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A Cemetery Fit for a Cultured and Christian City
Religious Freedom, Cultural Diversity, and the Urban Landscape in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Spanish Caribbean

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A Cemetery Fit for a Cultured and Christian City: Religious Freedom, Cultural Diversity, and the Urban Landscape in the Late-19th-Century Spanish Caribbean

The Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón (Colón Cemetery) in Havana, Cuba, is a renowned cultural and architectural landmark. Just a few blocks away lies the smaller Cementerio Chino (Chinese Cemetery). Both were built in the late 19th century, with the Catholic Colón Cemetery representing the legal and cultural identity of the Spanish colony, while the Chinese cemetery served a racially and religiously marginalized population. This article examines the management of non-Catholic bodies in Havana, focusing on the establishment of burial grounds for those outside the Catholic faith. Through a comparative analysis of Protestant groups and Chinese immigrants, it explores the struggle for separate burial spaces, shedding light on the negotiations, conflicts, and accommodations surrounding their creation. The findings contribute to our understanding of how immigrant groups navigated the changing socio-legal landscape, highlighting cemeteries as a site of cultural and religious negotiation.

1. Introduction

In 1879, the German sailor Jon VanDyck visited the Cuban port of San Juan de los Remedios and soon after entered the hospital suffering from vomito negro (yellow fever). He died on June 26th and was quickly buried in the city's cemetery. This was a common fate for visitors to Cuba who often succumbed to disease, with swift burials following. However, VanDyck's death grew into an international diplomatic incident when the German consul, alerted by a newspaper article, inquired about his burial location.

The situation escalated, and soon Germany's plenipotentiary minister in Madrid accused Cuban officials of neglecting procedures for German citizens, particularly as VanDyck, a Protestant, was believed to have been interred in a Catholic site. After a year-long investigation, it was determined that VanDyck had been buried in a section of land outside the cemetery designated for non-Catholics. His mortal remains, which were in an unmarked grave on unconse-

crated ground, proved impossible to locate.[1]

Just a few years later, on May 19th, 1881, Wong Yu was buried in Havana's Colón Cemetery. His burial, as recorded in 'libro 29 de enterramientos de personas blancas', was unremarkable. His burial only gained significance seven years later when Lo Kay, a compatriot in Havana, petitioned for Wong Yu's body to be exhumed and returned to China for burial. Lo Kay engaged a solicitor to prepare the case, the Chinese Consul General in Havana signed as a witness, and the petition was submitted to the Governor. Because the burial was more than five years ago and therefore met the legal requirements for exhumations, the Governor approved the petition. Wong Yu's remains were exhumed and transported to Hong Kong.[2]

These two burials, though dissimilar, share common traits. Both VanDyck and Wong Yu were foreign-born, non-Spanish, and non-Catholic. In 19th-century Cuba, the legal and material framework for burial was Catholic. The state did not recognize non-Catholic groups, necessitating adaptation for those outside the dominant religious tradition. VanDyck's unmarked burial echoed the fate of many Protestants who died on the island. On the other hand, Wong Yu's repatriation represents an unusual option, available only to the affluent. Taken together, these cases illustrate the multiplicity of experiences of non-Catholics navigating Cuba's burial practices during this era.

This article argues that burial spaces in 19th-century Havana were a site for the politics of exclusion and inclusion in colonial society. By comparing the experiences of Protestant and Chinese immigrant communities, it reveals how colonial authorities and the Catholic Church used burial policies to marginalize non-Catholic groups while reinforcing racial and social hierarchies. At the same time, it demonstrates how these communities resisted exclusion by establishing their own burial spaces, asserting their cultural and religious identities in the face of colonial domination. The divergent outcomes for Protestants and Chinese immigrants underscore the uneven ways colonial power operated and was contested.

[1] The German representative's complaint did not refer only to the question of whether the Protestant sailor was buried inside the Catholic cemetery, but also to the fact that when a German subject is buried, the grave should be marked so that it can be located if necessary. Cf. Sobre la sepultura que ha de darse en remedios a los extranjeros en Cuba, 1880, in: Archivo Histórico Nacional de España (AHN), Ultramar (U) 4760, expediente (exp.) 44.

[2] Cf. Trasladar desde Colón a Hong Kong, 1888, in: Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba (ANC), Gobierno General (GG) 119, exp. 5409.

In the early 1800s, Havana was already a large port, although it had yet to reach its later heights. After Haiti's independence in 1804, slaveholding nations refused to trade with the new state, leading to the collapse of the Haitian sugar industry. Cuban planters filled this gap, boosting the island's economy. This economic boom was accompanied by demographic shifts, as the demand for labor led to the importation of enslaved Africans and, later, Chinese indentured laborers.[3] In 1825, John Howison described Havana harbor as filled with "a forest of masts" and humming with activity.[4] New arrivals wended their way through piles of boxes, bales, and casks. The port was crowded with vessels, shipmasters, seamen, Spanish merchants, and black laborers.

