

TOBACCO, SLAVERY AND RACE IN COLONIAL CUBA: LABOR IN THE ISLAND'S FIELDS AND FACTORIES

CHARLOTTE A. COSNER
Western Carolina University

On 23 June 1817, King Fernando VII signed a decree ending the one-hundred-year monopoly on Cuban tobacco had ended. The Spanish monarch noted that the monopoly's privileges had led to the decline of the island's tobacco production. Those in Havana did not learn of the monopoly's abolition until a 3 July *Gaceta de Madrid* supplement arrived in mid-August with a passenger sailing from Cádiz. Cuba's *Diario del Goberino de la Habana* and the *Memorias de la Sociedad Económica* republished the document the following month.¹ The Cuban royal tobacco monopoly's history ended much more quietly than it began. In 1717, when the monopoly was created, the island's tobacco farmers (*vegueros*) protested in a series of three separate uprisings, including one which drove the Spanish governor from the island.²

When reviewed at the macro level, Cuba's tobacco industry through the royal monopoly provided Spain with much needed funds, and allowed the metropole to exploit what it realized was a valuable and unique commodity. Cuban tobacco remained an important economic commodity for Spain even after the monopoly ended, however. Other regions attempted to

¹ ARCHIVO GENERAL DE INDIAS [AGI], *Audiencia de Santo Domingo*, Sevilla, leg. 2000 («El Rey: Dedicado desde la divina Providencia me ha resituído al trono de mis amados vasallos, formentando la agricultura, el comercio y la industria de mis reinos... », Fernando VII, Madrid, 23 June 1817); José RIVERO MUÑOZ, *Tabaco: Su historia en Cuba*, vol. 2, («Desde los inicios de la Segunad Factoría de Tabacos de la Habana hasta mediados del siglo XX»), La Habana, Instituto de Historia, 1965, pp. 231-232.

² Charlotte COSNER, *The Golden Leaf: How Tobacco Shaped Cuba and the Atlantic World*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2015, pp.71-76; José RIVERO MUÑOZ, *Las tres sediciones de los vegueros en el siglo XVIII*, Havana, Academia de la Historia de Cuba, 1951.

replicate Cuba's success with the plant, to mixed results. Examination of Cuba's tobacco industry at just the macro level, however, omits an important part of the island's tobacco history, namely those who grew and produced the plant. A micro level study of documents such as *tazmias* (tobacco accounting sheets) along with other Spanish and Cuban archival sources reveal an alternative picture of those who participated in Cuba's tobacco industry. Throughout Cuba, slaves assisted their owners in the tobacco fields, planting, tending, and harvesting tobacco, while some also grew tobacco on their own account, perhaps even using the money earned to purchase their freedom. Free people of color, like their enslaved counterparts, grew tobacco and, thereby, further integrated themselves into their community's economic fabric. The value of black labor, however, did not end in the island's tobacco fields, and extended to the production of tobacco within the confines of the Cuban royal tobacco monopoly. Slaves worked at the island's inland tobacco mills (*molinos*) grinding tobacco before it was transported to Havana, as well as within the capital's tobacco factory and nearby buildings such as the *Casa de Beneficencia* (Poor House) to produce the more finely ground tobacco, cigars, and other tobacco products for shipment to Spain and other places throughout the Spanish Empire and beyond.³

The end of Cuba's monopoly led to an expansion of tobacco cultivation, and the number of farms grew, increasing from 4,960 in 1811, to 5,534 in 1827. Production simultaneously flourished, rising from 9.3 million pounds of tobacco in 1811 to 22.5 million pounds by 1836. One nineteenth-century contemporary observed that following a dip in prices, coffee farmers shifted their slaves to growing tobacco instead. The 1830 census showed that less slaves lived on tobacco *vegas* as compared to those residing on *ingenios* (sugar estates), 14,263 versus 100,000. This disparity largely was due to the individual labor requirements for each type of agricultural exploit, however, with sugar growing requiring a much larger labor force than tobacco. Yet, the total number of people involved in tobacco production continued to grow as the nineteenth century progressed, increasing from 32,248 to 58,039 between 1846 and 1863. By 1862, 18 percent, or 15,500, of all Cuban free people of color lived on the island's *vegas*, as did 5 percent of all slaves, 17,675. Interestingly, the ratio of male slaves to females was higher on

³ Requests for tobacco came from all parts of the world including the King of Prussia, Court of Rome, King of Russia, England's Duke of Sussex, among others. See, for example, ARCHIVO GENERAL DE INDIAS [AGI], *Archivo Historico de la Real Fabrica de Tabacos* [AHRFT], Seville, Spain, leg. 61; AGI, *Ultramar*, leg. 245.

