth and consistent profits," built on a "multifaceted" agricultural infrastructure envisioned by an ambitious class of elites with the use of slave labor (p. 34). Van Norman reminds his audience that all things were not solely devoted to sugar. "The Cuban economy," he writes, "was an interconnected system that united rural and urban interests and spanned crop based segments through family ties that were at the core of Cuban expansion throughout the first three to four decades of the nineteenth century." Disappointingly, he does not demonstrate how such "interconnection" was the order of the day or how it affected the lives of slaves. We are told briefly instead that Cuba's planter class used varied strategies and diverse

holdings to achieve and maintain their wealth. The eventual turn to sugar is said to have been far from sudden or inevitable, but was rather a "product of transformations at the local and personal level in response to capitalist pressures that arose from outside political events" (p. 43). Whereas sugar had gone on to astronomical heights, coffee faltered by the mid-1840s in response to what the author suggests was a combination of the declining power of local elites, lower profits, devastating hurricanes, and foreign investors seeking quick and hefty profits in sugar.

While these broad economic forces came to impact the colony, its slaves gave their lives and labor to Cuba's rising master class. Planters appear to have followed the advice of sugar masters in building their coffee plantations. Overwhelmingly male populations of African slaves cleared the lands, planted crops, and built the structures of plantation slavery needed for producing coffee. There were few women required at this time. After some five to six years, the cafetal typically reached the stage befitting commercial production. At this point, Van Norman reasons that slave life synced to the needs of the delicate coffee plants and their yields destined for market. At every stage the methods of planting, transplanting, weeding, trimming, picking, and processing the coffee crop all required careful attention from slave laborers. Naturally, planters came to value dexterity over brute strength in cafetal slave laborers for such reasons.

Among the issues tackled here is that of slave labor organization. Unsurprisingly, the author finds instances of the task system, gang labor, and "modified" (or hybridized) forms in use on Cuban cafetales. Flexibility, as he indicates, was the general rule. As the plantation progressed beyond the first stage into the lengthy commercial period that followed, labor requirements stabilized for approximately the next fifteen to eighteen years of mature coffee production. According to Van Norman, "Plantation owners typically regulated their

slave holdings to maximize production" (p. 57). Masters did so largely by importing more female slaves, who both cost less than males and gave birth to a rising number of children as well. The process of creolization appears to have accelerated. Evidence of family units and more stable conditions on cafetales indicate that such sites featured a "unique environment, with opportunities for personal and collective survival through biological and cultural creativity and construction" (p. 61). The myriad ways in which the cafetal itself varied or what those variations might have meant for slave life are left unexamined. Apart from limited comparisons with *ingenios* (sugar plantations), it is also entirely unclear as to what exactly lent the cafetal its qualities that Van Norman finds so "unique" and filled with those "opportunities" not also had by slaves whose lives synced to *their* work, crops, and routines outside of the sugar industry.

The second half of the work is concerned more explicitly with the day-to-day aspects of slave agency, as laborers craftily negotiated issues of power, space, and structure. Readers might be surprised to read the following statement about slave life on the cafetales of Cuba: "Their experience of slavery more closely resembled what they might have expected of slave life in Africa, in which they were able to live and work in a stable environment, raising their own food, establishing relationships both among themselves and with the slaveholding class, and having children: in short they lived a more 'normal' life than their counterparts in other circumstances" (p. 59). In both tone and spirit, such phrases appear much too frequently in *Shade-Grown Slavery*. The author often spends a significant amount of time talking about the singular idea of the cafetal in almost glowing terms. Only much later in these discussions does he append the obvious assertion that slavery was a brutal system of exploitation and cruelty in a simple sentence or two. The imprecise language in the above example insists on a comparative degree of normalcy in the cafetal

experience, though it is unclear to what "other circumstances" the comparison should be made.

Within the so called "cognitive structures" of the plantations, Van Norman argues that slaves routinely challenged masters and made its areas "neo-African spaces." Indebted to the work of B. W. Higman, Theresa Singleton, and James Delle, the author sees the *cafetal* as a built environment bent entirely on control and profitability. He does point out that many slaves on *cafetales* were housed in *bohios* (small huts) with easy access to provision grounds. As a result, they lived in less crowded dwellings and had an abundant and diverse food supply, better overall health, and a higher rate of reproduction than slaves on *ingenios*. Such measures reduced total plantation expenditures, kept slaves under control, and served to reinforce the system of slavery.

Nowhere is Van Norman's emphasis on slave agency more on display than in his discussions of *coartación* (self-purchase) and slave uprisings. As to the first matter, the author echoes Alexander Von Humboldt's view that slaves' ability to purchase their own freedom largely depended upon where they labored and the nature of the work performed. *Cafetal* slaves are "overrepresented" in the overall totals due to the advantages of life and work demands of that particular setting, in the author's estimation. What these totals contribute to our understanding of the practice is somewhat more difficult to gauge. Admitting that the absolute numbers of slaves increased by over 50 percent, Van Norman points out that so did the free population by some 43 percent from 1827 to 1841 (p. 119). A total of about 13 percent of slaves purchased their freedom in the long period from 1790 to 1880 (p. 140). The author rightly admits that the total tallies are limited, but then somewhat skirts the issue only to suggest that he is less concerned with numbers than with arguing "that many more slaves participated in the system than actually saw the process through to the end" (p. 118).