The city's streets were similarly chaotic, bustling with carriages and pedestrians. The elite traveled in volantes and quitrines, Cuban open-air carriages, promenading along the Alameda in the afternoons and attending dances, theater, and opera in the evenings. Havana's upper class was divided between peninsular elites (Spaniards enforcing colonial rule) and Creole elites (descendants of Europeans who prospered in Cuba). Creole-owned plantations powered the island's economy, and despite their differences, both groups aimed to keep the sugar money flowing.[5]

The prosperity of Cuba's sugar industry relied on the exploitation of enslaved labor. By 1827, enslaved and free people of color made up 56 % of the Cuban population.[6] However, only a fraction of the enslaved population resided in Havana; the majority were sent to work on the plantations. Between the white elite and the enslaved Africans were large middle- and lower-class populations, including many free people of color. Progressive manumission policies and immigration increased their numbers; they worked as artisans, skilled tradesmen, and small business owners. This demographic reality and the shadow of Haiti would shape colonial policies.[7]

Even as the revolution in Haiti created Cuba's sugar industry, it left the island's white population concerned about racial unrest.[8] Both Peninsular and

3 Cf. Rebecca J. Scott, Slave Emancipation in Cuba. The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899, Pittsburgh 1985, pp. 6-15.

4 John Howison, Foreign Scenes and Travelling Recreations, London 1834, p. 108.

5 Cf. Franklin W. Knight, Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century, Madison 1970, pp. 92 f.

6 Cf. Ramón de la Sagra, Historia Económico-Política y Estadística de la Isla de Cuba, Havana 1831, p. 6.

7 Cf. Ada Ferrer, Freedom's Mirror. Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution, New York 2014, pp. 15 f.

8 Cf. Michele Reid-Vazquez, The Year of the Lash. Free People of Color in Cuba and the Ni-

Creole elites viewed these changing demographics with suspicion, if not fear. José Antonio Saco, a Cuban intellectual, promoted abolition in order to decrease the number of blacks in Cuba. He argued that colonization of white labor was "necessary and urgent to give the white population a moral and numerical preponderance over the excessive population of color" in order "to neutralize to a certain degree the terrible influence of the three million blacks that surround us."[9] Embracing this policy of blanqueamiento, authorities sought to increase the white population through changes in immigration policies.[10]

Immigration to Spain's colonies had been restricted to Catholics of Spanish origin. However, as plantation economies expanded, the demand for labor led to policy changes. In 1815, the newly arrived Superintendente de Real Hacienda Alejandro Ramírez established the Junta de Población Blanca to promote white immigration. In his previous post in Puerto Rico, Ramírez had secured the Cédula de Gracias of August 10, 1815, offering land grants and tax exemptions to Catholic immigrants.[11] Similar policies were enacted in Cuba through the 'Cédula' of October 21, 1817, which aimed to increase Cuba's white population. It mirrored the Puerto Rican document, offering incentives to Catholic immigrants willing to pledge allegiance to Spain. The allocation of land grants was left to the discretion of the captain general by emphasizing the need to attract "honorable white colonists".[12] Though focused on Catholics, the urgency to increase the white population indirectly facilitated Protestant immigration, as many evaded the religious oath by maintaining a low religious profile. By 1878, about 9,000 Protestants lived in Cuba, most of whom settled in Havana and engaged in urban employment rather than plantation work.[13]

When attempts to recruit white workers for the plantations failed, the Cuban planters turned to Chinese indentured laborers. In 1844, the 'Junta de Fomento' sent agents to China, resulting in an agreement to import Chinese coolies. The Chinese were legally classified as white and free. However, they were required to work for the contract-holder, making them an ideal labor pool to

neteenth-Century Atlantic, Athens 2011, pp. 26 f.

9 José Antonio Saco, Carta de un cubano a un amigo suyo, Seville 1847, p. 31.

10 Matt D. Childs, The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle Against Atlantic Slavery, Chapel Hill 2009, pp. 69-71.

11 Cf. Duvon C. Corbitt, Immigration in Cuba, in: The Hispanic American Historical Review 22:2, 1942, pp. 280-308, here pp. 288-290.

12 Real cédula de 21 de octubre de 1817, sobre aumentar la población blanca de la Isla de Cuba, Havana, 1818, in: Latin American Pamphlet Digital Collection at Harvard University.

13 Cf. Luis Martínez-Fernández, Don't Die Here. The Death and Burial of Protestants in the Hispanic Caribbean, 1840-1885, in: The Americas 49:1, 1992, pp. 23-47, here p. 26; id., Protestantism and Political Conflict in the Nineteenth-Century Hispanic Caribbean. New Brunswick 2002, pp. 48-71.

Cuban plantation owners.[14] The first ship arrived in Havana in 1847, marking the beginning of the coolie trade. By the time it ended in 1874, over 120,000 Chinese laborers had been brought to Cuba to bolster the labor force as the African slave trade was ending.[15] This influx not only sustained sugar production but also aligned with colonial strategies promoting a whiter population. Chinese workers came with promises of independence after fixed years of employment, guaranteed by contract. However, employers often ignored the contracts, and laborers faced harsh penalties, including death or imprisonment, if they refused to extend their service periods.[16]

This socio-economic and demographic backdrop sets the stage for understanding the experience of Protestants and Chinese coolies in 19th century Havana and highlights their struggles for dignity and recognition in both life and death.

