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Gendered geographies: motherhood, slavery, law, and space in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the negotiations over physical space that underpinned women's legal claims in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba. Legal petitioning revealed women's surprising mobility, journeying between rural areas and the capital city. The cases are striking because women experienced 'spatial subjection' under slavery in particularly intense ways. The use and abuse of physical space by slaveholders and the colonial state facilitated the appropriation of their reproductive lives, while their opportunities for mobility were more limited than were those of enslaved men. Women's journeys were frequently undertaken on behalf of children, who had been separated from them through sale. Focusing on gender, law, and the politics of space and slavery in their lives and journeys helps us avoid reifying the 'mobilities' of Atlantic subjects. For these women, mobility was probably undesirable as an end in itself. Instead, they sought fixity, as a creative, resistive counter to the abuses wrought on their bodies and families by the constant dislocations of the plantation system.

On 2 August 1883, in Havana, a free black woman named Juana Mojena had a petition drafted on her behalf to the Governor General regarding her young daughter Dolores Mojena.¹ Although Juana had obtained freedom, Dolores remained a *patrocinada* (apprentice) under the *patronato* system that, from 1880, heralded the gradual ending of slavery in Cuba.² The petition requested Dolores be freed because her owner was not complying with his legal obligations to educate, feed, and clothe her.³ Juana had presented several previous petitions, not only in Havana where she lived, but much further afield: 'Since the *patrono* of her aforementioned daughter lives in Guanajay, ... she travelled there, where she attended constantly at the Junta Local de Patronato' (local *patronato* board). Afterwards, however, 'she returned to Havana without having achieved anything, and after a few days, she presented a claim to the Provincial Government, explaining her unfruitful trip to Guanajay.' Finally, she asked that the Gobernador General 'order that her daughter be moved, in order to be heard by the Havana Junta, and the appellant will fund the costs of the journey.'

How did Juana, an illiterate freedwoman of colour perhaps travelling alone, negotiate the lawless roads and unfamiliar terrain that led to Guanajay?⁴ This small town was about

thirty miles southwest of Havana, in a region dominated by large sugar plantations, with only a small free population of colour.⁵ Somehow, Juana had traversed this demographically hostile landscape, in a colonial setting in which travel was not a simple business for anyone, even affluent white men.⁶ How did Juana keep herself informed about Dolores's circumstances? Why did she want her brought to Havana and why did she think her request had any chance of being granted? More broadly, why did space and location seem to loom so large in the methods and aims of Juana's legal activities? What might we learn about linkages between motherhood, gender, and slavery by focusing explicitly on struggles over space and place within the actions of women like her? This article, which is part of a broader project on space and slavery in Cuba, will address these questions. While it opens with this example from the 1880s *patronato* (apprenticeship) period, the article seeks the gendered roots of Juana's legal and spatial struggles in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, which is the article's main focus.⁷

The rapid development of a plantation-based slave society in western Cuba by the start of the nineteenth century heralded an assault on space and a radical remaking of place. Large sugar plantations spread out across landscapes previously covered by forests or smaller farms.⁸ Endless disputes arose, in the process, about the uses of space as property, as land changed hands rapidly and plantation owners disputed the contours and uses of roads, fences, and boundaries.⁹ The 'second slavery' linked slave-produced tropical products to industrialising North Atlantic economies and was underpinned by vastly improved transport networks.¹⁰ Cuba became home to Latin America's first railway line in 1837 and to an island-wide network by 1868, as well as benefiting from shipping and communications innovations.¹¹

In turn, the sugar export project itself, of course, relied on the largest forced movement of humans in modern history: the Atlantic slave trade, which experienced an upswing from the late eighteenth century and continued to Cuba until the eve of abolition. Illegal from 1820, yet fantastically profitable and openly pursued, the tentacles of the trading network stretched across the island, from the coasts to deep inland, and burrowed inexorably down through the colonial social strata. Tied to this trade was a vigorous internal trade in men and women that had a major, constant impact on enslaved people's lives.¹² This tremendous surge in forced human movement, along with the expanded transport systems, propelled the 'second slavery' in Cuba.

Yet enslaved mobility was also subject to constant, complex negotiations. Colonial authorities and individual slaveholders shared the need to control slaves' movements and thus prevent rebellions, yet each also recognised the need for many slaves to be mobile. Owners, in particular, demanded control over their slaves' movements, not only for economic reasons but as a part of their slaveholding authority. Thus they often subverted authorities' attempts to regulate such movements.¹³ Meanwhile, enslaved people themselves attempted to harness colonial law to contest the spatial terms of their enslavement. To this end, they employed surprising geographic literacy. Officials frequently recorded how litigants had travelled long distances to make their petitions, expressing little surprise that they had done so. Occasional references imply that at least some had made such journeys by rail or steamship—the very transport mechanisms that underpinned their more efficient enslavement in the first place.¹⁴ These spatial struggles are reminiscent of what, for the U.S. South, Stephanie Camp referred to as 'rival geographies.'¹⁵

Women like Juana played central, specific roles in these socio-spatial contests. While legal developments during the period of gradual emancipation (1870–1886) would later bring this role to the fore in new ways, the gendered roots of their quests were older, and it is these roots with which this article is concerned.¹⁶ Historians of Cuba have generally not paid specific attention to spatial elements of these legal struggles, while studies that do address contestatory enslaved mobility tend to focus on areas like marronage and rebellion, and to foreground male activity.¹⁷ Attention to space and gender together within stories like Juana's can help reveal the bitter contests over 'place-making'—the human use and abuse of physical space—that had tremendous impacts on enslaved women's lives.¹⁸

