

MANUMISSION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CUBA

Wage-Earning Slaves: Coartación in Nineteenth-Century Cuba. By Claudia Varella and Manuel Barcia. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2020. Pp. 217. \$85.00 cloth. doi:10.1017/tam.2022.126

This book examines the evolution of *coartación*—a form of manumission whereby an enslaved person paid for their freedom in installments—in nineteenth-century Cuba. Claudia Varella and Manuel Barcia trace its transformation from a relatively uncontroversial form of manumission rooted in custom to its emergence as a site of conflict encapsulating wider crises of the second slavery era. Whereas other scholarship has focused on *coartación* in Cuba as a site of resistance and a basis for enslaved people to make legal claims, Varella and Barcia instead focus on its place in wider Cuban society and its implications for the meanings of freedom and property. The book's main argument is that *coartación* in nineteenth-century Cuba paradoxically rendered legal freedom little more than an illusion. *Coartados* (those so manumitted) remained in a precarious liminal space between slavery and freedom, compounded by the competing interests of the state, slave owners, notaries, and *síndicos*.

In 1842, Cuba's Reglamento de Esclavos codified enslaved peoples' right to *coartación* and their right to demand a change in owner. The Reglamento sought to impose state control over the relationship between enslaved people and owners in terms of manumission. One might expect that these newly codified rights would have expanded access to legal freedom, but the reality was much more complex. The authors begin from the premise that a definitive, quantitative study of *coartación* is impossible because "the titles or deeds that would have ensured that an enslaved person was truly *coartado* went largely unformalized" (13). The failure to record *coartación* in a systematic way preserved slave owners' mastery over *coartados* and rendered them vulnerable to the whims and interests of corrupt notaries. The high internal demand for slaves at the time the 1842 Reglamento was executed meant that slave owners responded by finding ways to squeeze more money out of *coartados* to prolong their enslavement, a tactic that was facilitated by inconsistent and informal recordkeeping.

The precarity of *coartación* was compounded by state representatives and institutions that were, in theory, charged with protecting the rights of *coartados*. A major figure studied in the book is the *síndico*, an appointed "legal protector and defender" of enslaved people who facilitated the process of *coartación* and arbitrated conflict outside of the court (148). But as *coartados* initiated complaints or sought fair appraisals of their market value, *síndicos* placed them in the judicial custody of the state, sometimes in charitable institutions, from which they entered an urban rental market. In the process, their rights and status as *coartados* evaporated. In exploring the role of the state in *coartación*, the authors reveal how freedom's conditionality was managed, bureaucratically and institutionally.

Varela and Barcia conclude that *coartación* amounted to little more than “false manumission,” because relatively few *coartados* obtained their full legal freedom (146). This is an inescapable conclusion, given the overwhelming evidence that slave owners, *síndicos*, and notaries exploited *coartados* and ignored the rights conferred by their *coartado* status. But this conclusion prompts a deeper question: given its starkly exploitative nature, why did enslaved people pursue *coartación* at all? Because *coartación* clearly was not forced on enslaved people, readers are left wondering what *coartados* imagined was possible when they put a down payment on freedom. One possible answer, gleaned from examples in the book, is that enslaved people were acutely aware of *coartación*’s logic and used the process to achieve other kinds of freedoms, protections, privileges, and customary rights (79, 83-4, 149). By focusing more on these strategies and even incorporating the scholarship on conditional freedom in other parts of Latin America, the authors could have deepened their analysis of why enslaved people initiated a process that paradoxically placed freedom further out of reach.

As the first full-length study of *coartación*, this is an exhaustively researched, insightful contribution to the history of manumission. It challenges many assumptions and misconceptions about *coartación* in Cuba, broadens our understanding of legal freedom’s wrenching conditionality, and reminds us that the paths to manumission were rarely linear.

Colorado College
Colorado Springs, Colorado
jmarquez@coloradocollege.edu

JOHN C. MARQUEZ

CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LATIN AMERICA

Republics of Knowledge: Nations of the Future in Latin America. By Nicola Miller. Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 304. \$39.95 cloth.
 doi:10.1017/tam.2022.127

Nicola Miller offers an insightful, well-researched, and engaging addition to the body of literature on the emergence of nations and the republican tradition in Latin America. Miller argues that the creation of new nations and national identities is a project of generating and disseminating new knowledge. This project entails the building of communities (“republics”) and institutions that support this enterprise.

The book focuses on South American nations, particularly Argentina, Chile and Peru, although it speaks more broadly to trends in Latin America. The book features ten thematic chapters organized in two parts. The first part focuses on institutions and