3. Urban Reform: Havana's Transformation in the 19th Century

Late-18th-century officials began reforming the colonial city to reflect its wealth. In 1818, Richard Henry Bonnycastle described Havana's infrastructure, noting its harbor and fortifications, eleven churches, two hospitals, and public buildings, including an aqueduct that supplied water and turned the sawmills in the dockyard. He further commented upon the sophistication of its inhabitants, remarking that they were "more polished than in most American cities".[17] Havana's commercial and professional class agreed with him. They considered themselves cosmopolitans and saw Havana as a hub; appearance and presentation became tools for the display of Cuban affluence.[18] Public urban reform projects were another.

Colonial and municipal authorities worked together to transform Havana into a modern metropolis. The most tangible changes affected the physical city, where buildings with noteworthy architectural designs replaced colonial struc-

[14] Cf. Evelyn Hu-Dehart, Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century. Free Labor or Neoslavery, in: Contributions in Black Studies 12, 1994, pp. 38-54, here p. 40; Kathleen López, Chinese Cubans. A Transnational History, Chapel Hill 2013, p. 21.

[15] Cf. Hu-Dehart, Chinese Coolie Labor, p. 41; Lisa Yun/Ricardo Rene Laremont, Chinese Coolies and African Slaves in Cuba, 1847-74, in: Journal of Asian American Studies 4:2, 2001, pp. 99-122, here p. 111.

[16] Cf. Hu-DeHart, Chinese Coolie Labor, pp. 44 f.; López, Chinese Cubans, pp. 28 f. and pp. 36 f.; Lisa Yun, The Coolie Speaks. Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba, Philadelphia 2008, pp. 30-32.

[17] R. H. Bonnycastle, Spanish America, London 1818, pp. 189 f.

[18] Cf. Louis A. Pérez Jr., Intimations of Modernity. Civil Culture in Nineteenth-Century Cuba, Chapel Hill 2017.

tures. Miguel Tacón y Rosique, governor from 1834 to 1838, oversaw extensive modernization efforts. His reforms included enhancing the port, developing public amenities, improving the city's infrastructure, constructing the Tacón Theatre, and strengthening public security through police reforms. In their attempt to transform Havana from a colonial backwater into a regional capital, the authorities deemed it necessary to modernize both the space of the city and the behavior of its inhabitants.[19] Havana emerged as a model of urban modernization in the region.

Even as the old city underwent modernization projects, limitations of space inside the city walls led to the expansion of the urban footprint. The population grew from 76,000 in 1774 to 160,000 in 1841. New inhabitants meant new neighborhoods, such as the extramuros barrios like Regla, Horcón, and Cerro. These were composed largely of the poor and people of color. The 1841 census was the first in which officials counted these areas as a continuation of the capital. When included, these residents swelled the population of Gran Habana to over 184,000. By mid-century, three quarters of Havana's residents lived outside the walls.[20] The city continued to grow, developing a dense urban core that housed the elite and a sprawling suburban area that accommodated marginalized communities.

4. Reforming Death: Catholic Burial Practices in Havana

Advocates of modernization also aimed to reform the city's burial grounds. Across the Atlantic world, proponents of enlightened theories of disease condemned the churchyard burial system as a source of epidemics.[21] States began to prohibit burials in churches and mandated the construction of general cemeteries. In the Spanish Empire, cemeteries incorporated these enlightened principles into a Catholic framework.[22] In Havana, a leader in urban reforms, this resulted in an evolving infrastructure that started with the ideals of hygienic, egalitarian cemeteries, but in practice evolved into a tiered system with a

[19] Cf. Dorleta Apaolaza-Llorente, La Habana ilustrada del siglo XVIII. Sus transformaciones urbanas a través de la mirada de los bandos de buen gobierno, 'Cambiando la imagen de poder,' in: Iberoamérica Social 2, 2018, pp. 63-80.

[20] Cf. Guadalupe García, Beyond the Walled City. Colonial Exclusion in Havana, Oakland 2016, pp. 78-89; Louis A. Pérez, Winds of Change. Hurricanes & the Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Cuba, Chapel Hill 2001 pp. 50-52.

[21] Cf. Andrews Lees/Lynn Lees, Cities and the Making of Modern Europe, 1750–1914, Cambridge 2007, pp. 61 f.

[22] Cf. Informe dado al consejo por la Real Academia de la historia en 10 de junio de 1783 sobre la disciplina eclesiástica antigua y moderna relativa al lugar de las sepulturas, Madrid 1786.

hierarchy of burial spaces divided by race and class. As this section will show, Havana's burial reforms, while ostensibly aimed at creating a universal system, ultimately reinforced existing social and racial hierarchies.