Gender, space, and movement in a burgeoning slave society

Cuban slave society had a high degree of spatial segregation along gendered lines, as well as along those of race, class, and legal status.¹⁹ Physical space was used to facilitate the subjection of all enslaved humans on the island, but this 'spatial subjection' worked in a specific and especially acute way upon women. In their working lives, enslaved women were not generally deemed suitable for mobile professions such as driving carts, taking messages, or riding horses.²⁰ They were ineligible for most skilled artisan jobs, or to work as *contramayorales*, the enslaved foremen who might be trusted to leave the plantations on errands.²¹ Indeed, in the Spanish Crown's 1789 vision for the slave society in the making, enslaved women should not work at anything that brought them into contact with men, including working as *jornaleras* (the relatively mobile urban slaves who sourced their own income on the streets and paid owners a day wage).²² Although these regulations were not implemented, the cultural barriers to women's mobility that they suggest are striking. These gendered codes were highlighted by the 1834 case of a young *parda*, Florencia Rodríguez, who requested freedom on the grounds of various kinds of ill-treatment. One of her complaints was that her owner 'made her dress ... as a man, working in the smithy, and tried to train me as a coach-driver.'²³ Being made to perform the masculine work of transport was defeminising and degrading to the point of being presented as a form of abuse.²⁴

Just as women were denied the daily mobilities that were sanctioned for some enslaved men, accounts of marronage and revolt—from Cuba as well as across the slaveholding Americas—also indicate a less visible role for women in these more rebellious quests for autonomous mobility.²⁵ Almost certainly, the gendered biases of those who produced such documents help to obscure women's presence.²⁶ Nonetheless, clearly women did experience particular barriers to travel. Such barriers are hardly specific to nineteenth-century slave societies. Across time and space, women's avoidance of unaccompanied travel reflects specific fears that are undergirded by the threat of rape.²⁷ For women of colour travelling unprotected in colonial Cuba, such fear was surely entirely justified. Examples of what such journeys were like for women are rare, but one 1838 anecdote, presented by the governor of Santiago de Cuba, is suggestive. He described a recent incident on a local country road, in which:

seven black *cimarrones* [maroons] attacked ... two free black women, one of whom was carrying a baby at her breast, and they were carrying them away to the *montes*,²⁸ when by chance they were saved by the *mayoral* [overseer] of the Jaragua Grande plantation, ... who responded to their cries and managed to rescue them, killing one of the *cimarrones* with

his machete, whose ears were [later] sent by the *capitán del partido* [local governor] to this Government ...²⁹

Presented without testimony from the women themselves, the story was produced from a combination of the gendered gazes of the *mayoral* and local officials who reported it, and provides little real insight into the motivations of the actors involved. Yet the picture it presents is worth considering. It reminds us that encounters on the lawless roads of nineteenth-century Cuba with strange, potentially hostile men—in this case, the *mayoral* at least as much as the *cimarrones* themselves—were a routine experience for unaccompanied women travellers. For non-white or slave women, who were not afforded the limited protection of racialised social status, this vulnerability was much more acute. Travelling with a young baby could only have added layers of vulnerability, as well as untold practical difficulties.

Colonial litigation documents do sometimes provide echoes of women's voices and attitudes towards travel. In 1852, eighteen enslaved people fled the *potrero* (ranch) of La Catalina, in Havana province, to petition about ill-treatment.³⁰ Most were men, but two women, each of whom had a husband who was also fleeing, joined the group. A third woman, Candelaria Congo, wanted to 'accompany' her husband, the *contramayoral* Joaquín Congo, but ultimately stayed behind.³¹ When questioned, one of Candelaria's complaints was that 'she was pregnant and the *mayoral* still obliged her to work as hard as the rest of her companions.' Despite her grievances and wish to flee, 'when [Joaquín] proposed to the declarant that she should leave with them, she refused because she was close to her time to give birth.'³² Pregnancy thus functioned for Catalina both as a unique cause for grievance and, simultaneously, a significant impediment to undertaking a journey that might help resolve it.³³ The testimony of Candelaria and many other slaves at La Catalina traces an internal decision-making process within this community of seventy-three people about who would leave and who would stay, involving conversations within families and between husbands and wives. It is impossible to know the exact nature of these decisions, but we can suggest that, for women, internal gendered hierarchies—along with primary roles in caring for young children, gendered fear of the road, and a lack of the geographic knowledge that some men's professions granted them—helped complicate, and raise the stakes of, mobility.³⁴

Women's specific experience of spatial subjection makes the many mobile female litigants who do appear in nineteenth-century Cuban colonial documentation a fascinating subject of study. In practice, enslaved and freed women moved around autonomously more than the colonial regime originally envisaged. In urban settings, they worked on the streets as vendors. Beyond the cities, they often moved around the island with surprising speed, and communicated with enslaved relatives on distant plantations.³⁵ Attempting to keep their children with them or loosen slavery's bonds over their sexed bodies, their struggles intertwined with the politics of motherhood and reproduction. While they might employ mobility as a means to an end, the gendered costs it entailed meant they were unlikely to seek it as an end in itself. They were more likely to seek improved conditions under which they could experience *fixity*, which became a creative, resistive counter to the abuses wrought on their bodies and families by the constant displacements of the expanding plantation system.³⁶ Such journeys offer an alternative lens through which to view Atlantic histories that can tend towards reifying movement itself and that focus mainly on mobile men.³⁷

The gendered geographies of the city and the countryside

Spanish American colonial societies were organised around an important socio-spatial dichotomy: the city and the countryside. Slave law in Cuba, although its exact stipulations shifted over time, consistently reflected this division, distinguishing between 'urban' and 'rural' slaves.³⁸ In practice, though, the boundaries of what counted as city and *campo* (countryside) were constantly disputed—by owners, on the one hand, but also by slaves, on the other.

