

# CUBA'S LABORANTE

## The Worker as Revolutionary Identity

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*Abstract: The laborante was a revolutionary identity of the Ten Years' War that represented those who worked clandestinely in favor of Cuban independence. The repeated invocation of the term did not emerge from a single print source, nor was its usage evolutionary such that each reference responded to a previous one. Instead, writers appropriated the term to represent anticolonial advocates from diverse sectors of Cuba's socio-economic strata and to grapple with shifting identities. A Latin term for "worker," laborante intimates the changing dynamic between elites, the working class, and slaves. This article examines the uses of laborante to show how Cuban identity was negotiated in different but related moments. It also explores why elites may have cultivated the worker, a figure of limited economic power, to represent their aspirations for increased political freedom, and what this implies about the agents of the revolution.*

"Laborar. Laborantes. Laborantismo." With these three words Juan Clemente Zenea titled an article that set off a debate with his fellow Cuban émigré Rafael María Merchán (*La Revolución*, May 31–June 4, 1870). The controversy centered around the origin of the *laborante*, a popular revolutionary identity of the Ten Years' War that symbolized those who "work clandestinely in favor of Cuban independence and against the Spanish government."<sup>1</sup> According to Zenea, the widespread references to the *laborante* during the war can be traced to his monthly periodical *Revista Habanera: Periódico de Ciencias, Literatura y Bellas Artes* (1861). The Latin verb *laboremus*, meaning "let us work," appeared in the second issue of the magazine, and this, according to Zenea, is the origin of all subsequent uses and derivatives of the term, including the most popular and personified variant: *laborante*.

In response to Zenea, Merchán refutes the notion that chronology indicates genealogy. To illustrate his point Merchán dates the first use of *laboremus* as political mantra to classical antiquity, when Emperor Septimius Severus encouraged his army "to work" for imperial expansion (*La Revolución*, June 4, 1870). Merchán argues that just as the Roman anecdote had no bearing on Zenea's choice of the Latin term or its significance, Zenea's use of *laboremus* in *Revista Habanera* did not signify a genealogical origin for later invocations of the term and its variants.

Merchán's position in the dispute may well have been inspired by self-interest. Seven years after the publication of Zenea's *Revista Habanera*, and in the weeks following Carlos Manuel de Céspedes's battle cry at his plantation, La Demajagua, Merchán published a political tract on November 15, 1868, in Havana's *El Siglo* ti-

1. Zenea, "Laborar. Laborantes. Laborantismo," *La Revolución*, May 31, 1870.

tled “*Laboremus*” (repr. Merchán 1948). The essay resonated among revolutionary supporters in the capital, who readily circulated the publication. That Merchán discredits Zenea’s claim allows him to assert his own: Merchán’s “*Laboremus*” essay published in *El Siglo*, rather than Zenea’s in *Revista Habanera*, gave rise to the laborante’s wartime popularity.

Merchán’s comparison of the Roman anecdote to Zenea’s *Revista Habanera* demonstrates the mutually exclusive origins of *laboremus* and more importantly the process of contextualization. That is, consideration of the independent usage of *laboremus* takes into account the circumstances that gave rise to the term’s invocation, as well as the potential for it to acquire new meaning. The use of *laboremus* in *Revista Habanera*, for example, addressed the socioeconomic and political situation in Cuba at the start of the 1860s, while Merchán’s “*Laboremus*” engaged the concerns of the incipient revolution. Merchán’s premise regarding contextualization is further substantiated by Domingo Figarola-Caneda, who proposes that Merchán had lifted the title of his essay from the masthead of a working-class periodical published in Camagüey (Figarola-Caneda 1905, xviii). Merchán’s invocation of *laboremus* was thus purely coincidental with respect to the term’s earlier appearance in *Revista Habanera*.

