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A Transatlantic Slavery Narrative: Work Sketches of a Nineteenth- Century Bristolian-Cuban Sugarcane Plantation and President Barack Obama's 'Black Speech' in Cuba

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This is a historic visit and it's a historic opportunity to engage directly with the Cuban people and to forge new agreements, commercial deals, to build new ties between our two people.

——Barack Obama, Speech in Cuba

After the triumph of the Haitian Revolution in 1804, Cuba emerged as the world's largest producer of sugar through a complex commercial relationship with the United States as its most important buyer. This financial relationship was gained by means of a rather intricate web of US businesses that supported Cuban sugarcane plantations dependent on the labor of enslaved workers. An active slavery trade between Cuba and United States was based out of Atlantic Coast American ports. Though barely documented today, there was a close commercial relationship between Cuba and Bristol, a coastal Rhode Island town that was central to the transatlantic slavery trade. This industry prospered in spite of a series of antislavery trade regulations, beginning with the US Congressional Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves (1807), which, although intended to act as a blockage, failed to impede a highly profitable business that involved a myriad of supporting transnational partnerships.

A notable US financial enterprise was ownership of sugar plantations.

Bristolians owned sugarcane plantations in the Cuban province of Matanzas that produced molasses, that was then taken to Bristol for the production of rum. These rum refineries were also an important component of the slavery trade, as rum was used as a bargaining chip in the purchase of African enslaved workers, who were brought, in turn, to Cuba, as first point of arrival of the slave trade, followed by other US southern markets. Other side businesses operating from Rhode Island included the importation into Cuba of dried codfish and fabric for clothing for enslaved workers.¹

These relations of commerce between Cuba and the United States gave rise to numerous trips to the island by Americans involved in the business of cultivating sugarcane and sugar byproducts. Americans often visited Cuban *ingenios*, as sugarcane plantations were widely known on the island, either as tourists or as friends of landowners who gladly showcased these sites well known for their use of industrialized inventions.

Technology, often American, supported the refinement of sugar molasses into sugar-related products. Americans also came to Cuba as technicians performing work on sugarcane plantations. Given the scarcity of historical sources concerning these transnational exchanges within the Bristol-Cuba trade, of significant historical importance within the Bristol-Cuba slavery trade is a work diary written by a Bristolian, George Howe, who provided managerial support on New Hope, a sugarcane plantation owned by well-known Bristol merchant, slave trader, and US senator James D'Wolf (1764–1837). In his diary, written from Ingenio New Hope from May 1832 to February 1834, Howe wrote about a number of agrarian work practices predominantly performed by field enslaved workers. His views on enslaved work practices are today a window into an often secretive worksite, as publications about sugarcane *ingenios* were often censored in the Cuban press.

The Travelogue as a Literary Testimonial

After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the tradition of letterwriting from Cuba by American travelers endured. The US congressional embargo went into effect in 1962, heavily restricting free travel between the United States and Cuba, though the embargo has been circumvented by selective American and international personalities for decades. Through their eyewitness accounts, Americans followed key events in the development of radical sociopolitical policies under the revolutionary government. Like the accounts of nineteenth-century travelers before them, these travelogues revealed the heightened politicized climate operating on the island as socialist policies addressed socioeconomic issues, some of which related to Cuba's long imperialist history with the United States.

Arguably, the most famous of American tourists visiting Cuba in the early years of this millennium has been Barack Obama.² The US president's three-day official visit, beginning with his arrival in Havana on March 20, 2016, had an extraordinary impact on prospective diplomatic conversations surrounding the US embargo against Cuba. As

US news media highlighted, the last time an American president had come to Cuba on an official matter was in 1928, with the visit of President Calvin Coolidge. Indeed, President Obama's presence on the island in spite of the ongoing US congressional economic embargo was symbolically equated to the breaking down of an old political order. Similar to the accounts that, throughout the nineteenth century Cuba's international visitors had carefully recorded of their journeys, particularly tracing their encounters with slavery-related customs, Obama's visit while exploring iconic Cuban sites was fully documented by the US press.

The newspaper *The Guardian* proudly proclaimed, "this is a Berlin wall moment: a step toward liberation worthy of Nelson Mandela, at whose funeral Obama and president Raúl Castro famously first shook hands."³ Nonetheless, it also underscored the importance of Cuba as an emerging business partner for US markets. There was not, however, a direct reference that the loss of Cuba as a prominent importer of US goods came after the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. An embargo intended to destabilize national economy seemingly failed to refrain a socialist government.