Part of the backdrop for these struggles was a lively internal trade in slaves back and forth across the island. For enslaved people—even if they were not actually sold but simply rented to another owner in a different location or moved between their owner's city and countryside residences—these forced relocations could be devastating. They required adaptation to new work and disciplinary regimes, and threatened the permanent loss of kinship ties. There are still many questions to answer about the workings of this constant exchange in people, but scholars have suggested that, with the gradual repression of the Atlantic trade to Cuba from about the 1850s, slave labour became more concentrated in plantation agriculture, implying a significant flow of slaves from cities to plantations.³⁹ Certainly, there are innumerable cases within Havana's colonial records in which owners attempted to move slaves from cities into rural work. Slaves used all the available legal mechanisms to forge a 'rival geography' to resist such measures, aiming to stay in cities or come to them to have their pleas heard.

Women played an important role in this endeavour. They were disproportionately located in the cities, where they had closer access to the mechanisms of petition and litigation. Gendered assumptions about the 'place' of slaves, in which women were deemed especially suited to urban, domestic work, helped women make arguments about coming to, remaining in, or bringing their relatives (especially children) to the cities.⁴⁰ It was common for mothers such as Juana Mojena, whom we met above, to petition from Havana, and to embark on difficult journeys back and forth on behalf of children who were scattered in slavery on rural plantations. As well as motherhood, this struggle also encompassed other aspects of women's bodily experiences of slavery.

Filed fifty years before Juana's, the case of Florencia Rodríguez, whom we met above, shared many of the concerns later faced by Juana. In 1834, Florencia complained of ill-treatment by her owner, D. Ramón Sainz, and requested to change owners. She had made her initial complaint in the town of San Antonio de los Baños, about twenty-two miles south-west of the capital, where she lived with her owner. Claiming that she had been disregarded, she fled, and somehow journeyed to Havana, where she made several petitions for freedom to the Captain General (at the time, the notoriously repressive Miguel Tacón). She alleged a series of abuses: her owner 'ten or twelve years ago induced me to serve him with my person [sexually], giving his word that within three years he would free me; at that time I was fourteen years old.' Since then, far from freeing her, he had subjected her to constant physical punishments. Sainz's abuse extended beyond Florencia herself: in a strange, cruel act, he had also sewn three rings into the *partes*⁴¹ of one of her companions, a *mulata* named Inés, after 'having her as his wife' for a long time.

Historians who have discussed this unusual case have focused on these disturbing details of sexual abuse.⁴² Yet as far as Florencia was concerned, what the case came to

hinge on was geography. The young woman's increasingly desperate petitions from Havana hinged on her not being sent back to San Antonio for the case to be heard there. Like most other enslaved petitioners, she had scant faith in small town justice. When she had complained to the local *alcalde* about Inés's fate:

this gentleman, who knows well the unruly character of my owner..., asked me whether I also had rings in my *partes*, and when I told him what had been happening to me, he refused to listen, and told me to go home, saying he would speak to my owner.

This distressing combination of lascivious curiosity and total indifference to her plight convinced Florencia to travel to Havana. The rest of her petition hinged on her plea to remain there.

Regardless, the Captain General ordered that Florencia be returned to San Antonio to have the case heard there. Three days later, she sent a last desperate plea, describing with terror how 'an individual has come with an order from San Antonio to take me, in chains, to my owner's house.' The man was even 'dressed in my master's clothes,' in a stark visual reminder of the man and the place from which she had run. She was 'ready to renounce ... my [claim to] freedom, and ask only that I be permitted to seek a new owner here in Havana, or be allowed to die ... but do not drag me from this city.' The file ends here, and it is likely that her petitions were unsuccessful. Yet Florencia's struggles contributed to a set of strategies, developed by many enslaved women, that used spatial positioning to escape from sexual and reproductive abuse. Travel could be very effective, but it was not particularly desirable in itself; rather, it was fraught with danger and was not undertaken lightly.

Coartación and the spaces of motherhood

Within these geographical struggles, a key legal weapon for slaves was *coartación*. This involved the enslaved person making a down-payment towards freedom which fixed their price and afforded them the right to a *papel*—literally a piece of paper—granting them time (usually three days) to seek a new owner before they could be sold. Initially a customary practice, constant enslaved negotiation helped enshrine *coartación* more firmly in law.⁴³ The 1842 slave code made *coartación*, *papel*, and self-purchase legal entitlements for slaves who had enough money.⁴⁴

Historians have often discussed *coartación* in terms of the numbers who attained full manumission, pointing out that this was rarely achieved.⁴⁵ Yet enslaved people's legal claims suggest that for them, *coartación*'s most important promise was not the distant attainment of full freedom, but rather increased control over one's own sale or transfer. In other words, *coartación* became a crucial weapon in the struggle over geography. Time and again, it was only after they were threatened with sale to the countryside that people sought *coartación*, somehow producing the money they needed to make the down-payment.

Like manumission more broadly, *coartación* was an activity in which women—particularly women in cities—were significantly over-represented in numerical terms.⁴⁶ Women clearly played an active role in the *coartación* process, probably beyond that which their numeric representation among the *coartado* population suggests, because a significant part of their activity for *coartación* was on behalf of children. Thus, frequently, a file

documenting the *coartación* case of a male slave turns out in fact to have been instigated by his mother. *Coartación* became an important legal and spatial tool that mothers used to prevent their children being sold away.

For example, in September 1868, an enslaved *moreno*, Francisco Criollo, who lived with his owner in the coastal town of Guanabo, twenty-five miles east of Havana, somehow reached a *sindicatura* in Havana, made a down-payment, and sought *coartación*.⁴⁷ If this could be done in the capital, it would then be easier for him to stay there, registered as an urban *coartado*. His owner, D. José Hernández, wanted his *coartación* to be carried out in Guanabo. However, contrary to the rule normally applied in such cases that the slave should travel to the owner, not vice-versa, Hernández received a letter from the *síndico*, 'ordering me to present myself [in Havana] to meet with my slave about this matter.' He refused, but the *síndico* refused to return Francisco. Hernández then learned of a new development: Francisco's mother, Juana, had also appeared at the *sindicatura*, bearing twenty-seven ounces of gold which, in addition to the three deposited by Francisco, should buy him not just *coartación* but outright freedom. As well as acquiring the money, Juana had somehow obtained orders from the Gobierno Superior Civil that Francisco must not be sent anywhere until the dispute was resolved. Keeping him in Havana had a practical purpose, since it might ensure a lower manumission price. Alleging Francisco was sick, Juana sought a price evaluation in Havana, away from the owner's local influence that could result in an artificially high price being set.