Burial reform was a reality of European states and their colonies since the 18th century. It gained prominence at the court of the Spanish Bourbon King Charles III (reigned 1759–1788), who, along with progressive advisors, sought to dismantle the institutions of the Ancien Régime, including Baroque Catholic burial practices. Following a 1781 epidemic in the Basque town of Pasajes, which was blamed on the miasma of church burials, the Council of Castile prohibited interments inside churches.[23] Enlightened reformers advocated general cemeteries to promote public health and religious respect, despite conservative opposition. While imperial authorities sought to abandon the churchyard burial and move to sanitary general cemeteries, most cities across the empire postponed or avoided making any changes.

The city of Havana was an exception in that it made this transition early. A coalition of civil, religious, and medical authorities spearheaded the construction of a cemetery where all of Havana's inhabitants would be buried without distinction.[24] The change faced resistance, especially from the Franciscan order, which sought to preserve its privileges, and wealthy families unwilling to forgo their prestigious burial sites. Reformers proposed constructing a "partial cemetery" funded by the Cathedral; this scaled-down plan addressed land limitations and financial challenges while also helping the faithful gradually adapt to using a cemetery.[25] This undersized space would be expanded at a later date, once the population's attachment to the traditional churchyard system had been overcome. In 1806, Havana's first general cemetery—known as the Espada General Cemetery—opened to widespread acclaim.[26]

The luster of Havana's new cemetery quickly wore off. By 1811, liberals in the city were criticizing decisions made to appease the urban elite. These critics saw the spatial divisions and staggered burial fees as antithetical to the re-

[23] Cf. Carlos III, Real cedula de S.M. que trata de los que podrán enterrarse en las iglesias, con las adicciones y declaraciones que se expresan, Madrid 1787.

[24] Cf. José Díaz Espada y Landa, Exhortación a los fieles de la ciudad de la Habana, Havana 1805.

[25] Cf. Antecedentes sobre el cementerio parcial, January-June 1804, in: Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Cuba 1717, Cuentas de fábrica de la Iglesia Catedral, cementerios, cofradías y hospitales (F).

[26] Cf. Julián Joséph del Barrio, Discurso que en la solemne bendición del Cementerio General de La Habana, Havana 1806, p. 11; Tomás Romay y Chacón, Descripción del cementerio general de La Habana, Havana 1806, p. 6. Correspondence between Bishop Espada and Governor Someruelos, October 1805-February 1806, in: AGI, Santo Domingo (SD) 2258; AGI, Cuba 1717, F.

form legislation.[27] The hierarchy they so loathed was exacerbated by a shortage of space. Even as they built the cemetery, reformers knew it was roughly a quarter of the size required for Havana's population. When it opened, 2,500 people were buried in the city annually.[28] By 1819, over 3,000 were buried in a six-month period.[29] Accommodating the burial requirements of Havana's Catholic population would require a second cemetery.

The Cerro Cemetery—also known as la Ciénaga (the swamp)—opened in 1817. It served the parishes of Cerro, Pilar, and Mordazo on the margins of the city. Its location on undesirable land serving the poor and people of color stigmatized the burial ground from the start. Initially, it was no more than a fenced plot of land behind the Depósitos de Cimarrones. In the late 1830s, public health officials attributed the high mortality rate among the negros cimarrones, esclavos, y emancipados (maroon, enslaved, and emancipated blacks) in the surrounding area to the pestilence emanating from the decrepit cemetery.[30] To contain the risk, Havana's town council relocated it to a less populated area, equidistant from the three parishes. While the new burial ground featured a sturdy wall and a small chapel, it lacked pantheons and niches; all burials were in-ground.[31] The Cerro Cemetery became Havana's second permanent Catholic burial ground, subordinate to Espada in status and catering to less affluent neighborhoods.

In addition to the two permanent Catholic cemeteries, burial grounds emerged to serve those ineligible for Catholic interment. An informal cemetery on the edge of the city was used to bury unbaptized negros esclavos bozales (enslaved persons newly arrived from Africa). It was first used in 1832, when Don Antonio de Frías set aside land on his farm for that purpose.[32] In 1858, his descendants complained to the city that people continued to bury negros bozales and,

27 Cf. Ampliación del discurso, in: Aditamento a la tertulia de la Habana, 5 September 1811, in: AGI, SD 2258; Antonio Bachiller y Morales, Apuntes para la historia de las letras y de la instrucción de la isla de Cuba, vol.1, Havana 1859, p. 108.

28 Cf. Romay, Descripción, p. 9; Romay, Discurso, pp. 23 f.

29 Cf. Cementerio General, in: Diario de la Habana, July 1819-December 1819, in: Biblioteca Nacional de España, Hemeroteca Digital.

30 Sobre trasladar el cementerio situado al fondo del depósito de cimarrones en la calzada del Horcón a los terrenos de la Ciénega, August 1837-July 1838, in: ANC, Gobierno Superior Civil (GSC) 744, exp. 25544.

31 Cf. Construcción de un cementerio en los terrenos de la Ciénega que reemplace al que se halla al fondo del depósito de cimarrones, November 1841-May 1842, in: ANC, GSC 61, exp. 3677.