While the question of the origin of *laborante* takes on a personal dimension for these two authors, the impetus for the Merchán-Zenea debate and its greater significance is the proliferation of the Latinate term. The repeated references to *laborante* throughout the Ten Years’ War meant that the revolutionary figure it represented acquired a multifaceted and at times contradictory identity depending on the unique print sources in which it appeared. The symbolism of *laborante* is yet further complicated if we consider the diverse group of anticolonial advocates to which it referred. The war’s leadership, for example, consisted mainly of Cuba’s elite, including plantation owners and professionals, many of whom later emigrated to US cities, where they continued the war effort. Enrique Piñeyro’s description of the Cuban émigré community of New York gives an insider’s view of the individuals involved in the struggle against Spain:

The migrations were made up of individuals of both sexes and all ages, as well as those of the most diverse social positions, from the millionaire to the cigar worker; they were like pieces of the country, each one complete by themselves, each one in perfect harmony with the merits and defects of the Cuban character, fragments of a society who, because of political upheaval, were detached and embedded in foreign ground. Where Cubans numbered in the thousands, as they did in New York, there was really a floating Cuban city, so to speak, in the great Anglo-American metropolis, that lived according to the customs of their country, that thought, spoke, worked, with the sole objective of favoring the island’s independence and of hastening their return to the lost and reconstructed country.<sup>2</sup> (Piñeyro 1901, 113–114)

Proponents of the revolution thus came from all sectors of Cuba’s socioeconomic hierarchy. And while elite men dominated periodical production in New York, women and working-class émigrés mobilized through political associations. La Junta Patriótica de Cubanas en Nueva York, for example, raised funds through

2. Translations are by the author.

donations and charitable events, while La Sociedad de Artesanos Cubanos garnered supplies to send to the battlefields.<sup>3</sup>

Closer scrutiny of these organizations, however, reveals the incorporation of revolutionary advocates beyond the fragmented strata of Cuban colonial society. La Sociedad de Artesanos Cubanos, for example, bestowed membership to any artisan resident of New York, regardless of nationality.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the establishment of a Cuban émigré community meant that socioeconomic groups no longer maintained the same profile as their counterparts on the island. Take, for instance, the *artesano*. During the labor movement of the 1860s, Cuba's skilled workers asserted political agency through strikes, periodical publications, and the practice of reading aloud in factories.<sup>5</sup> While Cuba's *artesanos* had formulated a collective political consciousness, their counterparts in New York realized working-class political agency in a distinct manner. That is, unlike Cuba's *artesanos*, Cuban émigré skilled laborers occupied a transnational space and, as a result, cultivated an organization that subsumed individual national identity in favor of a shared vision of Cuban independence.

Nonetheless, proponents of the revolution differed significantly in their advocacy, both in terms of their political objectives and the strategies employed to those ends. The émigré community in particular was divided between annexationists and nationalists, who in turn appealed to diplomatic and military programs, respectively (Poyo 1989, 35–37). The use of the term *laborante* thus functioned as a mechanism of consolidation and engaged two formative processes: it sought to cultivate a common revolutionary vision while negotiating the shifting, not static, identities of its constituent parts. To this we add the appropriation of *laborante* by Cubans and non-Cubans alike, which resulted in competing notions of the revolutionary and his purpose. The figure of the *laborante* in effect was the forum through which Cuban revolutionary identity was meted out.

This investigation seeks to explore the contexts in which the *laborante* appeared to show how Cuban identity was negotiated at different but related moments. As we will see, the repeated invocation of the term did not emerge from a single print source, nor was its usage evolutionary. Instead, *laborante* underwent several distinct appropriations in both literary and visual sources. This study underscores the fragmentary nature of *laborante*, which is demonstrated not only by the array of voices that contributed to its meaning but also the inconsistent treatment of this figure in print media.

While the figure of the *laborante* is imbued with different nuances, the term itself refers to the “worker.” Given its Latin roots and circulation among the literate, the *laborante* belonged more to the elite than to the working classes. Yet the

3. “Gran Bazar bajo los auspicios de la Junta Patriótica de Cubanas,” *La Revolución: Cuba y Puerto Rico; Periódico político*, April 28, 1870; “Reglamento,” *El Demócrata*, September 21, 1870.

4. “Reglamento,” *El Demócrata*, September 21, 1870.