In the end, the owner lost this particular war of attrition. The case dragged on for months, as Juana found new strategies for keeping Francisco in Havana and Hernández lost his slave's 'services' and spent money on letters and litigation. In December, he gave in, travelled to Havana, and had Francisco manumitted there. According to Hernández, 'in order to avoid lengthy procedures, given the considerable delay over this issue ... he now renounces his right of address' (i.e. the right to have the procedure done at his place of residence). He also grudgingly freed him for less than Hernández thought he was worth. Juana used Havana as a site of geographical contestation, communicating with her son or travelling to his rural residence, and mobilising law and money from the capital. Her efforts, combined with Francisco's own ability to employ mobility to reach the capital, achieved his freedom and reunited mother and son.

As well as using *coartación* to avoid separation from children, mothers and their relatives used it to press for other socio-spatial demands that related to reproduction. In an 1861 case, a freed, literate African grandfather, Esteban Muñoz, attempted to prevent the sale of his enslaved daughter, Matea, and her young daughter, Enriqueta, away from Havana. Among his allegations, he noted that, during a difficult childbirth and post-natal period Matea became 'mad' and 'sick' (perhaps what we would today call postnatal depression), Matea's owner had not provided care for her; instead, this was provided by her freed mother, Esteban's wife. Based on such allegations, Esteban sought *coartación* for mother and daughter, in order to keep them united with each other and with their Havana family.⁴⁸ Demands for care in childbirth did not have a clear legal foundation, but *coartación* cases continued to evoke customary expectations, as well as the regulations that were codified in 1842.⁴⁹

Such customary expectations appear to have held some weight. In an earlier 1854 case, for example, enslaved woman Cecilia also linked her *coartación* claim to complaints about neglect in childbirth, saying that she paid for a midwife herself. Along with other

complaints about ill-treatment, this helped build her case for a reduced *coartación* price.⁵⁰ This would increase her chances of remaining in Havana, which in turn affected the conditions under which she might mother her child and perhaps conceive other children. *Coartación*, then, was a gendered geographical practice. Used broadly by enslaved families to gain a modicum of geographic control, it held specific promises for women, helping them resist the ravages of location upon their reproductive lives and bonds with their children.

Gender and ‘spatial discipline’

In July 1854, the Gobierno Superior Civil received a petition from a black woman named Dolores Justiniani.⁵¹ She related a traumatic tale:

[W]hile she was the slave of Doña Pilar Chacón, who was hiring her services out, she complained about the ill treatment she was receiving in the household where she was earning her day-wage, and this led her owner to ... order ... that her son Narciso, also a slave, should be made to physically punish his own mother. When, as is natural, he refused to carry out this barbaric order, they were both sent to the *ingenio* Mercaditas, owned by Don Bonifacio Cuesta, where they suffered severe punishments ... ; the petitioner was finally able to escape her owner’s power, but ... Narciso is still suffering.

Narciso had sought *coartación* in order to change owners, Dolores said, but had failed because a very high price had been set. Dolores wanted his price reduced. Geography, not manumission, was at the forefront of her mind: she wanted to help him escape the *ingenio*, as she herself had somehow done.

This case illustrates that sending slaves from city to countryside was not just a matter of practical expedience for owners. It was also explicitly understood, by masters and slaves alike, as a form of discipline. Whether the person was sold, transferred, or hired, the act of physical displacement strengthened the owner’s hand and weakened that of the slave in several important ways. It removed the person from their family and from the social setting that confirmed their legal identity, as well as from the mechanisms of legal redress that existed in cities. It also allowed geography itself to work against them, transferring them to an unfamiliar setting and therefore complicating further attempts to escape or move about. The threat of such removal hung over *all* urban slaves, even if they themselves never experienced it.⁵² It shaped the culture of slavery on the island, providing the plot for nineteenth-century works of fiction whose enslaved protagonists were sold away as small children and only much later reunited with kin who could prove their identity when the mystery was solved on the last page.⁵³ The human implications of the constant forced movement of enslaved people across the island are therefore much broader than quantitative analyses of ‘the internal slave trade’ can convey. Moving slaves around allowed owners to employ what we can call ‘spatial discipline.’ The terror that *el campo* inspired in slaves reminds us that ‘places have psychosocial as well as spatial or geographic meaning. They exist not only in terms of their specific location within a city ... or country, but also as cognitive spaces with attendant psychosocial significance.’⁵⁴

The cases discussed herein remind us that the ‘psychosocial significance’ of particular places was also deeply gendered. The threat of separation from children was particularly stark for women. For Narciso’s mother, Dolores, being separated from her son and

knowing that he was being subjected to brutal punishment was a high price to pay for her litigation activity. Matea, whose father appealed on her behalf, was spirited away from her parents, 'bound like a criminal,' after her relations with her owner soured. Her father interpreted her removal not as a practical economic decision by her owner, but as an act of personal vengeance. Once she was sold outside the city, she would have little redress against separation from her young daughter.