32 Cf. Pedro Marqués de Armas, Exclusiones post mortem. Esclavitud, suicidio y derecho de sepultura, in: Dirāsāt Hispānicas. Revista Tunecina de Estudios Hispánicos 2, 2015, pp. 49-63, here pp. 56 f.; Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, La Habana. Apuntes históricos, Havana 1939, pp. 59 f.

after 1847, asiáticos, without the de Frías family's knowledge or permission. This lack of supervision posed a public health threat. The burial ground became regulated by the city, and a fee of three pesos was introduced for each burial.[33] As the city grew, authorities were forced to grapple with the ongoing issue of where and how to bury the unbaptized, suicides, and non-Catholics.

While the unbaptized people were excluded from the Catholic burial grounds for theological reasons, other bodies were barred for public health reasons. The victims of contagious diseases were deemed a threat to the living, and during outbreaks, authorities opened provisional cemeteries to bury the epidemic dead. The provisional Cementerio de los Molinos opened during the cholera outbreak in 1833. Active for less than five years, it received 1,451 burials before closing.[34] The provisional Cementerio de Atares, opened when cholera returned in the 1850s, was located close to the city's poorest neighborhoods and intended for the epidemic dead of the parishes of Jesús María, Guadalupe, Pilar, and San Nicolás. After the epidemic, it became an overflow site for the central parishes.[35] Atares was not considered a respectable final resting place; city officials described it as only for la clase desacomodada de ciertos barrios (the destitute/disenfranchised classes of certain neighborhoods).[36] Intended for the poor, Atares lacked any frills; all interments were in the ground, with the majority in communal graves.

At the center of these satellite burial grounds lay the Espada Cemetery, whose conditions continued to deteriorate. Dr. John Wurdemann, an American who toured Cuba in the 1840s, documented his visit to the general cemetery. He described a fenced site with an ossuary in each corner. These ossuaries "were all more than filled, the pile of bleached skulls and other bones being heaped up above the top of the walls of each." Workers digging new graves were observed "throwing out with each spadeful of earth numerous bones, some of which were still connected by their ligaments, and were intermingled with portions of clothes and shoes".[37] Quicklime was liberally used to speed decomposition, and the bones in the ossuaries were regularly burnt as they became filled. Despite being the preeminent burial ground in Havana, only the wealthy were buried in coffins in Espada. The majority were buried without them. Bodies, crossing lines of class, race, and gender, were typically stacked on top of each other in

33 Cf. José de Frías to Governor José Gutiérrez de la Concha, September 1858, in: ANC, GG 316, exp. 15329.

34 Cf. Roig de Leuchsenring, La Habana, pp. 60 f.

35 Cf. Expediente sobre queja de los curas de San Juan de los Remedios y del Cano y de Guadalupe por las certificaciones que expide la policía para enterrar cadáveres de pobres, August-September 1860, in: ANC, GSC 748, exp. 25669.

36 Policía Terrestre, 1834-1858, in: ANC, Junta Superior de Sanidad (Sanidad) 6, exp. 1.

37 John Wurdemann, Notes on Cuba, Boston 1844, pp. 29-31.

common graves. These sites were covered with soil no more than two feet above the remains.

The conditions in Espada were a concern to officials and the city's population. By 1854, there was a growing movement to build a new cemetery, one that could serve the city's needs and stand as a testament to Havana's cultural sophistication. In 1869, the ecclesiastical and civil authorities formed the Junta de Cementerio to manage the project.[38] A competition invited architects to submit design proposals, and in 1870, the winning design, by Spanish architect Calixto de Loira y Cardoso, was announced. His project opens with the following quote: "Pale death with impartial step knocks at the hovels of the poor and the towers of kings alike", recognizing the reform impulse towards an egalitarian model in a city deeply riven with racial and class divides.[39] The reformers' dream of a universal cemetery where all the city's dead would be interred without distinction had failed. The city now had two permanent Catholic cemeteries, both of which, while universal in name, were increasingly catering to Havana's wealthy population. On the periphery of the city, further cemeteries emerged to serve poor parishes, communities of color, and non-Catholics.

Fig. 1: *This rendering shows the distribution of the burial grounds discussed in this article. The locations are geocoded using descriptions in archival documents as well as contemporary maps to reconstruct the spatial organization of the cemeteries by type. Created by the author using ArcGIS online.*

[38] Cf. Antonio de Gordon y Acosta, Datos históricos acerca de los cementerios de la ciudad de La Habana, Havana 1901, p. 28.

[39] Cf. Memoria, descriptiva del proyecto del Cementerio de Colón, 12 November 1870, in: ANC, GG 102, exp. 4839.

5. Protestants in Havana: The Struggle for Burial Rights

For Protestants in 19th-century Havana, burial practices were a stark reflection of their exclusion from a Catholic-dominated system. Denied access to regulated burial spaces, they were often relegated to potter's fields or privately managed sites, highlighting the colonial and religious hierarchies that marginalized non-Catholic groups. Yet, as their population grew, so did their efforts for dignity in death. This section explores the precarious position of Protestants in Havana and the establishment of autonomous Protestant cemeteries in the face of resistance from Catholic authorities.