5. See “The Labor Movement of the 1860s and Spain’s Search for a New Colonial Policy” in Joan Casanovas’s *Bread or Bullets* (1998) for a detailed study of the socioeconomic and political contours of the labor movement, including the emergence of the *lector*, a public reader, in the mid-1860s. See also Araceli Tinajero’s *El Lector: A History of the Cigar Factory Reader* (2009) for a discussion of the origins of the *lector*.

adoption of the term *laborante* by an elite cohort is a contradiction, since Cuba's landowning aristocracy was defined precisely by its exclusion from work and its reliance on slave labor. And while other members of Cuba's upper strata, including the administrative and professional classes, provided services, they continued to distinguish themselves from the working class and slave population through their avoidance of physical or forced work, respectively. This study, then, will also explore why elites may have cultivated the worker—a figure of limited economic power whose defining attribute is antithetical to their own—to represent aspirations of increased political freedom. An inquiry into the moniker *laborante* thus addresses the agency of the working class, elite, and slaves in the revolution.

Although the term *laborante* appeared in publications for the entirety of the Ten Years' War and once again at century's end, I have limited the period of investigation in accordance with texts that treat the topic extensively, beginning with Merchán's "Laboremus" (*El Siglo*, November 15, 1868) and concluding with H. Goodmann's *Escenas de la Revolución de Cuba: Los laborantes* (1872).<sup>6</sup> To ensure a thorough analysis I have included the pro-Spanish illustrated periodical of Havana *El Moro Muza* (1859) and the émigré newspapers of New York. I have incorporated Zenea's "Laboremus" (*Revista Habanera*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1861), although it predated the war, because it also articulated an autonomous Cuban identity and engaged changing notions of class to yield greater socioeconomic solidarity.

Zenea published *Revista Habanera* in response to the social and political crises of his time. He draws attention to the layout of contemporary newspapers as evidence of these new and troubling societal mores. With a majority of space devoted to mercantile interests, the newspaper relegates literary content to a small area at the bottom of the page. Zenea thus views the mercantile economy and the industrialization that supports it as eclipsing literary endeavors. Since public interest in the arts was on the wane, Zenea published *Revista Habanera* to rejuvenate a Cuban intellectual and literary culture, particularly among the younger generations who "begrudgingly attended school at the behest of their families."<sup>7</sup>

Zenea's characterization of patrons' indifference to the arts was met with a wide response. After the publication of its inaugural issue, *Revista Habanera* had acquired enough subscriptions to fund production for the first trimester. Demand for the debut issue exceeded expectations: Zenea sold out of the five hundred copies he had printed for the anticipated audience in Havana and received additional requests from several locales in Cuba's interior. In his delight at the public's support of *Revista Habanera*, Zenea exclaims the following in the second installment, from which *laborante* emerges: "And so we have achieved such a reception that we find it opportune to express our gratitude, and to continue to carry out the thorny mission that we have imposed on ourselves, we say in our delight: Laboremus!"<sup>8</sup>

6. In "An English and American Journalist" in the January 26, 1898, issue of *Cuba: Periódico político autonomista / Cuba: A Weekly Publication Edited by Cubans in the Interest of Self-Governed Cuba*, "laborante" appears and is accompanied by a parenthetical definition: Cuban rebels.

7. See Pamela Smorkaloff's *Readers and Writers in Cuba* (1997) for a discussion of the crisis of the publishing industry.

8. Zenea, "Laboremus," *Revista Habanera*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1861).

The "thorny mission" to which Zenea refers is the publication of *Revista Habanera* and the resurgence of Cuban intellectual culture. It follows, then, that the individuals responsible for carrying out this task and who will "work" toward its end included Zenea and the contributors to *Revista Habanera*; they are the laborantes. Yet as Zenea so emphatically indicates in his praise for the subscribers, the magazine's success depends on more than editorial and contributor efforts. Instead, "Laboremus" is a pact between two parties—the print intellectual and the consumer—each of which has their own task in the proliferation of culture. I qualify the former as "print" intellectuals to underscore the role Zenea ascribes to this figure and the arena in which he operates. That is, the print laborante is a member of the elite who pursues scientific inquiry or literary creation and then publicizes his or her work in serials and, to a lesser extent, books. The consumer, like the print laborante, was also of the upper class since he or she possessed the means to purchase and read publications.<sup>9</sup> Zenea's laborante thus corresponded to members of the elite, though he frames the promotion of Cuban culture as "patriotic" and therefore ostensibly relevant to a broader Cuban population.<sup>10</sup>