Cuba's tobacco farms, where there were one hundred ninety two men to every one hundred women. By comparison, the ratio on sugar plantations (one hundred seventy four to one hundred) and coffee estates (one hundred twenty four to one hundred) was lower, indicating that male slaves comprised more of the labor force on tobacco farms than on either sugar plantations or coffee estates. By 1900, tobacco in all possible forms made up over half of Cuba's total exports. Tobacco leaf and cigars alone that year accounted for \$23 million, one historian estimates.⁴

Fernando Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint*, his seminal work, set the trend for future historiography. In this study, he poetically contrasts sugar's whiteness and tobacco's darkness, and continues this analogy to overlook the presence and contribution by those of color, both free and slave, within all sectors of Cuba's tobacco industry. Even scholars who do indicate the presence of people of color in Cuba's tobacco fields give them a limited role in the plant's cultivation and production. Research in Spanish and Cuban archives reveals that Cuba's tobacco farmers (*vegueros*) and producers were a far more complex group that included whites, free blacks, and slaves. This study attempts to reinsert people of color back into the discussion of the plant that Ortiz described as the "color of its race."⁵

Sugar and slavery have dominated much of the historiography of colonial Cuba. Joan Casanovas rightfully argues,

Historians have concentrated on the study of sugar and its impact on Cuban society as if it were the only major export that has influenced modern Cuban history. Again, historical analysis has become the victim of the present: because sugar became by far the most important export in the twentieth-century, other Cuban products, such as tobacco, lost their previous significance.⁶

⁴ PÉREZ, *op cit.*, 47, 54, 94-95; Rebecca J. SCOTT, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 8, 12; Victor BULMER-THOMAS, *The Economic History of the Caribbean Since the Napoleonic Wars*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 504-505.

⁵ Fernando ORTIZ, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís, intro. Bronislaw Malinowski, prologue Herminio Portell Vilá, new intro. Fernando Coronil, reprint, 1947, Durham, Duke University Press, 1995, p. 9.

⁶ Joan CASANOVAS, *Bread, or Bullets! Urban Labor and Spanish Colonialism in Cuba, 1850-1898* Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998, pp. 17-18.

Only in recent years has the study of Cuban agriculture shifted away from sugar to explore other pursuits.⁷ Interestingly however, period writers and observers of colonial Cuba noted the importance of people of color to tobacco cultivation and manufacture. Francisco Arango y Parreño, Jacobo de la Pezuela, and various foreign travelers all noted the presence of slaves and free people of color in the island's tobacco cultivation, with one official noting that 113,700 slaves worked in tobacco cultivation in 1859. This image is not the one presented by most modern historians of Cuba, however.⁸

As Casanovas argues, Cuban history frequently has served non-historical masters. E. J. Hobsbawm noted the particular challenge facing historians was that despite one's attempt to maintain professionalism and impartiality "history is inextricably bound to contemporary politics...." Historians in Cuba sought to craft the island's history in the years leading up to and after its independence, and an artificial national identity emerged. Emphasizing Cuba's whiteness and rejecting its African influences, Cuba's iconic figure of Liborio was depicted as "a thin, short, white *guajiro* (peasant) with sideburns and a mustache," Aline Helg notes.⁹ The construction of a predominantly white identity was in direct opposition to the island's history, yet it mirrored Cuban society where one's legal color was the primary social dividing line. Cuba's tobacco farmers, or *vegueros*, were key players in the continuation of this mythical identity. Writers described the colonial tobacco farmers as proud and independent rural peasants who defied the mighty Spanish crown and fought against the imposition of a tobacco monopoly during the early 1700s. The lowly white *veguero* embodied the best traits of the Cuban people, and

⁷ The historiography of Cuban sugar and its predominant labor form, slavery, is extensive and includes Raúl CEPERO BONILLA, *Azúcar y abolición (Apuntes para una historia crítica del abolicionismo)*, La Habana: Editorial Cenit, 1948; Ramiro GUERRA Y SÁNCHEZ, *Sugar and Society in the Caribbean: An Economic History of Cuban Agriculture*, foreword Sidney W. Mintz, Caribbean Series, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1964; Félix GOZIETA-MIMÓ, *Azúcar amargo cubano: monocultivo y dependencia económica*, Madrid, Instituto de Sociología y Desarrollo del Area Iberica, 1972; Manuel MORENO FRAGINALS, *The Sugarmill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba, 1760-1860*, trans. Cedric Belfrage, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1976; and 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 studies that are not sugar-centric, see María Elena DÍAZ, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670-1780*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000; Sherry JOHNSON, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba*, Gainesville, The University Press of Florida, 2001; Louis A. PÉREZ, Jr., *Winds of Change: Hurricanes and the Transformation of Nineteenth Century Cuba*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001; William C. VAN NORMAN, Jr., *Shade Grown Slavery: The Lives of Slaves on Coffee Plantations in Cuba*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2013.

⁸ CASANOVAS, op cit., p. 22.