This paper examines two outstanding testimonial accounts by Americans visiting Cuba in the context of a Cuban–American history stemming back to a booming slavery trade spearheaded by the United States. George Howe's travelogue of 1832–34 provides the thematic foundations for a *literature of the plantation*. This type of discursive narrative documented the central role of sugarcane plantations upon Cuban and international economies and, by extension, reflected upon the impact of enslaved workers on the financial underpinnings of a Cuban colonial history with a strong connection with US financial markets. I extend this analysis to Obama's reading of the convoluted diplomatic relationship between both countries, which he also centered in terms of an Atlantic Pan-American racial legacy. An outstanding element of his official speech, which he delivered live and uncensored to a Cuban audience, was his self-characterization as an African American, a hybrid identity through which he examined the colonial histories of both countries.

Not coincidentally, both Obama and George Howe delivered celebratory speeches on the island. Howe wrote his text from the point of view of an eyewitness, as a supervisor of work tasks at a sugarcane plantation, where he oversaw enslaved workers who labored on sugarcane fields. As indicated in his personal letters, work reports, and diary entries, Howe commented positively on enslaved workers, individuals who, as key to the success of the plantation, were called on to perform a variety of agrarian tasks, typically under brutal conditions. Conversely, Obama, also a visitor without prior experience of Cuban culture, dwelt, however, as an African American, on the shared colonial history of the two countries. This self-characterization suggests he wanted to align him with Cubans, who, as part of the African diaspora, struggle with the negative heritage of a hideous slave trade. Indeed, a tone of compromise clearly dominated his speech. Against the political background of an economic embargo, Obama came to Cuba not only as the president of the United States embarking on a historical visit, but, significantly, in his own words, as a "Black man" and as "a child of

mixed race.”⁴ More importantly, Obama presented himself as intimately conversant with issues of race and class, points of contention in the diplomatic conversations pertaining to the US embargo.

A Literature of the Plantation: The Ideological Narrative of a Cuban Sugarcane Ingenio

George Howe (1791–1837), a Bristolian who had some administrative skills, came to oversee the operation of the Ingenio New Hope, a Cuban sugarcane plantation located in the emerging agrarian center of the province of Matanzas, on the northwestern coast of the island. Not much is known about Howe. He had attended Middlebury College and had literary aspirations. He wrote poetry profusely and, according to his own testimony in his diary, some of it was published in *Providence Gazette*.⁵ Howe also wrote songs, eulogies, and political speeches. Key US national holidays, such as the Fourth of July, inspired some of his most patriotic speeches.

The owner of Ingenio New Hope was James D’Wolf, a notable Bristolian businessman and politician, whose political machinations cleverly dealt with both US congressional prohibitions on the slavery trade and Cuban decrees regarding sugarcane ingenio operations. D’Wolf, today “remembered as the largest slave trader in the history of the United States,” had a central role in a thriving slave trade in the postindependence US.⁶ He had guided several brothers into slave trading, operating a booming business since the 1780s that would ultimately become “the single largest slave trading family in the United States.”⁷ As the worldwide sugar market increased in value throughout the nineteenth century, Bristol-based businessmen, including D’Wolf, who owned sugarcane and coffee plantations in the province of Matanzas, invested heavily in Cuba.

In the United States, the slave trade network, as David W. Blight contends, sustained “systems of slavery operated largely as thoroughly legal practice, buttressed by local law and by the United States Constitution.”⁸ The trade also required a complex organization of subsidiary businesses, such as “textiles, shipping, banking and insurance.”⁹ Cuban sugarcane plantations owned and managed by notable Bristolian businessmen had international and financial significance with the result that large numbers of skilled Americans came to Cuba to perform diverse work tasks. Their interactions with Cubans today represent the first contact that the postrevolutionary US sustained as a rising Atlantic commercial and political powerhouse.

The maintenance of ingenios required detailed documentation of operational practices, including personal observations, initially written as diary entries or work reports. Howe collected his personal letters and his labor reports as a formal literary travelogue, which he ambitiously entitled *The Diary with Letters, Lucubrations, Dreams, Flim-flams, Cogitations, Whims and Fantasies of the Author*. He wrote short, pseudo-scientific observations about the flora and fauna surrounding the “monte,” as the wilderness surrounding plantations was known and feared by city dwellers who found

themselves unprepared for the rough rural conditions of sugarcane. He also drew simple illustrations, rather detailed amateur drawings that might have been part of his conceptual project to publish the journal as a commercial travelogue. Unfortunately, Howe's untimely death prevented his publication of the diary.

The close involvement of Bristolians with slave-related businesses or Bristolian-owned ingenios in Cuba produced a flurry of written documentation, whether work reports or more personal documentation, such as diaries or epistolary correspondence. Indeed, large droves of Americans traveling to Cuba throughout the nineteenth century made this Caribbean island a popular destination, reflected in the large number of intimate personal diaries, some of them intentionally organized and published as formal travelogues. Howe closely followed the travelogue tradition, a genre that he was familiar with, given its popularity as a commercial enterprise.