Newly arrived foreigners were susceptible to tropical diseases in Cuba. Many Protestants were treated and died in private medical clinics, known as casas de salud.[40] As Havana had no regulated burial space for its Protestant population, many were consigned to burial in potter's fields.[41] In the 1820s, a British hotel keeper named Francis Nichols managed one such site, known as the English Cemetery. After Nichols' death, James Thompson took over its management. However, following Thompson's death, no one stepped in to manage the site, leading to its deterioration. British consul Trumbull wrote scathingly about the site, noting: "[D]ead bodies are left exposed in the face of day, and where the vulture contends with the worm for his share of the human spoil".[42]

The owners of private medical clinics catering to foreigners in Havana expanded their businesses to include burial grounds. Dr. Charles Belot, the owner of a 300-bed clinic in Regla, was accused of profiting from the death of his patients as he supposedly made more money burying them than he did curing them.[43] This practice highlights the precarious position of Protestants in Havana, who were often forced to rely on private, profit-driven arrangements for burial due to their exclusion from Catholic cemeteries. Facing such unsavory options, some Protestants feigned Catholicism to be buried in Catholic cemeteries.[44] It is impossible to know the extent of any of these forms of burial. Protestants were not recorded in the parish records, the sole death registry of the period.

To address the lack of records, the Governor asked parish priests across the island to report the number of non-Catholic deaths—and the manner of their burial—over a five-year period. The priest of San Antonio exemplified the rep-

40 H. Leon Greene, The Confederate Yellow Fever Conspiracy. 1864-1865, Jefferson 2019, p. 106.

41 Cf. Martínez-Fernández, Don't Die Here, pp. 38 f.

42 Id., Protestantism, p. 68.

43 Cf. Luis Martínez-Fernández, Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean, New York 1998, p. 123.

44 Cf. Yoana Hernández Suárez, Iglesias cristianas en Cuba. Entre la independencia y la intervención, Havana 2010, p. 29.

lies: his parish had no information about Protestants as only Catholics were subject to ecclesiastical authority.[45] Where records did exist, they indicated that non-Catholics were buried unceremoniously on the farms where they died or in land outside the general cemetery walls, often the same spaces used for unbaptized babies and suicides.[46] These reports coincided with a period of upheaval in the Spanish Empire, as longstanding religious restrictions came under scrutiny.

The legal monopoly of the Catholic Church on religious practice in the Spanish Empire was challenged in the 19th century. Revolutionary changes in Spain introduced varying degrees of religious freedom, beginning with the 1869 Constitution, which allowed for the private practice of non-Catholic religions. However, the restoration of Bourbon rule in 1874 saw many of these freedoms rolled back. In Cuba, these legal shifts were complicated by the island's political turmoil, including the Ten Years' War (1868–1878) and subsequent independence movements. The Catholic Church aligned itself with colonial authorities, while insurgents claimed religious freedom as a rallying cry, linking it to their broader struggle for autonomy.[47] This tension between colonial control and revolutionary aspirations shaped the limited adoption of religious freedom in Cuba, where the Church's influence remained a bulwark against change.

Laws governing non-Catholic burials similarly evolved in 19th-century Spain, driven by complaints from foreign diplomats about unregulated conditions. Reforms began with Ferdinand VII's 1831 royal decree allowing non-Catholics to establish burial grounds in towns with consulates, followed by legislation in 1855 and 1866 emphasizing respectful, secular burial practices.[48] When the 1869 Constitution established freedom of religious practice, officials had to address the haphazard nature of non-Catholic burial. In 1871, they mandated designated spaces for non-Catholics within Madrid's cemeteries, but clergy protests led to a compromise: non-Catholic burial grounds were placed just outside general cemeteries, separated by fences and gated entrances. This formalized existing practices while allowing non-Catholic associations to petition for separate burial grounds.[49]

[45] Cf. Expediente con las respuestas sobre el entierro de los no católicos, 21 May 1860, in: ANC, GSC 748, exp. 25709.

[46] Cf. ibid., May-July 1860.

[47] Cf. Antoni Kapcia, The Exception Proves the Rule. Lessons from the Cuban Case, in: Stephen G.H. Roberts/Adam Sharman (eds.), 1812 Echoes. The Cadiz Constitution in Hispanic History, Culture and Politics, Newcastle upon Tyne 2013, pp. 298-313, here pp. 301-306.

[48] Cf. Jordi Moreras/Ariadna Solé Arraràs/Sol Tarrés, The Other Dead. An Ethnohistorical Approach to Religious Diversity in the Spanish Cemeteries, in: Diversité urbaine 18, 2018, pp. 11–29, here pp. 13-15.

[49] Cf. RO 16 julio 1871, in: Marcelo Martínez Alcubilla, Diccionario de la administración es-

In Cuba, however, these laws faced serious challenges. Colonial officials never implemented religious freedom and did not recognize non-Catholic associations, leaving them unable to request their own burial grounds. Authorities deemed the land outside cemetery walls, already used for the unbaptized and suicides, sufficient for non-Catholics. The island's political instability, particularly during the independence wars, further hindered the enforcement of these laws.[50] As a result, burial space for Protestants remained tied to general cemeteries until the issue gained renewed attention in the 1880s.