⁹ E.J. HOBSBAWM, "The Historian Between the Quest for the Universal and the Quest for Identity," in *The Social Responsibility of the Historian*, François Bédarida (ed.), Providence, RI, Berghahn Book, 1994, p. 55; Aline HELG, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1995, p. 105.

thus the myths that surround the island's colonial tobacco industry and particularly those who cultivated the plant were not only born, but perpetuated.

Tobacco: Cuba's special gift

The uniqueness of Cuba's tobacco products was well known even in the eighteenth century. In 1769, Tobias George Smollett declared that Cuban tobacco was "thought to excel that of all the world." Soil, climate, seeds, and method of culture all play a role in the resulting flavor of tobacco. Nineteenth-century traveler Richard Robert Madden noted that the mildness or strength of tobacco's flavor depended on cultivation practices. Another contemporary wrote, "...although every known climate and soil of the earth have been tried in the cultivation of tobacco, Cuba...is still first in the quality produced, and Cuban tobacco need never fear a successful rival in excellence." Not unlike wine or champagne, tobacco's taste and quality was the result of *terroir*, historian Jean Stubbs argues. This made it difficult for other locations to duplicate the taste of a genuine Cuban tobacco product, but did not stop farmers across the globe from trying to do so.¹⁰

Various locations in the United States attempted to replicate Cuba's success with the plant to uneven results. One of the first locations associated with Cuban tobacco, although not initially grown in the U.S., was Connecticut. General Israel Putnam returned home with Cuban cigars following his participation in Havana's siege and capture during the Seven Years' War. By 1799, domestically produced cigars were made in Connecticut, but using local leaf. A "half Spanish cigar" using Cuban filler was produced later in the nineteenth century. Cuban tobacco seed was introduced and planted in Connecticut in the 1870s. The experiment was successful, and led to an all-Cuban leaf cigar. Within several years however the plant developed its own characteristics from the local soil, nevertheless it was still considered superior to standard domestic wrapper leaf.¹¹

Farther south, several articles reprinted in the *American Farmer* in 1822 note that A.W. Foster brought Cuban seed to Pennsylvania in an attempt to

¹⁰ Tobias George SMOLLETT, *The Present State of All Nations: Containing a Geographical, Natural, Commercial, and Political History of All the Countries in the Known World*, vol. 8, London, R. Baldwin, W. Johnston, S. Crowder, and Robinson and Roberts, 1769, p. 495; W.A. BRENNAN, *Tobacco Leaves: Being a Book of Facts for Smokers*, Menasha, Wisconsin, Collegiate Press, 1915, pp. 21-23; Richard Robert MADDEN, *The Island of Cuba: Its Resources, Progress, and Prospects, Considered in Relation Especially to the Influence of Its Prosperity on the Interests of the British West India Colonies*, London, Charles Gibson, 1849, p. 180; Robert P. PORTER, *Industrial Cuba*, New York, G. Putnam's Sons, 1899, 303; Jean STUBBS, «El Habano: The Global Luxury Smoke», *Commodities of Empire Working Paper*, N° 20, September 2012, pp. 9-11.

¹¹ STUBBS, «El Habano and the World it has Shaped», *Cuban Studies*, Vol. 41, 2010, pp. 48-49.

cultivate it there. Foster used a hot bed to start the plants, knowing that he needed to harvest them well before the first frost. He admitted that he had "no practical knowledge" of curing the plant, but also stated that the resulting cigars "have all the indications of the family from which the plant is descended." No matter the outcome, Foster concluded, "...at least my cigars will be well puffed." By the 1840s, Dr. Joseph E. Muse of Maryland successfully cultivated Cuban tobacco there. Selling his cigars for \$14 for a box of one thousand, he estimated that he would be able to produce 600,000 for the 1845 crop year.¹²

The plant grown from Cuban tobacco seed, over time, lost its Cuban-ness, as Connecticut farmers discovered. Local conditions made the tobacco eventually more domestic and less Cuban, leaving those wishing to emulate the Cuba's quality generally unable to replicate it outside of the island. Spain benefitted economically from its colony's unique agricultural product for longer than it did with virtually any other territory, since the metropole controlled Cuba until the end of the nineteenth century. One way that Spain attempted to ensure exclusive power over Cuba's tobacco was via a royal monopoly on the plant. Between 1717 and 1817 the monopoly demanded that Cuba *vegueros* deliver all of their tobacco to only the state. Officials insisted that contraband was to be avoided at all costs, although this was near-impossible to enforce. Tobacco farmers and others went to great lengths to hide their activities, and today the historical record only includes the accounts of unsuccessful attempts at contraband, not fruitful ones. The sheer volume of correspondence between Spain and those in charge on the island at both the capital and local levels is a good indication of the problem of tobacco contraband during the monopoly years. Notwithstanding tobacco that went unrecorded due to illicit transactions, the estimated value of Cuban tobacco exported to Spain in just fifty years, 1760 to 1810, was one hundred million pesos, or 25 percent of Spain's total revenue. The market value of Mexican precious metals at its highest point, by comparison, was between 99.1 and 133.3 million pesos.¹³