As would be expected, a central *narrative* component of a *literature of the plantation* centered around descriptions of slavery practices. Matthew Pratt Guterl has argued that the role of slavery-related travel experiences throughout the Caribbean had a notable ideological impact: "Slaveholders and slaves, masters and laborers of all sorts, journeyed across the American Mediterranean, each imagining a New World that still shared a great deal across national borders or that was bound together by wide-open circuits, trade routes, and intellectual connections."¹⁰ The degree to which the specifics of the slave trade were revealed, including the actual work practices on plantations, widely differed according to the individuals and their function within the numerous, and often criminal, tasks.

Howe recorded a plethora of seasonal details pertaining to the cultivation of sugarcane and, proudly, his overseeing of the installation of a sawmill, a modern facility that supported a new business enterprise that aimed to import exotic woods to the United States. Howe did not, however, document details about slavery practices that he dealt with, nor did he reveal specifics about transactions of D'Wolf's slave trading that would have been illegal since 1807, following the US Congressional Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves. He was likely torn on this humanitarian issue, given that he was also a member of the D'Wolf family. His mother, Abigail, was James D'Wolf's sister. While he may have held conflicted views about his role on Ingenio New Hope, he was determined to do his job well, in spite of the rather harsh surroundings of the Cuban countryside and the hostile conditions operating at New Hope that for him became emblematic of bad business practice by the D'Wolfs. At the core of his ambivalent personal feelings regarding slavery was his belief that, though he knew slavery to be an oppressive system, enslaved workers were essential to the ingenio's financial success and, therefore, his own well-being as an employee and close relative of the powerful D'Wolfs.

Enslaved workers were very much on Howe's mind, however. One of his art pieces in particular stands out today for its bold representation of Peter, Ingenio New Hope's cook (see *Figure 1*). Although Howe noted encountering Peter, he never specified the nature of their relationship. It was, however, strong enough that Howe

would memorialize him in a full-length color portrait. This is Howe's only such aesthetic representation in which he documented an African worker or, for that matter, any other laborer on the plantation. His artistic rendition of a sad-looking, dark-skinned, middle-aged man was meant to be haunting and particularly tragic: This is evident in his purposefully dramatic depiction of Peter's legs as widely bowed.



Figure 1. This is Howe's sympathetic rendition of Peter, an enslaved worker who served as Ingenio New Hope's cook. Significantly, other than his own self-portrait, Howe did not draw any white staff member. Image used by permission and courtesy of the Bristol Historical and Preservation Society, Bristol RI.

A thin walking stick, which clearly could barely support the weight of a large, muscular man, emphasizes the subtle message that his arched legs could have been the result of a work accident on the field. But Howe remained silent about the origin of Peter's disability, which did not prevent the use of his labor as cook. Perhaps in this elaborate portrait of Peter, Howe was exploring his activist feelings regarding the injustices and criminal acts that he witnessed at Ingenio New Hope.

Nonetheless, Howe maintained a positive outlook on the role of New Hope as a remarkable financial investment and an outstanding technological operation. Writing in August 1832, some three months after his arrival in the province of Matanzas, Howe formally addressed a crowd of workers, including enslaved workers, at Ingenio New Hope. He was celebrating the conclusion of the construction of a sawmill whose operation he had come to supervise. He summarized his heightened expectations that his arduous physical work, as a supervisor of this modern construction, would have an impact beyond the economic remuneration. The sawmill would be part of the advanced technology, mainly American and British, that would turn Cuban ingenios into superb work sites. Thus, the sawmill indirectly became a symbol of the installation of new American technology on foreign soil.



Figure 2. An artistic rendition by George Howe of New Hope's steam sawmill. Image used by permission and courtesy of the Bristol Historical and Preservation Society, Bristol RI.

Howe considered the sawmill an advanced piece of technology, a symbolic representation of superior US methods of production and, most importantly, an efficient work apparatus. Indirectly, it also represented a triumph for an American government aspiring to expand economically and politically into the Caribbean—and Cuba, in particular, which was viewed as an untapped frontier.