Removal by force to new locations where they had no social connections or protection also had specific bodily implications for women. Florencia Rodríguez, for example, knew that a forced return to San Antonio represented a return to unmitigated sexual abuse.⁵⁵ There is a studied silence, in the documents consulted for this research, about the conditions in which forced labourers—slaves, *emancipados*, prisoners—were routinely transported around the island, but we can assume that it involved violence at all stages of the process. Violence came to light in one 1863 case in which night guards arrested a white, male serving soldier, Manuel Hurralde y Martínez, on a Havana street for being drunk and disorderly.⁵⁶ In the process, they subjected him to a beating. This came to light as Hurralde's case was being examined, and the Gobierno Superior Civil agreed that 'these functionaries be told that when they capture any military individual, they should treat him with appropriate consideration, without harming him more than is necessary to avoid him running away.' If military men were only offered this limited protection in 1863, we can only guess at the untold violence that was routinely perpetrated against unfree transportees. We can assume that for women, forced transportation, multiple sales, and constant encounters with new environments where they were devoid of any social protection would have involved repeated acts of sexual violence. Like the apparently routine practice of slave ship rape, spatial and sexual subjection were surely melded together on these journeys.⁵⁷ Disputes between owners and slaves about space, then, were highly charged psychological battles that went to the heart of what it meant to enslave and to be enslaved. For slave women, the stakes were particularly high.

Gender, space, and the psychology of resistance

Havana played a specific role within broader spatial struggles between owners and slaves that played out elsewhere on the island. Time and again, slaves only came to the capital after they had made an initial legal claim elsewhere, for which owners had attempted to punish them with both physical and geographic violence. This context means that escaping, journeying, and continuing to litigate was a brave, impressive act, especially given women's additional spatial subjugation. Beyond material aims, litigation could yield other kinds of results, ensuring that owners did not have the psychology of geography all their own way.

For example, as one owner who punished his slave with geographic violence discovered, it was sometimes possible for the enslaved to turn such relocations to their advantage. The owner in question sent his slave Andrea, aged twenty-two and described as *mulata*, from the southern port city of Cienfuegos to Havana for sale in 1865, after subjecting her to physical punishments from which her body still bore recent weals.⁵⁸ Andrea, nonetheless, was swift to make use of her arrival in Havana to seek *coartación* there, making the required down-payment of fifty pesos. Even though he had specifically sent her to Havana to sell her, the owner still tried to make her return to Cienfuegos for the *coartación*

to be performed there. However, the *síndico* took seriously her claim that if this were to occur, 'her owner with his ... influence ... can have her evaluated at an exorbitant price,' and she might 'be obliged to work on the Ingenios where she will be punished again.' It was agreed that the *coartación* should happen in Havana. While Andrea's body and mind might continue to bear the scars of the journeys she had undergone, she had also built a 'rival geography' out of her experiences, subverting her owner's intention to use relocation as a weapon.

Even if the enslaved person did not ultimately get what they wanted, the act of seeking it evidently touched a nerve in owners' slaveholding authority and social standing. A case brought in 1835 reveals continuities in the kinds of power struggles that spanned the decades. María Encarnación de Cárdenas, a *morena libre* living in Havana, asked the Gobierno Superior Civil to help her free her *conga* mother, Joaquina, owned by one Doña Rosalía del Corral.⁵⁹ Joaquina worked as a nurse on the *ingenio* Candelaria, 'more than twenty leagues distant' from the capital. María Encarnación brought notions of daughterliness, as well as motherhood, to her arguments: she wanted to free Joaquina 'as a good daughter.' She alleged the price demanded by Doña Rosalía was too high, since her mother was old and sick. She asked that Joaquina be evaluated by an official evaluator, based in Havana, and, to this end, that 'Doña Rosalía be ordered that within ten days she [her mother] should be presented here in this City.' Such evaluations should normally be done at the slaveholder's residence, and Doña Rosalía protested accordingly. She alleged: 'Twice I have had the *negra* Joaquina brought [to Havana] from my Ingenio.' Both times, she said, María Encarnación had not even turned up to initiate proceedings. Now, she continued, 'she wants this repeated a third time, and I do not think it correct that she should thus mock me, making me lose Joaquina's labour ...' She added: 'It is well known that her aim is merely for [Joaquina] to come back here [to Havana] to no purpose, because as far as I can see the daughter lacks the means to pay for the mother's freedom.' Arguing that 'my intention is not to impede [María Encarnación],' she proposed a supposed compromise: a price evaluation near the *ingenio*. She promised to accept the outcome, knowing that her own local influence would ensure a high price. Returning to geography for her clinching argument, she said this 'would avoid the journey, which is difficult in this season of copious rains ... and pernicious because it distracts the slave from her work.'

Although María Encarnación's attempt to free her mother apparently failed, the litigious journeys she instigated did trouble her owner's sense of authority. Her ability to have her mother brought, more than once, to the capital, with some support from the colonial authorities, 'mocked' Doña Rosalía's assumed right to personal control over her slaves' location. Doña Rosalía attempted to regain control by portraying herself as a kindly yet firm slaveholder, and María Encarnación as an unreasonable child. This power struggle over the 'place' of the enslaved mother was a struggle about slaveholding identity, as well as about practices of enslaved motherhood and daughterhood.

Nonetheless, ultimately, mother and daughter remained separated. Spatial subjection left mother-child bonds constantly vulnerable, and therefore 'success' in disputes of this kind was a relative concept for women. The strong association between enslaved motherhood and loss, highlighted by many papers in the *Mothering Slaves* collections, was shared by women in Cuba who sought improved conditions for their children. In January 1842, an angry slaveholder in Santiago de Cuba, D. Nicolás José Gutiérrez, complained that his geographic rights over one of his slaves, a *pardo* named Feliz, had been permanently broken: the

slave had escaped, along with several others, on a steamship bound for Jamaica.⁶⁰ Feliz had been helped, it transpired, by his mother, who, along with a male relative, had secured a passport allowing her son to leave the island, along with several other slaves. Feliz's mother had helped facilitate her son's escape from slavery; yet she faced imprisonment for her actions and, worse, the possibility of permanent separation from him. For enslaved families in general, but particularly for women, who had a specific legal and social stake in maintaining family ties in slavery, 'success' and heartbreaking loss were not antithetical. Indeed, they were often intimately bound together.