Cuban tobacco continued to be an important commodity export for the island and metropole even after the end of the monopoly. Leaf tobacco

¹² A.W. FOSTER, *The American Farmer, containing Original Essays and Selections on Rural Economy and Internal Improvements, with Illustrative Engravings and the Prices Current of Country Produce*. John S. Skinner, (ed) 6 September 1822, No. 24, Vol. 4, Baltimore, J. Robinson, 1823, pp. 191-192; United States Congress, *Congressional Series of United States Public Documents*, Vol. 484, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1846, p. 272.

¹³ COSNER, *op cit.*, pp. 68-117; 136; John H. COATSWORTH, «The Mexican Mining Industry in the Eighteenth Century», in Nils Jacobsen and Hans-Jürgen Puhle, (eds.), *The Economies of Mexico and Peru during the Late Colonial Period, 1760-1810*, Berlin, Colloquium-Verlag, 1986, p. 31.

exports in 1839 alone were valued at \$1,273,069, while cigars accounted for \$637,558. Together these two products comprised 11.5 percent of the island's total exports that year. Cigar exports supplanted those of tobacco leaf by 1841, and were valued at \$1,331,121 and \$719,360 for leaf. Cigar and leaf exports combined accounted for just over 9 percent of Cuba's total 1841 exports in terms of value. The tobacco leaf harvested in 1867 was estimated to be thirty million pesos, and by 1902, although land under sugar cultivation covered half of the island's arable land, compared to just 10 percent for tobacco, "the export value of the two crops...is about equal." Again, these figures did not reveal the complete economic picture of Cuba's tobacco industry, since estimates indicate that in 1859 somewhere between 40 and 70 percent of all exported Cuban tobacco leaf and cigars left the country as contraband, with the higher figure more likely.¹⁴

Statements of quality and the economic impact of Cuban tobacco however do little to explain what, other than the island's soil and particular climate, made its tobacco so renowned. Instructional manuals attempted to explain to those interested in the plant's cultivation what was needed to produce good tobacco, and copy the methods utilized in Cuba, but adapted to local conditions. The manuals concluded that success, ultimately, was not ensured, as much depended on the farmer's experience. Spain realized this, acknowledging the valuable knowledge possessed by Cuba's *vegueros* and attempted to export that information to other parts of the empire. In the summer of 1811, a royal order requested that four Cuban tobacco farmers be sent to Peru, along with one hundred pounds of Cuban tobacco seed, in an effort to establish the industry there and instruct local farmers of the best cultivation practices.¹⁵

Yet, if tobacco growers were responsible for ensuring Cuban tobacco's quality through harvesting and curing, these are the very people who should be at the focus of Cuba's tobacco history in order to present a complete story of the industry. The historiography however has misrepresented who these people were, repeatedly describing them as typically poor, white, Canary Islanders. Scholars generally have dismissed or discounted as insignificant

¹⁴ Freeman HUNT, *The Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review*, vol.3, New York, 1840, p. 351; *Niles' National Register, containing Political, Historical, Geographical, Scientific, Statistical, Economical, and Biographical Documents, Essays and Facts: Together with Notices of the Arts and Manufactures, and a Record of the Events of the Times*, Jeremiah HUGHES (ed), vol. 62, Baltimore, 1842, p. 392; CASANOVAS, op cit., pp. 20-21.

¹⁵ Lino LOPEZ MENDEZ, *Manual del veguero venezolano. Cultivo del tabaco segun los mejores metodos empleados en Cuba y adaptados a la practica en Venezuela*, Cáracas, Imprenta al Vapor de "La Opinion Nacional", 1883; ARCHIVO NACIONAL DE CUBA [ANC], Havana, *Intendencia General de Hacienda*, leg. 973, exp. 22, (C [name illegible] Arguelles to Superintendente General de la Factoría de Tavacos de la Havana, 28 June 1811, Cádiz); ANC, *Intendencia General de Hacienda*, leg. 973, exp. 22 (Juan Antonio de Unzueta, "Aviso al publico," 17 September 1811).

the contributions of slave labor and that of free people of color.¹⁶ Reinserting people of color into this history also merits an examination of the geographic and occupational areas where they typically have been overlooked. One such region is western Cuba, specifically Pinar del Río, which was a primary focus of tobacco cultivation on the island. This region in particular, along with others, are studied to reveal the contributions of people of color as part of the larger tobacco-growing population. Even the Spanish crown acknowledged their contributions in various ways. The Real Factoría de Tabacos provided funds to farmers in order to purchase slave labor for the fields and authorizing enslaved women living in Havana's Casa de Beneficencia (Charity or Welfare Home) to produce tobacco products for the monopoly, for example. Through examining the labor of those of color both in the field and factory, a more complete and accurate view of colonial Cuba's tobacco history can be developed.