Although the sawmill symbolized the triumph of modernity over the overwhelmingly wild forces of nature, the clear protagonists were men, whose herculean manual efforts brought to completion this Bristolian-designed machinery. Indeed, Howe did not document the presence of women workers, even as field enslaved workers performing duties of the various aspects of cultivation of sugarcane. Howe passionately applauded the efforts of all the men who were working at New Hope and, surprisingly, among them, the enslaved workers, whose representation in his work reports went beyond the usual voyeuristic depiction of individuals engaged in forced labor activities. Although Howe physically placed them in the field, he awarded them a strikingly sympathetic image: “Our Ebony friends who roll their billiard balls in wonder, as the work advances, and show their rows of ivory—give happy demonstrations of health and cheerfulness.”¹¹ In his characterization of African “Ebony” field workers, Howe certainly drew from the usual stereotypical physical depictions so common in popular art forms; however, he also described the laborers as exceptional workers in spite of exhaustive agrarian tasks: “Their docility at labor betrays no reluctance—their honest faces are charged with no accusation; whilst their posteriors, naked as heavenly Truth most eloquently reproach the neglect or miscalculation of their owners” (24). Those unnamed owners, perhaps Cuban and Spanish plantation owners whom Howe eventually came to despise as ineffective administrators, mistreated their hardworking enslaved crews. He pointed out in a matter-of-fact fashion that nearby enslaved workers lacked basic needs, such as proper clothing: “In sober truth, they are egregiously in want of trousers” (24). This would be Howe’s most direct critical attack on plantation owners, who, as his actual neighbors, spent only short seasons living in their ingenios, preferring the refined life of urban centers, such as Havana and the city of Matanzas.

Unexpectedly, Howe’s speech praised enslaved workers, in contrast to white workers, for their hard work under dire conditions: “I am at a loss to imagine how with none but these poor negros [sic]—insulated from the arts and from all intelligent society—subject to inclement skies—subject to diseases—subject to other positive evils and to innumerable privations, he could so soon have ‘laid low the dark forests and tamed the features of the landscape!’” (24, emphasis in the original). Although the embedded reference to Washington Irving might be seen as an early indication that Howe intended to reduce the harsh elements associated with rural slavery to literary components, the scene is arguably significant as an open abolitionist statement: “It is very remarkable that amidst [sic] all these labors and sufferings, his people have been generally contented; still more remarkable that death has claimed but one” (24). Of notable importance was Howe’s determined effort not to label enslaved workers as

such. He would call them by various epithets, “people” in this case, unlike his Cuban counterparts, who often referred to the workers as either “slaves” or by some contemporaneous racial slur. Mindful that a public stance in which he openly lamented enslaved workers’ harsh lives could be perceived as an abolitionist sentiment, Howe ended his speech with sentimental praise for his manager: “No praise can add anything to these facts—they plainly indicate the care and attention of the manager—they speak a language that cannot be misapprehended. May his toil, and peril, and anxiety be sweetened by the consummation of his wishes; may the machinery meet expectation; may the earth continue bounteous; may the cocks tread the hens, and the hens lay till fowls abound on the premises of every varying feather” (24).

Howe’s sawmill speech functioned as a basic managerial account, a work sketch that highlighted the pecking order in which the plantation’s manager was the most important staff member. Better known in Cuba as a *mayoral*, or overseer, New Hope’s manager is praised by Howe as a man of outstanding characteristics: “Surveying the scene around us, I am utterly at a loss for words of adequate commendation to our manager for the perseverance and indefatigable zeal with which he has reclaimed this wilderness” (24). This statement would be, however, an exception. In later work sketches, Howe indicated having little contact with New Hope’s manager, whose name he did not even mention. He did, however, show admiration for this presumably Cuban man who, in his coming into contact with an increasing number of foreign investors, had learned to speak English and French, advanced skills that Howe jealously admired. In spite of their common interest in foreign languages—Howe being bilingual—no strong connection developed between them. Howe never sought the administrator’s company, opting for a life of solitude that he clearly despised. Frequent strolls through the wild surroundings of Ingenio New Hope and his active writing served as relaxation from his strenuous work responsibilities. Though conveying a sympathetic look at the enslaved, Howe nevertheless displayed the inherent racial biases that rendered African enslaved workers inferior to white workers, and certainly beneath Americans, whom Howe often praised as superior to Cuban as well as Spanish workers, towards whom he openly displayed a strong animosity. In this, he reflected the expansionist national agenda dominating the United States in the early part of the nineteenth century.