Zenea's approach did not differ from that of other Latin American *letrados*, who created a national culture that was implicitly all-inclusive but that prized literacy and thus continued to marginalize the disenfranchised. That Zenea describes his initiative as "a thorny mission" could well reflect this paradoxical approach to nation formation. It could also, however, refer to the laborante's work as contributing to the growing tensions within Cuba's elite. That is, while *peninsulares* (those born in Spain) and *criollos* (Cuban-born natives of Spanish descent) made up Cuba's upper echelon, the political authority accorded to each was skewed according to origin. *Peninsulares* had access to administrative posts and political representation, which was denied to *criollos* (*creoles*). The cultivation of Cuban autonomy by creole elites, whether political or cultural, was considered an affront to Spanish colonial domination. Consequently authorities viewed all creole publications, like *Revista Habanera*, as potentially subversive and routinely suppressed or altered their content. As Piñeyro informs us in his biography of Zenea, editors and staff were not only subject to reprisals but were also forced to revise and gather new content for their publication, making the mission both risky and labor intensive. In the case of *Revista Habanera*, Zenea was forced to cease publication after only two years despite having obtained

9. Periodicals (and books, to a lesser extent) were not the only venues for intellectual and educational exchange. In 1844 *peninsulares* founded Cuba's first cultural center: the Liceo de la Habana. At this time the Liceo was a meeting place for elites of diverse economic backgrounds including merchants, sugar planters, factory owners, and professionals. The Liceo was a forum for public debate, the dissemination of intellectual and literary production and the teaching of classes. By the 1850s the Liceo became a creole institution and site for political activism, in addition to its earlier commitment to cultural activities. The initial success of the Liceo de la Habana inspired the founding of similar centers in other Cuban cities (Casanovas 1998, 55).

10. Zenea's assessment of public apathy toward the arts elicited not only subscribers but also criticism. When challenged on his assessment of the public's "bad habits," Zenea defends his role as social critic and promoter of the arts as "patriotic." "Hay más *patriotismo* en tratar de la enmienda de los malos hábitos, que en adular . . . la vanidad de las masas" ("Laboremus," *Revista Habanera*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1861, my emphasis).

the required permit (Piñeyro 1901, 56–58). While Zenea’s magazine did, in fact, promote the writings of reformists and former annexationists, including Rafael María Mendive, José Antonio Saco, and like-minded individuals, his objective was more than the dissemination of anticolonial thought or the formation of an elite community of laborantes.<sup>11</sup>

In the prospectus of *Revista Habanera*, Zenea provides a caveat to his argument that redefines the place of Cuban culture and those who have access to it. That is, Zenea juxtaposes modernization and its reliance on empiricism to spirituality and other aspects of human nature like creativity. Zenea expresses his concern not only for the decline of the arts in the face of modern advancements but rather the disappearance of creative expression altogether. And yet he later categorizes these antithetical endeavors as “equally indispensable” to society. The obsolescence of either one is moot since society, as he tells us, is divided into these two factions and sustained as such by a greater power. By resituating the competing binary of empirical and artistic pursuits into a complementary unity, Zenea appears to undermine the urgency of his plea to promote cultural creation. Zenea’s interpretation of the empirical-artistic dichotomy as mutually inclusive, however, has important implications when mapped to Cuba’s social hierarchy.

In the following metaphor Zenea makes explicit his vision for Cuba’s social equilibrium: “The man in Cuba that can self-sacrifice to carry out long and labor-intensive studies is, without a doubt, the one who deserves the best applause; and, furthermore, he who dedicates himself to letters would be worthy of being placed among the true martyrs. . . . The man next to the machine forgets his condition and coarsens himself to the point of converting himself into a force and nothing more.”<sup>12</sup> To characterize the intellectual, particularly the poet, as “martyr” implies his work is an act of selflessness. Indeed, instead of well-deserved praise the intellectual receives no recognition and consequently no compensation. The worker suffers similar deprivation. The close and prolonged physical proximity to the machine dulls the worker such that his attributes increasingly mimic that of his instrument. The “factory hand,” as it were, becomes a mere force who “forgets his [spiritual] condition.” Consequently, he is prevented from engaging in the creative pursuits inherent to mankind. Zenea thus establishes parity between the two figures, for they both endure the detrimental effects of industrialization, which lead to a decline in creativity. In so doing, Zenea not only fosters solidarity between the intellectual and worker but also suggests that each is capable of engaging the literary.