Conclusion

The expanding institution of slavery in nineteenth-century colonial Cuba was underpinned by new political uses of space, whether through the rapid alterations in the landscape brought by plantation development, more efficient trade in material goods and unfree humans, or the maintenance of a highly controlled socio-spatial order that prevented rebellion. Enslaved legal quests for freedom or improved conditions were thus closely connected to the everyday politics of space. Such politics were gendered in important ways. Women were subject to specific kinds of 'spatial subjection.' In response they attempted to use the law to limit the damage that geography wrought on them and their families, whether its facilitation of the abuse of their sexed bodies or its threat to separate them from their children. Engaging in dangerous contests with owners or former owners, women used *coartación* and other developing legal provisions to bridge the divides between urban and rural slavery. These struggles frequently ended in the profound loss that motherhood under slavery so often brought, yet collectively they helped undermine owners' confidence in their right to use space as a tool of discipline and helped shaped the evolution of slave law. Implementing 'rival geographies' through legal means, women challenged some of the most nefarious consequences of slavery for their sexual, reproductive, and mothering lives.

Notes

1. Expediente conteniendo instancia de Juana Mojena sobre su hija Dolores, Archivo Nacional de Cuba (henceforth ANC), Miscelánea de Expedientes (ME), legajo (leg.) 3724, expediente (exp.) S, 1883.
2. On gradual abolition in Cuba see Rebecca J. Scott (1985) *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: the transition to free labour, 1860–1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
3. The petition cites articles 32 and 33 of the regulation of the law. See Reglamento de ley de 1880, aboliendo la esclavitud en Cuba (8 May 1880), in Fernando Ortiz (1996; first published 1916) *Los negros esclavos* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales), pp. 335–350.
4. Like most petitioners discussed in this paper, Juana signed her name with a cross, since 'she does not know how to sign.' The petition would have been written for her by a *síndico* (a slave legal representative) or a scribe or literate acquaintance. It is not my contention that such sources can grant unmitigated access to the words or aims of illiterate enslaved or freed petitioners, but certainly we can 'hear' echoes of these through the careful use of these kinds of petitions. For detailed discussion of this issue, see Camillia Cowling (2013) *Conceiving Freedom: women of colour, gender, and the abolition of slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), pp. 62–66.
5. At the 1861 census, the town had 4,000 inhabitants. The *jurisdicción* (region) surrounding it had held 19,177 whites, 17,145 slaves, and only 3,521 free people of colour. José de J. Márquez

- (1926; first published 1875) *Diccionario geográfico de la isla de Cuba* (Havana: Imprenta Pérez, Sierra y Ca.), p. 68.
6. For this point, see David Sartorius (2009) 'Travel, passports, and the borders of race in nineteenth-century Cuba,' paper presented to Latin American Studies Association, Rio de Janeiro 11–14 June, 2009.
 7. In this sense, this piece, which focuses on the middle decades of the nineteenth century, builds on my own previous work on the gradual emancipation period. See Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom*.
 8. See Reinaldo Funes Monzote (2008) *From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba: an environmental history since 1492*, translated by Alex Martin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).
 9. See Imilcy Balboa Navarro (2013) *De los dominios del rey al imperio de la propiedad privada: estructura y tenencia de la tierra de Cuba (siglos XVI–XIX)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas).
 10. On this term see Dale Tomich (1988) The Second Slavery: bonded labour and the transformation of the nineteenth-century economy, in Francisco Ramírez (Ed.) *Rethinking the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 103–117; and Dale Tomich & Michael Zeuske (Eds) (2008) The Second Slavery: mass slavery, world economy, and comparative microhistories, parts 1 & 2, special editions of *Review: Journal of the Fernand Braudel Centre*, 31(2) and 31(3).
 11. On trains see Oscar Zanetti & Alejandro García (2008) *Sugar and Railroads: a Cuban history, 1837–1959* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press). On slavery and scientific knowledge see Daniel Brett Rood (2010) *Plantation Technocrats: a social history of knowledge in the slaveholding Atlantic world, 1830–1865* (PhD thesis, University of California: Irvine).
 12. On women and the internal market, see Beatriz Joda Esteve (2014) *Mujer y esclavitud doméstica: La Habana (1790–1844)* (PhD thesis, Universitat Jaume I, Castellón de la Plana).
 13. On these contradictions see Camillia Cowling (2016) *Esclavitud, espacio físico y movilidad en Cuba, s. XIX*, in José Antonio Piqueras (Ed.) *Orden político y gobierno de esclavos: Cuba en la época de la segunda esclavitud y de su legado* (Valencia: Centro Francisco Tomás y Valiente UNED Alzira-Valencia), pp. 205–228.
 14. For examples, see Cowling, *ibid*.
 15. Stephanie Camp (2004) *Closer to Freedom: enslaved women and everyday resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), pp. 6–7.
 16. On the transition period see Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom*. For work on women's litigation earlier in the century see Digna Castañeda (1995) The Woman Slave in Cuba during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century, in Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton & Barbara Bailey (Eds) (1995) *Engendering History: Caribbean women in historical perspective* (London: James Currey), pp. 141–154; Digna Castañeda (1996) Demandas judiciales de las esclavas en el siglo XIX cubano, *Temas*, 5 (January–March 1996), pp. 60–65.
 17. For an overview, see Alvin O. Thompson (2005) Gender and Marronage in the Caribbean, *Journal of Caribbean History*, 39(2), pp. 262–289.
 18. On 'place-making' through gendered socio-spatial practices, see Doreen Massey (1994) *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press). For an article on Brazil that explores the intersections between forced and autonomous movement and between bodily and legal identity in one woman's life, see Maria Helena Machado (2010) Corpo, gênero e identidade no limiar da abolição: a história de Benedicta Maria Albina da Ilha ou Ovídia, escrava (sudeste, 1880), *Afro-Ásia*, 42, pp. 157–193.
 19. The implications of gendered spatial segregation are explored cross-culturally by Daphne Spain (1992) *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press). Spatial segregation, she argues, 'does more than create a physical distance; it also affects the distribution of knowledge women could use to change their position in society' (p. xiv).
 20. Occasional interesting exceptions to this rule do appear. For enslaved women listed as *carreteras* (cart-drivers), see, for example, ANC, fondo Escribanía Mayor de Hacienda, leg. 134, exp. 2563, 1835, pp. 19–21, 57–60. Thanks to Jorge Macle for this reference.