At the end of his stay at Ingenio New Hope, Howe had lost the initial excitement of finding himself in an uncharted territory. He was overwhelmed by the political support that allowed for sugarcane plantations to dominate not only Caribbean but international markets. Thus, Bristol-based business owners and merchants might have seen themselves also as political pioneers paving the way to political expansion into Cuba, an island that had already attracted the attention of notable American politicians as a territory for prospective annexation.¹² The D’Wolf’s financial conglomerate was, however, also facing international opposition. Boycotts in Great Britain had started to target sugar produced by enslaved workers as part of a rising abolitionist movement that “began to acknowledge the power of consumption to drive the global economy—and to bring misery to people in distant locales.”¹³ The first US antisugar boycotts, also

ongoing in England in the 1790s, were “spearheaded ... especially by Quaker women’s antislavery organizations.”¹⁴ And around the time of Howe’s stay at Ingenio New Hope in 1825, the Birmingham Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves had called for “abstinence from the use of slave cultivated sugar ... not only in our West India Colonies, but also in other parts of the World.”¹⁵

Against this financial background of high-stake investments, the silences in Howe’s diaries are plentiful. Whether writing a work report to a representative of the D’Wolf administration or addressing a family member or a friend, he understandably refrained from discussions of the treatment of Ingenio New Hope’s enslaved workers. He neglected to dwell on references to New Hope’s hideously feared workers, such as the mayoral, a rather distrusted individual. In this self-imposed censorship Howe did, however, follow an approach similar to local writers, whose literary treatment of slaves on Cuban plantations could not include any reference to the particularly gory details of punishment practices. In his handling of specific details concerning his treatment of enslaved workers at Ingenio New Hope, Howe was in a difficult dilemma. He thus did not dwell on the behind-the-scene details of his managerial protocol of enslaved workers at New Hope. As the readers of his letters must have assumed, the intricate managerial details fell within the domain of the overseer, who was already documented in a rising Cuban abolitionist literature as a negative figure whose inhumane practices made him the most hated and despised administrator. Cuban abolitionist literature remained unpublished on the island, though. The powerful political machinery of an ingenio-based economy succeeded in silencing opposition to the horrors of slavery, including the publication of news about those terrible violations, situated at the core of operational practices, to the enslaved workers’ human rights.

President Barack Obama as a ‘Black man’: A Modern Reading of the Impact of Slavery on Cuba’s Colonial History

I can’t even hold up my experience as being somehow representative of the black experience (“After all, you don’t come from an underprivileged background,” a Manhattan publisher helpfully points out to me); indeed, learning to accept that particular truth—that I can embrace my black brothers and sisters, whether in this country or in Africa, and affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for, all our various struggles—is part of what this book’s about.

—Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, xvi

As it had during the illegal slave trade period, the current financial blockade of Cuba seems to invite mixed results. Its actual effect on the development of ideological

policies is still highly contested. At the time of Barack Obama's election in 2008, as William M. LeoGrande and Peter Karnbluh attest, his political handling of Cuba would become a "litmus test of Obama's declared desire to forge a new 'equal partnership' with the region."¹⁶ Indeed, in his handling of the "Cuban case," Obama signaled his administration's prospective diplomatic approach toward Latin American affairs. Even before Obama's election, Fidel Castro had targeted "the black candidate ... nominated in the face of strong opposition" as a likely victor.¹⁷ On May 25, 2008, Castro reminded Obama about the revolutionary programs which had taken place in spite of an imposed US economic embargo: "Before judging our country, you should know that Cuba, with its education, health, sports, culture and science programs, implemented not only in its own territory but also in other poor countries around the world, and the blood that has been shed in acts of solidarity with other peoples, in spite of the economic and financial blockage and the aggression of your powerful country, is proof that much can be done with very little. Not even our closest ally, the Soviet Union, was able to achieve what we have."¹⁸ After the election of Obama, Castro highlighted, as he had done with previous presidents, Obama's inability to deal with the embargo, a point of contention that Castro frequently voiced as Obama's weakest diplomatic fault: "Not a word was said about the harshest of measures: the blockade. This is the way a truly genocidal measure is piously referred to, one whose damage cannot be calculated only on the basis of its economic effects, for it constantly takes human lives and brings painful suffering to our people."¹⁹

Connecting Race to a Transnational Activism

Like Howe and many other travelers throughout the nineteenth century, Obama projected his visit as a business trip while also framing his presence on the island within a strong ethnic context as a living example of American activism. A racialized self-characterization as an African American dominates his official speech, delivered in Havana on March 22, 2016 to a crowd of about one thousand individuals handpicked because of their roles within the political structure of the Communist Party. The speech was shared widely via radio and television coverage, and Obama had the opportunity to meet privately with notable dissenters living in Cuba. From his privileged vantage point as the first African American–elected president, Obama started his speech by emphasizing the importance of his trip: "Havana is only 90 miles from Florida, but to get here, we had to travel a great distance, over barriers of history and ideology, barriers of pain and separation."²⁰ The physical nearness of Cuba to the United States is a symbolic entry into a description of the similarities and, better yet, the historical intersections between both countries.