Despite their analogous circumstances and attributes, the worker and the intellectual share few socioeconomic traits that would allow their literary collaboration. Zenea is particularly cognizant of their financial disparities, and he attempts to minimize them, if only through the sale of his magazine. In the narrative that

11. In the first issue of *Revista Habanera* Zenea includes a literary review. In this installment he mentions the works of José A. Saco, el Conde de Pozos Dulces, Ramón Piña, and Rafael María Mendive, published in Paris and Madrid. Zenea also published the works of these individuals, including, for example, Mendive’s “Mis versos.”

12. Zenea, “A nuestros lectores,” *Revista Habanera*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1861.

accompanies the subscription rates, Zenea assures us that the price has been kept to a minimum to allow for the dissemination of *Revista Habanera* among a cross-section of Cuban society.<sup>13</sup> Zenea's anticipated audience thus exceeded the elite, since working-class individuals also had financial access to the publication. As a result, Zenea's consumer-laborante incorporates two distinct socioeconomic strata—the elite and the working class—into the print community.

Affordability, however, addressed only one obstacle to working-class access to print culture. With an illiteracy rate of 80 percent in 1861, most Cuban workers were unable to read print matter even if they could afford it (Smorkaloff 1997, 5). Nevertheless, lack of formal instruction did not deter the engagement of *artesanos* in the print community. In 1865, the cigar worker Saturnino Martínez founded the first working-class newspaper, *La Aurora: Periódico Semanal Dedicado a los Artesanos*. Two months later, on December 21, 1865, *artesanos* held the first public reading in Havana's El Fígaro cigar factory (Tinajero 2009, 16). Skilled workers in other factories in the capital and beyond then began pooling resources to compensate the *lector*, or reader, for his services and thus bridged the literacy divide.<sup>14</sup>

Zenea's attempt to integrate *artesanos* as consumers of print culture was an early manifestation of the reformist agenda to bring together elite and working classes through the dissemination of periodicals. In contrast to the practice of reading aloud, which flourished in the mid-1860s, Zenea's articulation of the consumer-laborante a few years earlier emphasized economic agency and purchasing power rather than literacy. In this way the laborante as consumer may serve as preamble to reading *viva voce* in the development of working-class political consciousness.

Despite curtailing production costs and eliciting a greater readership, Zenea was unable to sustain the publication of *Revista Habanera* in its original format. Instead, he reduced the magazine's dimensions by approximately one-third and began using paper of a lower quality. The following description of the changes reveals further insight to the economic conditions of the print community but this time with respect to the print laborante rather than his consumer counterpart:

We are varying the current format of our periodical for several reasons, the most important of which is the desire to increase the amount of reading and so we are offering a greater number of pages for what was until now offered on high-quality paper, as such the subscriber will gain hours of entertainment while *we lose more time in our unprofitable work*. We would have liked to preserve the previous format, or at least to have made the first volume more extensive, but in addressing the interest of those few who favor us through their interest, *we have not been able to create improvements except by using a modest suit, although it seems an anomaly that in this wealthy country literature is condemned to wear the poor man's suit*. (*Revista Habanera*, 1861, my emphasis)

13. Zenea provides the following explanation in the first issue of *Revista Habanera*: "As the objective of the proprietors of this publication is none other than to maintain an organ specifically for literature, they have determined the most reasonable price possible so that not only is it within the reach of all, but also, with the lowest subscription that can be gathered, all of the printing costs are covered; since it is well known that they cannot entertain ideas of economic gain, those who carry out this kind of unprofitable task."

14. See Tinajero (2009) regarding the tradition of reading aloud in nineteenth-century Cuba and *émigré* communities, particularly those in Florida during the Ten Years' War.

The lack of resources available for the periodical's production indicates that print laborantes, though elite, also faced economic challenges. The editor expresses desperation at the loss of time invested in work that is "unprofitable." The allusion to the intellectual's "modest suit" is another appeal to interclass solidarity and a reflection on the financially insolvent state of the publishing industry. The struggling intellectual, however, seems to lack credibility for he still belonged to Cuba's highest socioeconomic class. Nevertheless, the economic challenges of the print laborante gave rise to a reassessment of class consciousness and a potential realignment of elite and working classes in the pursuit of political and cultural change.