Tobacco and the "color of its race"

Dating back to at least the third quarter of the seventeenth century, tobacco was cultivated in western Cuba. This long association with tobacco continued throughout the remainder of the region's colonial history, becoming its primary agricultural and dominant activity. One historian argues that many of the Havana area's rebellious tobacco farmers remaining from the initial 1717 revolt left the region and moved to western Cuba's Vuelta Abajo. When a new administrative district was created in 1774, the lieutenant governor's responsibilities included receiving and making payments to the Real Factoría de Tabacos, and ensuring that local *vegueros* turn in all tobacco to the official monopoly.¹⁷

The remote location's population was small compared to other parts of the island, yet people of color comprised a significant and increasing share of its inhabitants, and those who cultivated tobacco. The 1774 census listed 2,617 people in western Cuba, 519 of whom were free blacks and 451 who were slaves, representing 20 percent and 17 percent respectively of the region's total population. Western Cuba's population of color continued to grow as the years progressed. In 1792, free blacks and slaves comprised 43

¹⁶ COSNER, op cit., pp. 24-38; ORTIZ, op cit., pp. 105, 155. Exceptions to this argument include Julio LE RIVEREND, *Historia económica de Cuba*, Barcelona, Ediciones Ariel, 1972, p. 80; Efrén CÓRDOVA, *El trabajo forzoso en Cuba (Un recorrido amargo de la historia)*, Miami, Ediciones Universal, 2001, 98; Robin BLACKBURN, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800*, London and New York, Verso, 1997, pp. 495, 498; CASANOVAS, op cit., p. 22.

¹⁷ Emeterio S. SANTOVENIA, *Pinar del Río*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1946, pp. 37, 42-43, 56-57.

percent of the area's total of 4,192 people. The 1819 census showed that the 7,155 people of color now made up over half of the area's population, nearly 55 percent. As the nineteenth century continued, not only did the population of color increase, their economic holdings and activities did as well. By 1899, Pinar del Río's 1,775 free black owners and renters of tobacco land made up 17 percent of the region's total landowners, holding 11 percent of all land. Indeed, over-three quarters of western Cuba's free people of color who rented property, 1,260 persons in total, were tied to a tobacco *vega*.¹⁸

Domingo González was one of those people residing in western Cuba during the late eighteenth century for whom slave ownership and tobacco growing went together. Born in the Canary Islands, and a member of the local militia, González grew tobacco by 1770 in the San Juan y Martínez region and continued to do so for at least a dozen years. Even his wife, María Asunción de los Reyes owned a tobacco farm, which she listed among her possessions in her will. González purchased three slaves, sold one, and freed two more between the mid-1770s and 1800. On 24 April 1775, he promised freedom to Antonio Bentura, a recently purchased Mina slave, which he granted before the year was over. The following month, González sold a forty-year old Caravali slave to the local priest, José Ignocencio, for 400 pesos, and purchased a thirty-one-year-old Lucumi slave, María in return from the cleric. González manumitted fifty-year-old slave Vicente Pedroso for 200 pesos in October 1800. *Tazmias* taken during this period also indicate that multiple people, although unspecified, labored in tobacco on his behalf. Together, González's ownership of slaves and records of multiple people working on his tobacco land suggest that he used slave labor in order to become among the top growers in the area. His two manumitted male slaves, Bentura and Pedroso, likewise may have earned the money to purchase their freedom through the cultivation of tobacco for themselves in little garden plots, known as *conucos*. Although it is difficult to determine the exact role that these slaves played in his tobacco production, or where they earned the money for manumission, the example of Domingo González illustrates the close relationship between slave ownership, freedom, and tobacco cultivation in a region where little other agricultural activities took place.¹⁹

¹⁸ SANTOVENIA, op cit., pp. 60, 63, 76; Scott, op cit., p. 263.

¹⁹ COSNER, op cit., pp. 42-47; ARCHIVO HISTORICO PROVINCIAL DEL PINAR DEL RIO [AHPPR], Escribanía de Gobierno, *Protocolos Notariales*, v. 1 (1775-1789), exp 3, (declaratorio, Domingo González, San Juan y Martínez, 24 April 1775); AHPPR, op cit., exp. 7 (venta de esclavo, José Ignocencio, San Juan y Martínez, 29 May 1775); AHPPR, op cit., exp. 8 (venta de esclavo, Domingo González, San Juan y Martínez, 29 May 1775); AHPPR, op cit., exp. 82 (venta de esclavo, Nicolas Hidalgo Gato, Pinar del Río, 7 May 1777); AHPPR, op cit., exp. 82 (venta de esclavo, Nicolas Hidalgo Gato, Pinar del Río, 7 May 1777); AHPPR, Escribanía de Gobierno, *Protocolos Notariales*, v. 2, exp. 65 (libertad, Domingo González, Pinar del Río, 17 October 1800).