21. On *contramayorales* and masculinity see Aisha K. Finch (2015) *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the insurgencias of 1841–1844* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), pp. 56, 173–176. On Cuban gendered divisions of slave labour see Aisnara Perera Díaz & María de los Ángeles Meriño Fuentes (2016) *Estrategias de libertad: un acercamiento a las acciones legales de los esclavos en Cuba (1762–1872)* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2 vols), vol. 1, pp. 338–348.
22. *Real Cedula [sic] de su Magestad [sic] sobre la educacion [sic], trato y ocupaciones de los esclavos en todos sus dominios de Indias, é [sic] Islas Filipinas, baxo [sic] las reglas que se expresan* (1789) (Madrid: Imprenta de la Viuda de Ibarra), ch. 3, p. 5.
23. Florencia Hernandez [sic] quejándose de su amo por los motivos que indica, ANC, fondo Gobierno Superior Civil (henceforth GSC), leg. 936, exp. 33047, 1834. Florencia's two petitions give her surname as Rodríguez; however, other communications contained in the file, and its title, refer to her as Hernández.
24. For ways in which slave families conceived of cross-plantation visits as a 'heroic' and specifically masculine activity, see Emily West (2010) 'He Come Sometimes Widout De Pass': rethinking cross-plantation marriages and enslaved families in antebellum South Carolina, in Craig Thompson Friend & Anya Jabour (Eds) *Family Values in the Old South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press), pp. 42–61.
25. Gloria García addressed this directly: 'Women encouraged the warriors with their cries, or walked in the rear, but there are no direct indications that they participated in armed combat.' Gloria García (2003) *La esclavitud desde la esclavitud* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales), p. 28.
26. On the need to read these documents against the grain to discern women's activities, see Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion*, ch. 5.
27. These issues have been explored in a very different setting—twentieth-century Britain—by, for example, Rachel Pain (1991) Space, Sexual Violence and Social Control, *Progress in Human Geography*, 15, pp. 415–431; and Gill Valentine (1990) Women's Fear and the Design of Public Space, *Built Environment*, 16(4), pp. 288–303. Evidently, such works cannot be applied directly to nineteenth-century Cuba, but they provide useful theoretical insights about the workings of masculine control of public space.
28. *Monte* in Cuba—translatable as wilderness, hills, or mountains—held a rich range of cultural significances. For slaveholders and colonial authorities it held the fearful connotations of uncharted or un-policed space. For runaways and outlaws, on the other hand, it could represent a reprieve from the controlled spaces of the *llano* (flat, farmed land). Meanwhile, Aisha Finch points out that woods were considered sacred spaces among *congos* and other Central African ethnic groups. Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion*, p. 63.
29. Sobre un proyecto del Gobernador de Cuba para el uso de armas a las personas de color en Cuba, para que auxilien en los casos que se expresan, ANC, GSC, leg. 938, exp. 33108, 1838.
30. Diligencias formadas a consecuencia de la fuga de varios negros de ambos sexos pertenecientes a la dotación del potrero La Catalina ubicada en el partido del Calvario ... ANC, GSC, leg. 947, exp. 33457, 1852.
31. 'Congo' referred to Africans who had embarked at one of the ports of West Central Africa, between Luanda and Benguela. See Manuel Barcia Paz (2008) *Seeds of Insurrection: domination and resistance on Western Cuban plantations, 1808–1848* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), pp. 22–23.
32. Declaration of Candelaria Congo, 4 September 1852, in: Diligencias formadas a consecuencia de la fuga de varios negros de ambos sexos ... ANC, GSC, leg. 947, exp. 33457, 1852.
33. The complaint appears to reference customary understandings of what was appropriate work for pregnant women rather than any specific legal provisions about this.
34. On women's primary childcare roles see García, *La esclavitud*, p. 28.
35. On women's role in connecting the 'family diaspora' across western Cuba, see Aisnara Perera Díaz & María de los Angeles Meriño Fuentes, The African Women of the *Dos Hermanos* Slave Ship in Cuba: slaves first, mothers second, in this collection.