Zenea's characterization of the intellectual, in fact, speaks to the elite continuum, which was broad enough to create disparity within this ostensibly singular stratum. Many peninsulares were bankers, merchants, and tobacco manufacturers with access to colonial governing institutions. Regulations favored the interests of these wealthy entrepreneurs. Creoles, though limited in their political influence, were also able to amass wealth through Cuba's most lucrative export: sugar. Cuba's professional class, made up of peninsulares and creoles, garnered a modest income as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and vocational practitioners, including the clergy. Elites that engaged in intellectual endeavors did so gratis. Individuals who were exclusively dedicated to publishing or literary pursuits, like Zenea, thus struggled to make a living (Piñeyro 1901, 9–14). The "anomaly" to which Zenea refers, then, is the extremes within Cuba's economy, where non-commercial interests like publishing pale in comparison to market-based transactions and create corresponding disparities within Cuba's upper class. Zenea's allusion to the "modest suit" presents a myopic, but valid, view of the elite, which attempts to promote solidarity between a marginalized element of the top tier—the intellectual—and the working class.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the potential limitations of Zenea's comparison, his articulation of the laborante did mediate some of Cuba's steadfast divisions. Several years after the publication of *Revista Habanera*, for example, Zenea reflects on its reception: "In those times, they celebrated literary *tertulias* in Rafael María Mendive's house and he usually said: 'well, the time has come for our discussions,' '*laboremus*,' or 'we are going to work,' or 'let's start our work as good *laborantes*.'"<sup>16</sup> Mendive's invocation of the laborante at the tertulia marked a shift from an exclusively literate to a hybrid forum. Although Zenea qualifies the tertulia as literary, this secret meeting was essentially a verbal exchange of ideas that made reference to print matter, artistic or political. The convergence of written and oral modes of communication at the tertulia facilitated exchange among Cuba's literate and illiterate populations. By the time of the war's inception in 1868, *laboremus* and its derivatives had already become popular references used throughout Cuban society, evincing the

15. Zenea's description of the "humble" intellectual may reflect his own experience. A member of the creole elite and the son of a Spanish soldier, Zenea struggled throughout his life to find gainful employment as a journalist and poet (Piñeyro 1901, 9–14).

16. "Laborar. Laborantes. Laborantismo," *La Revolución*, May 31, 1870.



contiguity between literary and oral realms and the possibility of interclass solidarity, as proposed almost a decade earlier by Zenea in *Revista Habanera*.

Merchán's "Laboremus" is much less explicit in its treatment of Cuba's socio-economic structure than Zenea's article, though his call for change is equally emphatic. Merchán's message is presented as a philosophical concern and makes frequent use of metaphors and analogy to avoid overt political commentary. Merchán's strategy of displacement is likely the reason why "Laboremus" escaped Spanish censors. Indeed, "Laboremus," at first glance, is an essay on the human condition. Since Merchán situates man along a trajectory of development that spans the centuries, his argument is a universal one:

Why does there always have to be a Calvary for all those who foretell the truth? . . . The grief, the cross and the chain have often been the recompense of all those who have tried to advance their era, without any other motive than to see their community of brothers happy. . . . What we are sure of is that civilization is only obtained by the force of work, selflessness and sacrifice and that human progress cannot come to fruition except by resigning ourselves to endure the tests of suffering. ([1868] 1948, 58)

Merchán presents human advancement as a dilemma: while progress benefits a great many, it also requires self-sacrifice. The allusion to the crucifixion situates Merchán's argument in a remote past, making its relation to the present either exclusive or ambiguous. Merchán, however, incorporates a lexicon that creates temporal continuity between biblical times and the present. Terms like "progress" and "civilization" were synonymous with modernity and the developments it yielded, including the nation. Merchán's reference to the "community of brothers," in particular, lends "Laboremus" a political and present-day inflection. Indeed, "brotherhood" and "fraternity" were common metaphors used to represent the horizontal, rather than vertical, configuration of power that distinguishes the modern nation from previous autocratic forms of government (Anderson 1983, 143–144). Merchán thus ascribes his essay contemporary significance by using modern terminology to describe the remote past. Consequently, he is able to address current political concerns under the guise of a philosophical treatise.