Western Cuba's notarial records also log various transactions involving tobacco land owned by free people of color. When Silvestre de Vielma Castillo, a freed black man living in Pinar del Río and described as Congo, made his last will and testament on 22 March 1777, he noted that he owned a tobacco farm. Other notarial entries during the following decades note the purchase and sale of other *vegas* (tobacco land) by people of color in western Cuba. On 7 September 1785, free black (*moreno libre*) Antonio Castellon purchased riverfront tobacco land from Pedro de Leon of Filipinas for 100 pesos. The following month, the notarial record indicates that free black Sebastian Moreno from Filipinas sold tobacco land along the Río Seco that he had owned for three years. Antonio Milian purchased this land for 50 pesos, which also included a residence on the property. These real estate transactions pale in comparison to the complicated network of community connections experienced by free black José Antonio Ribero and his wife, María Loreto. Both of these free people of color owned tobacco land and interacted on a regular basis with other *vegueros* in the region, either selling or purchasing land. After Ribero's death, Captain Bartolomé Diaz, a slave owner and fellow tobacco farmer, acted as the widow's representative on two land transactions.²⁰

All of these real estate transactions demonstrate that not only were free people of color actively working in the fields cultivating tobacco but were doing so for their own profit on land they owned. Individuals like Ribero and Loreto were not merely labor, but proprietors in western Cuba's tobacco industry, an area famous for its superb tobacco. These are the very people that Ortiz and others downplay when they argue that slave labor and free people of color were not significant to the overall production of tobacco on the island. Yet, it is in these very tobacco enclaves where many free and enslaved peoples, comprising between 37 and 55 percent of western Cuba's total population, lived and worked in local tobacco fields as noted above. These statistics and examples reveal that it is impossible to completely tell the story of tobacco in Cuba, particularly western Cuba, without including people of color. This was not the only area of colonial Cuba however where tobacco growing was undertaken by people of color. Along the entire stretch of the island of Cuba, free blacks and slaves both labored in tobacco fields, sometimes for others, and frequently for themselves.

Oriente located in the far eastern part of Cuba in the shadow of the Sierra Maestra Mountains generally was not viewed as a tobacco-growing

²⁰ AHPPR, Escribania de Gobierno, *Protocolos Notariales*, v. 1 (1775-1789), exp 273 (venta de vega, Pedro de Leon, 7 September 1785); AHPPR, op cit., exp. 279 (venta de vega, Sebastian Moreno, 10 September 1785); AHPPR, op cit., exp 317, (venta de vega, José Antonio Ribero, 27 March 1786).

area. Bishop Morell de Santa Cruz noted in 1756 however that the region had 205 *vegas* (tobacco farms). The predominant crop in eastern Cuba soon became tobacco, even in the El Cobre region where copper mining previously dominated the economy. By 1776, Santiago's branch of the tobacco monopoly was responsible for four districts (Santiago de Cuba, Cauto, Guaninicum, and Guantánamo) and the number of tobacco farms had risen to 514. Of those, the majority, 369 (71.8 percent), were owned by individuals. The remainder, 145 or 28 percent, were worked by peons or slaves of other farms who grew tobacco on their own account, "and presumably in some kind of sharecropping arrangement." As tobacco cultivation continued to grow in Oriente, in certain areas, people of color comprised a notable portion of those engaged in tobacco. By the 1862 census, the island's eastern districts were home to 84,500 free people of color, 15,500 of whom, or just over 18 percent, lived on *vegas*. Eastern Cuba did not have as many slaves per *vega* as Pinar del Río did, generally averaging less than one compared to four or five in the west. Unlike the west, most of those who lived on eastern tobacco farms were free people of color, where in the west, they were more likely to be whites.²¹

Just one year's *tazmia* from the region around Bayamo indicates the presence of people of color in the area's tobacco cultivation. Out of a total of eighty three *vegueros* in Bayamo, eight were people of color, three of whom were free and the others enslaved according to the 1773 document. Free black Juan Gabriel was listed as having the most tobacco plants of the group, four thousand five hundred, while Juan Antonio had four thousand, and Joaquin was responsible for three thousand. Slave Josef Antonio cared for five thousand plants, while Lorenzo tended three thousand fifty tobacco plants, and slaves Rafael and Juan Josef each were responsible for two thousand six hundred. Slave Melchor was listed with one thousand seven hundred plants. In nearby Mabay, four slaves and one free black man grew tobacco. Juan, a slave belonging to Simon Cruz, tended four thousand one hundred plants, while Santiago, owned by Francisco Reyes, cared for three thousand. Several other slaves grew smaller amounts of tobacco. Carlos who was the slave of Josef Torenté had three hundred plants and Josef Miguel, slave of Manuel de Tamayo, tended three hundred tobacco plants, while in Casibaroa, a slave named Vicente belonging to a Captain Pompa had three thousand five hundred plants. However, these amounts pale in comparison to the ten thousand plants that Juan, a slave owned by Doña María Basan, tended. Together, these fifteen people of color cultivated 47,350 tobacco plants in the area around Bayamo over the course of just one year alone. This figure was just a portion of the