36. For the US antebellum South, Emily West underscores a fundamental desire for stability, shared by enslaved and freed men and women, who 'wanted to remain at the heart of their kin networks and simply be still.' Emily West (2012) *Family or Freedom: free people of colour in the antebellum South* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky), pp. 20–21.
37. Feminist scholars have emphasised the gendered implications of the turn towards travel and mobility across different disciplines in recent decades. For Linda McDowell, '[Male-centred] stories of resistance through escape can ... ignore the ways in which struggle and commitment to change are possible among those [often women] who remain static.' Linda McDowell (1999) *Gender, Identity and Place: understanding feminist geographies* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 208. See also Janet Wolff (1992) On the Road Again: metaphors of travel in cultural criticism, *Cultural Studies*, 7, pp. 224–239. Defending their 'new mobilities paradigm,' Mimi Sheller and John Urry argued: 'It is not a question of privileging a 'mobile subjectivity,' but rather of tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis.' Mimi Sheller & John Urry (2006) The New Mobilities Paradigm, *Environment & Planning A*, 38, p. 211. For a more recent critique of the turn towards digitised sources in the service of transnational history, which can risk missing the stories of 'people who stayed put,' see Lara Putnam (2016) The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: digitised sources and the shadows they cast, *The American Historical Review*, 121(2), pp. 377–402.
38. In theory, since at least 1789, 'Slaves' first and principal occupation should be in agriculture and other rural work, not in work in settlements.' *Real Cedula [sic] de su Magestad sobre la educación ...*, ch. 3, p. 4. This 1789 Real Cédula was not enacted, but many principles it established were later applied. From 1844, owners were obliged to pay tax on their domestic slaves. Nominally, at least, they therefore had to divide their slaves into 'domestic' and 'rural.' See *Real Cedula [sic] de su Magestad sobre la educación [sic] ...*, 1789, ch. 3, p. 5. For an example of slaves thus categorised, see 'Varios padrones de los esclavos de ambos sexos destinados al servicio doméstico y sujetos al pago de Capitación,' ANC, GSC, leg. 948, exp. 33528, 1853–1854. On the history of the tax, see Perera Díaz & Meriño Fuentes, *Estrategias de libertad*, vol. 1, pp. 288–299.
39. Laird Bergad, Fe Iglesias & María del Carmen Barcia (1990) *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 85, 92.
40. Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom*, chs 1, 5.
41. Genitals.
42. Castañeda, The Woman Slave in Cuba; García, *La esclavitud desde la esclavitud*.
43. Alejandro de la Fuente (2007) Slaves and the Creation of Legal Rights: *coartación* and *papel*, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 87(4), pp. 659–692; Perera Díaz & Meriño Fuentes, *Estrategias de libertad*, vol. 1, pp. 15–35, 81–86, 97–112, and vol. 2, pp. 2–60.
44. Reglamento de Esclavos, 14 November 1842, Articles 34 and 37, in Bienvenido Cano & Federico de Zalba (Eds) (1875) *El libro de los Síndicos de Ayuntamiento y de las Juntas Protectoras de Libertos. Recopilación cronológica de las disposiciones legales a que deben sujetarse los actos de unos y otras* (Havana: Imprenta del Gobierno y Capitanía General por S. M.), p. 28.
45. Bergad et al., *The Cuban Slave Market*, p. 123; Scott, *Slave Emancipation*, 13–14; Claudia Varella (2011) *Esclavos a sueldo: la coartación cubana en el siglo XIX* (PhD thesis, Universitat Jaume I).
46. Bergad et al., *The Cuban Slave Market*, p. 123; Sarah L. Franklin (2014) *Women and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Cuba* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press), pp. 141–146; Scott, *Slave Emancipation*, pp. 13–14.
47. Expediente promovido por D. José Hernández vecino de Guanabo reclamando de la sindicatura tercera la traslación de su esclavo Francisco Criollo a la de Jaruco, ANC, fondo ME, leg. 3537, exp. Ll, 1868.
48. Expediente promovido por el negro libre Esteban Muñoz pidiendo la coartación de su hija Matea y su nieta Enriqueta que están en la jurisdicción de Güines, ANC, GSC, leg. 954, exp. 33750, 1861.

49. The 1842 Reglamento stipulated care for sick slaves, clothing and food allowances, and the right of mothers of young children to breastfeed them and not be separated from them until age three, but did not specify care to be given during childbirth. See articles 6–10, 15, 27, 28, 30, 31, Reglamento de esclavos, 1842, in Cano & Zalba (Eds) *El libro de los Síndicos*, pp. 21–27.
50. Expediente en que la negra Cecilia se queja del mal trato que le da su ama Dña. Inés Hernández, ANC, GSC, leg. 949, exp. 33563, 1854.
51. Expediente en que la negra Dolores Justiniani se queja de maltrato, ANC, GSC, leg. 949, exp. 33571, 1854. Dolores was described as a *negra*, a more disparaging term than *morena* and generally associated with slavery. Although no longer owned by Pilar Chacón, it is unclear whether she was now free, or enslaved to someone else.
52. For this point in the U.S. context see Walter Johnson (2001) *Soul by Soul: life inside the antebellum slave market* (Boston: Harvard University Press), p. 19. For Cuba, see Daniel Walker (2004) *No More, No More: slavery and cultural resistance in Havana and New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 40–42. Walker discusses the descriptions by Cuban slave Juan Francisco Manzano of endless trips back from the city to his master's plantation for punishment.
53. For example, Francisco Calcagno (1881) *Romualdo, uno de tantos*, in Imeldo Álvarez García (Ed.) (1974) *Novelas cubanas*, vol. 1 (Havana: Editorial de Arte y Literatura), pp. 273–380.
54. Walker, *No More, No More*, pp. 19–20.
55. Florencia Rodríguez to Gobierno Superior Civil, 5 November 1834, in: Florencia Hernandez [sic] quejándose de su amo ... , 1834.
56. Expediente promovido por el E. S. Capitán General para que se prevenga a los empleados de seguridad y serenos, que cuando conduzcan presos a individuos del ejército no le causen mayor vejación que la precisa para evitar la fuga, ANC, GSC, leg. 1388, exp. 54160, 1863.
57. See Joseph C. Dorsey (2003) 'It Hurt Very Much at the Time': rape culture, patriarchy, and the slave body semiotic, in Linden Lewis (Ed.) *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), pp. 294–322.
58. Expediente promovido por el Síndico Primero proponiendo que la esclava Andrea de Dn Manuel Muñoz, vecino de Cienfuegos, sea coartada en esta ciudad, ANC GSC, leg. 961, exp. 34064, 1865.
59. Expediente en que la morena María Encarnación de Cárdenas se queja de Da Rosalía del Corral por no admitirle la cantidad que tiene por la libertad de su madre, ANC, GSC, leg. 937, exp. 33060, 1835.
60. El Dr. D. Nicolás José Gutiérrez en queja de las circunstancias de la fuga de su esclavo pardo Feliz embarcado en el Vapor Venezuela que salió para Jamaica, ANC, GSC, leg. 941, exp. 33177, 1842. Thanks to Dan Rood for this reference.

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