In the essay, Merchán specifically encourages individuals to take on the arduous task of promoting modernity, and particularly the nation, through his plea, "Laboremus." Given the sacrifice involved in human advancement, however, Merchán anticipates that only a few are prepared to make it: "It is not the gathering, nor the crowd that we see. We seek advancement and not quantity. Virtues and not head counts. Souls and not numerical figures. May they not join us, those who ignore that the good of humankind cannot be obtained in our time without the complete disregard of oneself, without thoroughly leaving aside all egotistical thought" ([1868] 1948, 59–60). The coalition Merchán seeks is not the indiscriminate recruitment of many. Instead, he prefers a select few who possess the values and moral orientation to engage in acts of self-sacrifice. Merchán's displacement to a remote past and his emphasis on individual qualities, however, shroud the laborante's socioeconomic profile. In its most abstract but contextualized sense, Merchán's laborante may be a precursor to the modern citizen. That Merchán's

laborante resists a more concrete profile made the concept well suited to represent the formative nature of anticolonial thought and the diverse protagonists of the Ten Years' War.

In the years leading up to the insurrection, creole sugar planters in the western part of the island were proponents of reformism, while their eastern counterparts favored independence. The discrepancy between these two creole groups stemmed from a disparity in resources and international pressure to end the slave trade.<sup>17</sup> Diminished trade meant that the price of slaves had risen significantly so that after 1865, prices were prohibitive for all but the wealthiest of plantation owners in the west.<sup>18</sup> Eastern planters anticipated the demise of slavery and began transitioning from slave to paid labor. Reformers from the west, however, resisted wage labor and the end of slavery since they had larger labor forces and, consequently, more to lose. Instead, they preferred the gradual abolition of slavery with compensation. Thus when Carlos Manuel de Céspedes initiated armed revolt in Oriente and freed his slaves to join the insurrection, he had the backing of only eastern planters.

Although western planters subsequently supported the war effort, their participation did not signify the convergence of political or economic views. Factionalism among separatists ensued during the years coming up to the war. The insurrection's early leadership was not only faced with creating consensus among the elite regarding tactical and political objectives but also with mobilizing a revolutionary coalition that included mulattos and blacks, a point taken up in Goodmann's novel, to which we will return. Despite the controversies, Cuban émigrés openly proclaimed their unification in the war effort. Rafael Lanza's *El Demócrata*, for example, acknowledges the disagreements among Cuban émigrés but attests to their unwavering support for the revolution.<sup>19</sup> While the abstract profile of Merchán's laborante lent itself to the consolidation of competing agendas and a diverse group of activists, reference to this symbolic figure was rare in Cuban émigré publications, even his own.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, the term appeared extensively in pro-Spanish publications, impos-

17. While England had dedicated resources to end the international slave trade by seizing vessels, the United States did not express definitive support until the early 1860s, when the question of slavery sharply divided the nation (Thomas 1971, 231).

18. In 1860 the eastern province of Oriente was responsible for just 9 percent of the total sugar production, although the region accounted for approximately half the island. Production in the eastern provinces was hindered by limited roads and railways and relied almost entirely on manual labor. Western planters, with their substantial profits, were able to purchase machinery and maintain a large slave labor force, despite increased prices (Thomas 1971, 241).

19. [Untitled], *El Demócrata*, September 19, 1870. See Piñeyro's *Vida y escritos de Juan Clemente Zenea* (1901) for an account of the Quesada-Aldama divide within the Cuban émigré community. In brief, the arrival of General Quesada to New York in the fall of 1870 challenged the Junta's legitimacy. According to Quesada, the Republic-in-Arms rather than the Junta had appointed him to oversee the finance and arrangement of military expeditions. The conflict ultimately altered the power structure of the émigré community as public support for the Junta waned and Cuban factionalism came to define the émigré community (Piñeyro 1901, 116–123).