At that point, a new legislation was passed that reiterated and expanded the rights of non-Catholic associations to build and manage their own cemeteries.[51] The new laws required the submission of design plans, budgets, and regulations for proposed burial grounds. Since the 1870s, Protestant missionaries from the United States had been establishing congregations in Cuba—Episcopal in 1871, Methodist in 1879, and Baptist in the early 1880s.[52] It was the Baptists who first successfully built a cemetery in the city. Utilizing this regulatory framework, Baptist missionary Alberto J. Díaz purchased land near the Colón Cemetery. The burial ground, known as the Baptist Cemetery, was inaugurated in 1887. This marked the first regulated Protestant burial ground in the city.[53]

The newly established Baptist cemetery proved a success, attracting not only Protestants but other non-Catholics as well. Within three years, the cemetery expanded and generated a steady income for the Baptists.[54] As its popularity grew, even Catholics purchased tombs there, leading to conflicts over the control of the dead. Parish priests lodged protests with civil and ecclesiastical authorities about these cases. The priest of Jesús María y José wrote about "the abuses committed daily [...] by the representative of the Protestant sect called Baptist [Díaz], who is burying the bodies of my parishioners in his cemetery". Further, Díaz, having become an American citizen, was "a heretic, apostate, and renegade" from the Catholic faith and Spanish nationality, who committed these acts with "blatant disrespect for the laws of our country".[55] The battle over burial would continue, with Catholic priests and bishops striving to curb the challenges to their pastoral, legal, and financial stake surrounding burial in the face of a growing number of Protestant burial grounds.

pañola, Madrid 1892, p. 434.

50 Cf. Communications between the bishop, governor general, and Ministerio de Ultramar, March-September 1872, in: ANC, GG 117, exp. 5252.

51 Cf. RO 2 abril 1883, Martínez Alcubilla, p. 437.

52 Cf. Martínez-Fernández, Protestantism, p. 117, 140, 148.

53 Cf. ibid., pp. 155 f.

54 Cf. ibid.

55 Cuaderno de notas del expediente sobre enterramientos de católicos, en cementerios protestante, 3 September 1890, in: ANC, GG 108, exp. 5019.

Other towns and cities across the island submitted their own petitions. In 1891, Cienfuegos received approval from the Superior Health Board for its Protestant cemetery as "it appears that all requirements stipulated by the relevant law have been fulfilled [...]. The undersigned speaker believes it is fitting to grant the requested authorization".[56] Similarly, Santa Clara's application was found "fully compliant with current provisions on the matter; the undersigned speaker believes that said regulations can be approved".[57] These developments marked significant progress in providing dignified burial options for Protestants in Cuba, acknowledging their religious practices and ensuring proper final rites.

6. Chinese Coolies: Marginalization in Life and Death

The burial experience for Chinese immigrants in 19th-century Havana followed a different trajectory from that of Protestant immigrants. Chinese immigration under the coolie labor system occurred later and over a shorter period than Protestant immigration. Records of their burial experiences are sparse, providing only brief insights. What these records reveal is that, despite being nominally free and white, Chinese immigrants in 19th-century Havana faced marginalization in death as well as in life. This section explores how the Chinese community negotiated its place within the Catholic-dominated system, navigating a long and contested process to establish their own burial ground, asserting their cultural and religious identities in the face of colonial domination.

The Cuba Commission Report of 1876, the outcome of a Chinese imperial mission sent to investigate reports of abuse in the coolie system, provides a grim insight into the burial of Chinese laborers.[58] The report, based on hundreds of depositions from the laborers, details the lack of proper burial for Chinese workers, with bodies often left unburied or in shallow graves, exposed to the elements. Chou Jun-ch'ing deposed that unbaptized individuals were not admitted into cemeteries. Lo A-chi testified that bodies were placed in shallow holes, with bones eventually unearthed by spades and left to dissolve. Almost 100 depositions reported that Chinese laborers received neither coffins nor graves, and their bodies were cast out indiscriminately.[59] These testimonies reveal the brutal realities of the coolie system, which treated the Chinese as disposable labor and denied them even the most basic dignity in death. The 1860s survey soliciting details about the burial of non-Catholics across Cuba corrobo-

[56] Construcción de un cementerio bautista, 11 May 1891, in: ANC, Sanidad 33, exp. 81.
[57] Construcción de un cementerio protestante, 4 July 1893, in: ANC, Sanidad 33, exp. 93.
[58] Cf. The Cuba Commission. Report of the Commission sent by China to Ascertain the Condition of Chinese Coolies in Cuba, Shanghai 1877.
[59] Cf. ibid., pp. 79 f.

rates this testimony. The replies from parishes across the island include records for both Protestants and Chinese. When recorded, both groups were treated similarly: buried in unconsecrated ground with no markers.[60]

In Havana, documents indicate that unbaptized Chinese were buried in the same informal burial ground as unbaptized slaves. Unrecorded and unmarked, this form of burial was the lowest in the city.[61] The conflation of Chinese laborers with enslaved Africans in death underscores the racialized hierarchies of colonial Cuba, where both groups were relegated to the margins of society. Parish records also show some Chinese deaths in the ledgers for whites, with burials in the general cemetery. Depending on their conversion status, they could be buried in the Catholic section or in the area designated for those outside the Catholic faith.[62] A few petitions exist for the bodies of deceased Chinese to be transported back to China for burial. In Havana, the varied forms of burial show the diverse experiences within the Chinese population.[63] However, individuals were negotiating their place within the dominant Catholic system.