The speech was short, about thirty minutes long, including a small number of rather restrained applause breaks. It was seemingly purposely devoid of any controversial references to political figures, either American or Cuban. There was, however, a notable exception. Obama opened the speech with a peace offering,

introduced through the reference to a revered national political patriot: “In his most famous poem, José Martí made this offering of friendship and peace to both his friend and his enemy.” The greeting was, as Obama stressed in Spanish, “[e]l saludo de paz”; a peaceful greeting.²¹ His reference is Martí’s “Poema XXXIX,” often referred to as “Cultivo una rosa blanca”; I cultivate a white rose, as Obama proudly introduced it in Spanish. He symbolically dramatized the stanza in which an unnamed poetic speaker approaches someone, who is either a friend or a foe, with a rose. In the case of Obama, the hand that delivered a white rose to a foe was that of a black man. That iconic chiaroscuro image became emblematic of what would ultimately become one of his most personal public speeches. Obama’s inclusion of Martí’s poetry was also a calculated diplomatic decision. A well-known premodernist poet, Martí is considered an apostle of liberty for Cuban Americans and revolutionary Cubans alike. His poetry is also part of a rich musical repertoire, again shared by Cuban Americans and revolutionary Cubans. The explicit implication that commonalities between Cubans and Americans can exist in spite of ideological and political differences resonates throughout the speech.

Obama further stressed the similarities, stemming from their shared colonial pasts, between the United States and Cuba: “[...] we also need to recognize how much we share. Because in many ways, the United States and Cuba are like two brothers that have been estranged for many years, even as we share the same blood. We both live in a new world, colonized by Europeans.”²² This rather electrifying statement gave way to Obama’s declaring the United States a proud “brother” in the family of American nations. He then followed with a challenging statement intended to underscore a shared racial background: “Cuba, like the United States, was built in part by slaves brought here from Africa. Like the United States, the Cuban people can trace their heritage to both slaves and slave owners. We’ve welcomed both immigrants who came a great distance to start new lives in the Americas.”²³

Obama connected this ethnic history shared between the US and Cuba to his own family’s history. He proudly acknowledged that his Kenyan father had first come to the United States in 1959, the year Fidel Castro’s Movimiento Veintiseis de Julio took over political control of the island. Obama connected his birth year, 1961, with another historic Cuba–US experience, the 1961 Bay of Pigs, the first in a series of armed confrontations that Cuban Americans organized with the financial support of the United States government. The Bay of Pigs also brought forward the congressional embargo that Obama was determined to dissolve with this historical visit: “I want to be clear. The differences between our governments over these many years are real, and they are important. I’m sure President Castro would say the same thing. I know, because I’ve heard him address those differences at length.”

Cuba’s cultural heritage found a home in the United States, he noted, with popular Cuban American salsa music and food widely known throughout the country. Cubans, on the other hand, had taken up *la pelota*, as he referred to baseball, as a popular sport of Cuba favored in particular by Afro-Cubans. Culturally based food items

with a slavery connection must have been top of mind, too. Obama's mention of *ropa vieja*, a stew of salted, dried beef, is an iconic dish in modern Cuban cuisine that was also part of the meager food allowance given to enslaved workers. Beyond the political significance of considering the United States a multiethnic country by means of boldly recognizing Africa as a shared motherland, the president addressed the ways in which the United States continues to struggle with the legacy of slavery. A notable characteristic of the speech is its direct connection with elements central to the narrative of the *literature of the plantation*. In particular, Obama highlighted the resourcefulness of Cubans, who, in spite of the limits imposed by the economic US embargo, have found ingenious ways to survive financially. Entrepreneurial Cubans, whom Obama named as *cuentapropistas*, are resourceful individuals who are officially allowed to own private business in exchange for payment of high taxes to the revolutionary government. Obama proudly praised them in Spanish: "El cubano inventa del aire"; Cubans can invent anything from pure air.

Clearly aware that many of these private business owners are *afro-descendientes*, or Cubans of African descent, President Obama went a step further in his underlying message. In his most direct attack on the revolutionary political establishment, speaking of racial inequalities, he added: "And in Cuba, we want our engagement to help lift up the Cubans who are of African American descent, who have proven there's nothing they cannot achieve when given a chance."²⁴ Indirectly, Afro-Cubans are, like their enslaved African ancestors, cultural innovators, turning insipid salted beef jerk, the food item allocated to rural enslaved workers, into delicious *ropa vieja*. Like previous enslaved workers and freed blacks, today's *cuentapropistas* work within the system; even, as Obama stresses, "while sustaining a distinctly Cuban spirit. Being self-employed is not about becoming more like America, it's about being yourself."