²¹ DÍAZ, op cit., p. 163; COSNER, op cit, pp. 46-48; SCOTT, op cit., pp. 8, 11.

overall 1773 crop that exceeded 4.6 million plants.²² However, including or excluding sectors of colonial Cuban society from the historiography merely on the basis of perceived statistical importance distorts the historical reality. While participation varied in degree from year to year and region to region, people of color frequently were active participants in the island's tobacco industry. Leaving them out of a discussion of Cuba's tobacco history creates an image of tobacco cultivation that is simply not accurate.

Further to the west, 11 percent of the male royal slaves in the village of El Cobre in 1775 were listed as *vegueros* historian María Elena Díaz notes. Most heads of households growing tobacco were freemen, but many, 43 percent, were also married to royal slave women and had enslaved families. Díaz argues, "This profile may indicate that either local tobacco farmers were able to accumulate greater wealth and manumit themselves; or, as suggested before, free men had more time than royal slaves to dedicate themselves to the intense cultivation of tobacco." If her first assertion was correct, this would not make these former slaves not that different from those in western Cuba. There, in the tobacco-growing region of Pinar del Río, other slaves also are thought to have used tobacco cultivation to obtain funds to purchase their freedom, as noted elsewhere.²³ When one looks closer at the possible other agricultural markets open to those in these each of these geographic areas, the association between tobacco and manumission are clearer. Tobacco was not only a popular product with a consumer that was literally addicted, but the crop also had a guaranteed market in the royal monopoly, something that could not be said about other possible agricultural pursuits. Therefore, the ability of slaves to earn monies to purchase their own freedom, and continue to work in tobacco cultivation was not that unlikely.

Individuals however were not the only ones to see the importance of people of color in tobacco cultivation and labor. The Real Factoría de Tabacos, the entity that oversaw Cuba's tobacco monopoly, understood that slaves were needed to maintain and increase tobacco cultivation on the island. Between 1 March 1798 and 30 September 1799, the Real Factoría distributed funds totaling 8,160 pesos to thirty of the island's *vegueros* to assist them with purchasing thirty slaves to work in tobacco. The amount of money given to each farmer ranged from several instances of one hundred pesos "toward the purchase" of a slave, to a high of four hundred pesos respectively to two farmers in Güines and Guane. On average, each of the *vegueros* received just over 281 pesos apiece. Those in the western district of Pinar del Río, eight or

²² AGI, *Papeles Procedentes de Cuba*, leg. 1174 (tazmia, Partido de Bayamo, 28 February 1773).

²³ DÍAZ, op. cit., pp. 160-161, 163, 167; COSNER, op cit, pp. 46-48.

26 percent of those who were given monies, received the most slave subsidies, while the second highest was Güines with seven, or 23 percent. Similarly, the highest average subsidy for slave purchases, about 364 pesos per farmer, was in the Filipinas area, while those in Güines received almost 260 pesos per farmer. This was not the first time that Cuba's tobacco monopoly distributed slaves to farmers. In 1769, *vegueros* in the Havana area were given slaves. Under the terms, the farmers were to repay the debt to the Real Factoría within two or three years from their crops. Even Cuba's captain general, the Marques de la Torre noted, "the distribution of blacks among the tobacco farmers contributes much to the increase of this plant's harvest..."²⁴

Cuba's tobacco industry received the labor of people of color, both slave and free, not just in the fields, however. While most tobacco was developed into its final product not on the island, but instead in Seville, Spain's massive tobacco factory, some was produced in Cuba. As early as 1753, Cuba's tobacco monopoly noted that twenty-six male slaves worked in Havana's factory. Farther afield, thirty-two males representing various African nations labored in the island's tobacco mills. In all, one hundred and eight slaves were assigned to Cuba's tobacco monopoly that year. This number increased as the end of the monopoly neared and by 1812, sixty-two slaves were assigned to the tobacco monopoly in Havana alone.²⁵

Not all tobacco was produced within the walls of the tobacco factory however. Another location where tobacco was rolled was Havana's Casa de Beneficencia. Proposed by the top elites on the island, the charity house was the project of Cuba's Captain General Luis de las Casas, the Condesa de San Juan de Jaruco and the Marqueses de Casa Peñalver and de Cárdenas de Monte Hermoso. Las Casas indicated in the letter directed to the king on 17 March 1792 that the goal of the facility was to "establish and provide an orphanage or Casa de Beneficencia for the internment, education, and instruction of the beggars and orphaned children, of both sexes." The building was located outside of the main portion of the city of Havana at the corner of Belascoin street, and described by a contemporary observer as a "fine, large building and has beautiful grounds." Beginning in the summer