The efforts to establish a dedicated Chinese cemetery in Havana reflect the community's struggle for dignity and respect in death, amidst a broader context of discrimination. In 1883, Chinese Consul Lin Liang Yan formally petitioned the Captain General of Cuba. He requested permission to build the Chinese Cemetery of Havana, arguing that the community required a distinct space to conduct burials according to their customs. Citing the inadequacy of existing burial options, the Chinese population in Havana sought to create a burial ground that would "conform with the laws and practices followed by other foreign communities residing on the island, to whom equal concessions have been made".[64]

The Bishop responded curtly, stating that the general cemetery had adequate space to accommodate the burial of non-Catholics, including the Chinese. The Colón Cemetery had a designated section for non-Catholics with twelve spaces available: eight for common graves and four for monumental graves. According to the Bishop, this arrangement provided sufficient options to meet the needs of the Chinese community, regardless of their social class, thus nega-

60 Cf. Expediente con las respuestas sobre el entierro de los no católicos, 21 May 1860, in: ANC, GSC 748, exp. 25709.

61 Cf. José de Frías to Governor José Gutiérrez de la Concha, September 1858, in: ANC, GG 316, exp. 15329.

62 Based on 2,601 burial records from three parishes in Havana, Santo Ángel, Espíritu Santo, and Cristo de Buen Viaje for the years 1868 to 1873.

63 Based on 191 petitions to exhume and transfer bodies to or from Havana between 1853 and 1897 held in the AGI, AHN, and the ANC.

64 Expediente promovido por el Cónsul Imperial de China pidiendo autorización para erigir un cementerio especial para sus públicos, 11 December 1882, in: ANC, GG 369, exp. 17651.

ting the necessity for a separate burial ground.[65] The Captain General concurred and denied the petition.[66] This decision was a setback for the Chinese community, who continued to face limited options for burial. Despite the official stance that the existing system was sufficient, the desire for a separate Chinese burial ground would reemerge a decade later.

In 1893, the Chinese community in Havana once again petitioned to build a separate cemetery. While the clergy continued to resist the expansion of non-Catholic burial grounds, civil authorities were now enforcing the rights of non-Catholics. In 1888, the Governor ordered the Bishop to comply with laws. The Bishop responded that his intent "was to keep the rights of the Catholic Church intact", citing the precedent of Catholics buried in the Baptist cemetery to illustrate the threat to the Church.[67] Despite the diocese's reticence, in 1893 civil authorities granted authorization to establish the Chinese Cemetery of Havana.[68] This decision marked a victory for the Chinese community, allowing them to begin the project and create an independent space for their dead. Although delayed, the establishment of the cemetery was a crucial development in acknowledging and respecting the cultural and religious needs of the Chinese immigrants in Havana.

7. Legacy of Exclusion: Immigrants and Havana's Burial Landscape

The transformation of 19th-century Havana, from its elegant stone houses to its sprawling extramuros barrios, mirrored the city's growing economic prominence. Yet, beneath this veneer of progress lay enduring inequalities, reflected in the spatial and social divisions within its cemeteries. The unregulated burial of Protestants and Chinese coolie laborers highlighted broader issues of exclusion. As Havana evolved, so too did its cemeteries, becoming sites where colonial authority, religious control, and urban reform intersected. Protestants, long relegated to potter's fields, navigated legal and social barriers to establish their own burial grounds, while Chinese laborers, enduring deplorable conditions, struggled to secure a cemetery for dignity in death.

Today, the Cementerio de Cristóbal Colón, the Baptist Cemetery, and the Chinese Cemetery stand within a few blocks of one another. While Colón was conceived as a statement of Havana's sophistication, the Baptist and Chinese

65 Cf. Expediente promovido por el Cónsul Imperial de China, 27 August 1883.

66 Cf. ibid., 4 October 1883.

67 Comunicación sobre la RO de 22 de abril de 1866, 2 February 1888, in: ANC, GG 107, exp. 5011.

68 Cf. Gordon y de Acosta, Datos históricos , pp. 37-39; Teresita Labarca, El Cementerio Chino de la Habana, Havana 2017, pp. 14 f.

burial grounds emerged from struggles for cultural and religious autonomy. As migration continues to diversify urban populations globally, the experiences of Havana's Protestant and Chinese communities offer insights into cultural identity, religious pluralism, and urban development. Burial spaces as sites of memory and identity reveal the negotiation of established norms and emerging practices, emphasizing the importance of all voices in shaping urban landscapes.

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