Clearly missing from his stated desire that US engagement with Cuba will "help lift up the Cubans who are of African American descent," is an explanation of ways in which an Afro-descendiente US president could achieve such change in Cuba. He did refer to the activist lessons learned from the Civil Rights Movement that, as he pointed out, took place at the same time the Cuban Revolution was also confronting US congressional opposition. The radical societal changes brought by this movement, as Obama remembered, are placed within a narrative more similar to an abolitionist discourse, by means of popular protests: "[P]eople organized. They protested. They debated these issues, they challenged the government officials. And because of those protests and because of those debates and because of popular mobilization, I'm able to stand here today as an African American and as president of the United States. That was because of the freedoms that were afforded in the United States, that we were able to bring about change."

The reference to the Civil Rights protests brought him into the contested arena of political dissension or counterrevolutionary activism, which the Cuban Revolution has traditionally curtailed by means of strong criminal laws. In fact, in his initial address

to the audience, Obama chose a rather unscripted approach. Reacting to news reports that the Islamic State (IS) group had bombed Brussels's airport and a metro station on March 22, he unambiguously stated that the United States "stand[s] in solidarity with them [Belgians] in condemning these outrageous attacks against innocent people."²⁵ His promise to the Belgian people indirectly addressed similar terrorism, to which the Cuban Revolution had been linked worldwide: "We will do whatever is necessary to support our friend and ally, Belgium[,] in bringing to justice those who are responsible. And this is yet another reminder that the world must unite. We must be together, regardless of nationality or race or faith in fighting against the scourge of terrorism." A cold silence followed, an indication that indeed the subject of terroristic and guerrilla warfare tactics was a point of contention in Cuban-US diplomatic negotiations.

Conclusion: Today's Legacy of the TransAtlantic Slavery Trade

In analyzing the racialized elements of a nineteenth-century *sugarcane plantation narrative*, I am mindful of the latter's ideological connections with similar, contemporary conversations on the impact of slavery and its cultural and political legacies. Although Howe's depictions of enslaved customs drew heavily from formulaic legal and administrative documentation pertaining to the management of enslaved workers, he personalized them and presented them as efficient workers, in spite of the overwhelming work conditions pervading the plantation. Indeed, he often expressed dissatisfaction about the rustic conditions he personally experienced at Ingenio New Hope and yearned to see the day he could return to his family in Bristol. Of course, Howe's downfall was his hesitation to condemn the covert managerial practices that, as an administrator, he would have witnessed, including physical abuse and horrific punishment methods.

I was also struck by President Obama's message of political freedom for a postmillennium Cuba, which, like Howe's narrative of plantation literature, drew from a bold historical reading of an old ideological order still in operation under revolutionary practices. Boldly, Obama pointed to similar national racist attitudes as remnants of the strict racialized social order during the slavery period. Ultimately, his strongest point, in a rather ingenious speech that attempted to address a variety of political subjects, comprised highlighting racial dissonance as the result of a slavery past, a dissonance existing at the center of a national political discourse, in both the United States and in Cuba. Indeed, as Antonio Tillis has summarized, an in-depth exploration of the historical relevance of Afro-descendientes in today's Latin American societies is of prime importance in understanding a colonial past still in operation: "[T]he Americas are bridged to Africa in a way that cements the fluidity of cultural transfer and the fight for visibility, power, and a more inclusive understanding of national identity and culture."²⁶ President Obama's speech went a step further: As a politician and an African American, he bravely articulated the belief that social equality, both in the United States and in Cuba, will only be achieved when the legacy of slavery

practices is fully understood and, better yet, recognized as part of a terrible colonial past. His own story, as he stressed, corroborated his message to the Cuban people that American democracy, although imperfect, can achieve change, perhaps even faster than within the Cuban “one-party system,” which has yet to produce a person of color as a chief political leader.

In conclusion, the racialized narrative elements of popular plantation literature reveal strong ideological connections with current twenty-first century conversations on the impact of slavery both in Cuba, as a notable importer of enslaved workers, and the United States as the economic power that generated a complex network of business operations in spite of international and US congressional slave trade prohibitions. Indeed, George Howe’s diary represents an unusually positive profile of field enslaved workers, whom he characterized as the true engines behind the overwhelmingly powerful sugarcane ingenios responsible for Cuba’s claim as the world’s sugarcane producer throughout most of the nineteenth century. The ingenio network system was a complex machinery that managed to impose ideological silences. American travelers writing travelogues throughout the nineteenth century, for instance, clearly steered away from writing about controversial work practices that they certainly witnessed in their visits to Cuban sugarcane plantations. In spite of this self-censorship, Howe positioned field enslaved workers as protagonists of a booming economic national story though they remained voiceless in his writing. Their private lives were erased from a work narrative that had forced them into being mere impersonal components of a terrible socioeconomic system.