In the areas of slave culture and religious practices, the author sees the *cafetal* as a crucial setting that allowed for "continuities as well as re-configurations and propagation" (p. 91). In examining the practices of Lucumi (Yoruban) and Congolese slaves--two groups prominently represented on *cafetales*--Van Norman borrows much from James H. Sweet's work on Central Africans in colonial Brazil. He finds evidence of African survivals, but suggests that slaves sometimes borrowed local aspects from life on the *cafetales*. African drumming, dancing, and food rituals all informed slave life, he says, and served as sources of community building, resistance, ritual, and power. It is the endurance of such cultural boundaries stemming from a distinctively "west African cosmology" (p. 105) that the author finds cumulatively represent the driving force behind slave resistance.[5]

As his primary concern is to demonstrate slave agency, Van Norman boldly insists that scholars have "failed to take seriously" the complexity of slave motives because they have "often understood slave rebellions as reactions to harsh conditions or as part of the struggle for freedom" (p. 123). He rejects such causes in place of "informed cultural calculations" (p. 123), which the author suggests came from Africans who "arrived in Cuba with an understanding of slavery based on their own backgrounds that included ideas concerning the parameters of proper relationships, including that of master and slave" (p. 130). The rhetorical emphasis on these remarkably broad "cultural norms" allows Van Norman to disingenuously reframe every action as an example of slave agency. Among the incidents and uprisings he cites from 1825, 1827, 1833, 1835, 1842, and 1844, all but one actually appear as reactions to "harsh conditions" experienced on the *cafetales*.

In spite of its recent printing, Van Norman's *Shade-Grown Slavery* is a very dated work of social history. A profoundly disconcerting theme of

disconnection runs throughout the manuscript. Van Norman's myopic focus on western Cuba's *vuelta abajo* region makes for a world unto itself that remains largely unconnected to the rest of Cuba and, more importantly, to its prominent place within the burgeoning Atlantic economy. While a few sporadic sentences hint at broader forces at work, their insertion makes such gaps all the more glaring. When it comes to evidence the author engages haphazardly with a badly outdated and largely irrelevant body of historiography; has frequent instances of inconsistent or otherwise missing citations; and relies heavily on imprecise language and blanket assertions to bolster his claims. The misplaced principal emphasis on slave agency causes Van Norman to slight a host of issues ranging from the enduring and unrivaled impact of the Haitian Revolution to the proper meaning and roles of enslaved women in Cuban slave society. Places of redress come too infrequently and too late in the manuscript.

Beyond the notion that cafetal slaves exercised agency that was, in the author's words, "exceptional" (p. 121), the lives of the slaves collectively depicted are part of a bizarre, decontextualized world surrounded by mere shadow figures for masters, and unforgiving and imposing structures that littered the plantation landscape.[6] I commend the author's willingness to challenge the traditional narrative of Cuban history and its asymmetrical emphasis on sugar in retelling its storied past. Unfortunately, I cannot recommend a work that shows an unwillingness to engage an enormously rich and readily available body of newer historiography in order to make his points. Van Norman treads over much of the same ground but tries to lay claim to the originality of his findings. His choice to do so has produced a volume that has profoundly stripped Cuba's cafetal slaves from the reality of their daily lives and circumstances. In place of a nuanced scholarly approach that deepens our knowledge as to the diversity of Atlantic slavery, readers are left with

more of a political tome that falls woefully short of fulfilling its aims.

Notes

[1]. Pedro L. San Miguel, "Economic Activities Other Than Sugar," in *General History of the Caribbean, Volume IV: The Long Nineteenth Century: Nineteenth-Century Transformations*, ed. K. O. Laurence (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2011), 104.

[2]. Tomich has employed the concept for years, but see his excellent essay "The Wealth of Empire: Francisco Arango y Parreño, Political Economy, and the Second Slavery in Cuba," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (January 2003): 4-28, and *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). An examination of recent historiography on the subject is found in Anthony E. Kaye, "The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Southern History* 75 (August 2009): 627-50.

[3]. Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 15, 17.

[4]. Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution, Third Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 55, and *Winds of Change: Hurricanes and the Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 39. Examples of newer scholarship available before Van Norman's publication emphasizing the importance of Cuba's transformation after Haiti are ubiquitous, but see: Ada Ferrer, "Speaking of Haiti: Slavery, Revolution, and Freedom in Cuban Slave Testimony," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009): 223-47; and Michele Reid-Vazquez, *The Year of the Lash: Free People of Color in Cuba and the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

[5]. Van Norman's treatment on this subject could have benefited enormously from the essays found in *The Yoruban Diaspora in the Atlantic World*, ed. Toyin Falola and Matt D. Childs (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004); and Solimar Otero, *Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010).

[6]. Criticisms made by Peter A. Coclanis, James Oakes, and Walter Johnson about scholarship emphasizing slave agency are particularly relevant to Van Norman's work. See Coclanis, "Slavery, African-American Agency and the World We Have Lost," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79 (Winter 1995): 873-84; Oakes, "Slaves without Contexts," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (Spring 1999): 103-09; Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37 (Autumn 2003): 113-24; and Coclanis, "The Captivity of a Generation," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 61 (July 2004): 544-55.

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