²⁴ AGI, *Ultramar*, Sevilla, leg. 250 (Cuenta de cargo y data de los caudales de la Real Factoría correspondiente a desde 1 de Marzo de 1798 hasta 30 de Septiembre de 1799, ambos incluye," Francisco Jacott, Havana, 25 July 1804); AGI, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba [Cuba], leg. 1156 (Martín Xavier de Echeverría to Marques de la Torre, Havana, 19 May 1772; AGI, Cuba, leg. 1179, (Marques de la Torre, Havana, to Martín de Azana, Bayamo, 23 September 1774).

²⁵ COSNER, op cit., pp. 131-132; AGI, *Ultramar*, Sevilla, leg. 1002 («Lista que comprende los negros esclavos de Rl Compania de esta ciudad e Ysla, con destino en el Ramo de Tava-cos, y distincion de sus nombres, naziones, fihaziones, tachas, y edades, los mismos que constan del Ymbentario gral de Existencias del día treinta y uno de octubre proximo pasado formado con esta fha a saver, » Gabriel Santos, Real Factoria de Tabacos, Havana, 17 February 1753).

of 1802, the Casa de Beneficencia was given the right to twist tobacco into cigars. White female cigar rollers and the occasional monopoly worker taught the African-born slave women the process. Initially, eighty-four whites and eighteen people of color produced cigars, working two hundred and eighty days a year. One suggestion was to have one hundred young black girls, aged ten to fourteen, also stay at the charitable institution to produce tobacco. The number of cigar rollers increased from twenty-six in April 1803 to thirty-five by the end of the year. The slave women were not expected to work producing cigars on either Sundays or festive days, and two women managers oversaw the operation to ensure that the workers were not treated unfairly.²⁶

This connection between tobacco manufacturing and young, poor women, frequently sexualized was a common theme among contemporary observers of Cuba's tobacco factories. The image of a female cigar roller, turning out cigars pressed against her bare thighs in an overheated and crowded factory floor was a frequent one, and perhaps best epitomized by the character of "Carmen" from Spain's tobacco factory. In his 1855 account, one nineteenth century author, Henry Anthony Murray described a class of cigars known as "Plantations" in England, but called "Vegueros" in Cuba. These particular cigars were highly prized, Murray stated. They were produced "by the sable ladies of the island, who use no tables to work at – if report speaks truth – and as both hands are indispensable in the process of rolling, what they roll upon must be left to the imagination." Yet, the presence of men of color working as tobacco manufacturers is just as historically accurate, if not as well known. A forty-two year old man from Lagos was taken from Africa to Cuba in 1834. Sold to Havana tobacco roller and merchant, Don Manuel Vidau, the African man worked for this owner for eleven years, learning how to roll tobacco himself, and averaging four hundred cigars per day. Eventually, he was sold. Saving 4.5 pesos per week from his salary of six to seven pesos a week, he was able to purchase his freedom at the cost of 589 pesos. Eventually, he and others from Lagos won the local lottery. After being free for eight years, Vidau sailed for London, hoping to return to Africa.²⁷

²⁶ Paul NIELL, *Urban Space as Heritage in Late Colonial Cuba: Classicism and Dissonance on the Plaza de Armas of Havana, 1754-1828*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2015, p. 63; Samuel HAZARD, *Cuba with Pen and Pencil*, London, Sampson Low, 1871, pp. 92-93; AGI, *Ultramar*, leg. 235, Junta, Havana, 15 July 1802; AGI, *Ultramar*, leg. 243, «Hoja de Servicio, D Santiago Fagle», Havana, 18 December 1808; AGI, *Ultramar*, leg. 245, (Antonio del Valle Hernandez to Francisco Arango y Parreno, Havana, 14 April 1810); COSNER, op cit., p. 96.

²⁷ Henry Anthony MURRAY, *Lands of the slave and the free: or, Cuba, the United States, and Canada*, Vol. 1, London, J.W. Parker, 1855, p. 309; Solimar OTERO, *Afro-Cuban Diasporas in the Atlantic World*, vol. 45, Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora, Rochester, University Rochester Press, 2010, pp. 46-47.

All of these various examples of people of color laboring in the field or factory to produce and manufacture Cuba's prized agricultural product have mostly been lost to the modern historian. Following in the footsteps of Ortiz and others, it has been more common to reproduce the argument that Cuba's tobacco farmers were not people of color, and that any contributions that they made were minimal at best. This was not the case, and that without including the labor of people of color in Cuba's tobacco story, historians are only repeating that error. Cuba's tobacco industry truly was a multicultural and multiethnic enterprise in which all sectors of the island's society, white and black, free and slave, participated.