Likewise, in President Obama’s historical approach, to his Cuban and US audience he was clear in the cultural specificity of his message of political freedom. It was based on the grounds that, in spite of abolishment of an old ideological order informed by slavery work practices, racist attitudes are still in operation. Indeed, while Howe modestly lamented the rough conditions that enslaved workers experienced at Ingenio New Hope, Obama brought an activist edge to his call for action. As this most distinctive element, Obama’s speech placed him as yet an African American man whose life story and multiethnic background instilled in him his commitment to fight for change in a racially charged US society. While Howe interacted directly with enslaved plantation workers, he remained quiet on the subject of their personal struggles. In contrast, Obama highlighted ways in which his life intersected with a tainted racist political system. As his own successful example demonstrates, people of color in the United States can achieve political power, including the highest office, in a country still struggling with the legacy of enslaved practices’ highly racialized classifications. It has certainly been a long historical progression from the servitude depicted in Howe’s passive rendition of enslaved workers.

Obama’s success story goes, however, beyond the traditional so-called American Dream; it speaks to the peaceful possibilities of socioeconomic activism within the democratic American political system. This is the model he encouraged

rising Afro-Cuban activists to explore and was a central message in his historical speech from the perspective of an Afro-descendiente at the pinnacle of a US democracy.

Notes

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¹ Miguel A. Bretos, *Matanzas: The Cuba Nobody Knows* (University Press of Florida, 2010), 143.

² President Obama was in good company. Prior to his trip to Cuba, other American personalities whose visits were extensively covered in the media in both countries included megastar singers like Beyoncé and her husband Jay Z; actress and singer Rihanna; and pop stars Katy Perry and Usher. Actors and directors have also come to Cuba, among them Robert Redford, Benicio del Toro, Danny Glover, Harry Belafonte, Kevin Costner, and Steven Spielberg.

³ Dan Roberts, "Obama Lands in Cuba as First US President to Visit in Nearly a Century," *The Guardian*, March 21, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/20/barack-obama-cuba-visit-us-politics-shift-public-opinion-diplomacy>.

⁴ All citations referring to President Obama's speech in Cuba are from *Time* magazine's transcription: "Read President Obama's Speech to the Cuban People," *Time*, March 22, 2016, <http://time.com/4267933/barack-obama-cuba-speech-transcript-full-text>.

⁵ Howe's diary is available at the special collections in the Bristol Historical Society in Bristol, Rhode Island. All quotations are from June Truitt's transcription.

⁶ Leonardo Marques, *The United States and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the Americas, 1776–1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 2.

⁷ *A Forgotten History: The Slave Trade and Slavery in New England* (Brown University: Choice for the 21st Century Education Program and Watson Institute for International Studies, 2008), 20.

⁸ David W. Blight, "Introduction" in *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, ed. Kate Shuster (Atlanta: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018), 7.

⁹ “How Slavery Is Taught Today” in *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, ed. Kate Shuster (Atlanta: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018) 16–17.

¹⁰ Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 186.

¹¹ All citations are from June Truitt’s transcript, available at the Bristol Historical Society, here page 24.

¹² Outside the scope of this book are the plentiful political discussions throughout the eighteenth century by American politicians regarding a formal expansion of the United States in Cuba within a formal annexation of the island.

¹³ Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003), 13.

¹⁴ Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, 88.

¹⁵ Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, 93.

¹⁶ William M. LeoGrande and Peter Karnbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 369.

¹⁷ Fidel Castro, “The November 4 Elections,” in *Obama and the Empire* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2011), 9.

¹⁸ Fidel Castro, “The Cynicism,” in *Obama and the Empire*, 6.

¹⁹ Fidel Castro, “Not a Word about the Blockade,” in *Obama and the Empire*, 50.

²⁰ Obama, “Read President Obama’s Speech,” transcript.

²¹ The version published by *Time* does not include Obama’s phrases in Spanish. All quotations in Spanish are my own transcriptions from the original speech available on C-Span (“President Obama Speech in Cuba, Full Speech,” C-Span, <http://cs.pn/1MzALdZ>).

²² Obama, “Read President Obama’s Speech,” transcript.

²³ Obama, “Read President Obama’s Speech,” transcript.

²⁴ Obama, “Read President Obama’s Speech,” transcript.

²⁵ Obama, “Read President Obama’s Speech,” transcript.

²⁶ Antonio D. Tillis, “Introduction,” in *Critical Perspectives on Afro-Latin American Literature*, ed. Antonio D. Tillis (New York: Routledge, 2012), xiv.

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