20. Merchán published *El Diario Cubano* in New York from April 22 to June 28, 1870, and throughout the dispute with Zenea about the origins of the laborante. And yet, *laborante* appeared only twice in Merchán's daily: in "Paralelo" (May 22, 1870) and "A los bomberos de Cuba" (June 10, 1870).

ing solidarity to the Cuban insurgence from the outside. A keyword search of *laborante* in *El Diario de la Marina*, the official daily published in Havana, produced 145 matches from May 11, 1869, to June 23, 1878, and another 17 between September 10, 1880, and September 26, 1922.<sup>21</sup> While initial references to *laborante* focus on a theatrical performance and a clandestine periodical published in Havana, subsequent articles report on revolutionary efforts.<sup>22</sup> For the pro-Spanish daily, the specific socioeconomic attributes of the *laborante* were subordinate to political affiliation. As anticipated, *laborante* in *El Diario de la Marina* had a derogatory connotation. A contributor to *El Diario Cubano* compiled a list of several hundred descriptors that pro-Spanish publications had used for advocates of the Ten Years' War. The author cites terminology like "enemigos del orden" or "traidores," the contextual monikers "filibustero" and "mambises," and colloquial epithets including "chusma," "farandulero," "ratones de manigua," and for the women, "suripanta."<sup>23</sup> The inclusion of "laborante" in this list of pejorative terms corroborates the negative inflection ascribed to the revolutionary "worker" by *El Diario de la Marina*.

While the articles from *El Diario de la Marina* focused on revolutionary activities in Cuba, Havana's other pro-Spanish periodical, *El Moro Muza*, targeted members of the Junta Central Republicana de Cuba y Puerto Rico in New York, the Republic-in-Arms's official revolutionary delegation in the United States. In the May 16, 1869, issue of *El Moro Muza*, for example, Víctor Patricio Landaluze released a sketch of women selling raffle items and wartime memorabilia (figure 1). The illustration, *El Bazar de los Laborantes en N. York*, depicts a common strategy among Cuban émigrés to raise money for the revolution, particularly for military supplies. The representation of items for sale, however, makes a mockery of the insurrection's leadership. The "Sombrero del General Mambí," adorned with a pineapple, draws attention to the arena of military conflict in the eastern and undeveloped part of the island and implies that the insurgents possessed only rudimentary skills and materials. The "Espada de Quesada" hanging above likewise snickers at the general's substandard performance by likening his sword to an ineffectual and inappropriate "weapon": the broom. And the three boxes stacked in the lower left corner that read "bonos" and "noticias" refer to the Junta's failure to secure financial backing.<sup>24</sup> That the personified character "El Moro Muza"

21. *Hispanic American Newspapers, 1808–1980*, Readex, <http://www.readex.com/content/hispanic-american-newspapers-1808-1980> (accessed May 15, 2013).

22. The debut performance of *El Laborante* took place on May 31, 1869. *El Diario de la Marina* characterizes the play as a "comedia de circunstancia" that makes use of political allegory to bolster colonial authority (May 29, 1869; June 6, 1869). An article in the April 21, 1870, issue, however, focuses specifically on the insurgents. The piece interprets Eugenio M. de Hosto's resignation from *La Revolución* as an indicator of the internal conflicts of the "partido laborante." See García del Pino's (2006) study on the clandestine periodical *El Laborante* published in Havana for a discussion of its production, political ideas, and potential collaboration on the part of José Martí.

23. *El Diario Cubano*, May 26, 1870. See Lazo 2005 for an analysis of the *filibustero*. In the mid-nineteenth century the filibuster conducted military expeditions that left from US shores, including those of General Narciso López. *Mambí* was the surname of a black Spanish soldier who joined the rebel forces of the Dominican Republic. The term was subsequently used to refer to Cuban insurgents of the Ten Years' War.

24. Merchán, "El mensaje," *Diario Cubano*, June 15, 1870.



Figure 1 Víctor Patricio Landaluze, *El Bazar de los Laborantes de N. York*, in *El Moro Muza*, May 16, 1869. Biblioteca Nacional de España.

occupies the foremost plane in the center of the scene suggests Spain's political and military dominance over the insurrection. Moreover, his ability to engage the fund-raiser suggests that he has successfully manipulated revolutionary supporters. Rather than recognize El Moro Muza as a threat to the cause, the saleswoman treats him as a potential customer, thereby displaying her ignorance and the vulnerability of the émigré project.

The laborante of New York, as portrayed by Landaluze, is far different from Zenea's interclass community of laborantes and Merchán's revolutionary worker who articulates political thought. Instead, according to Landaluze, the émigré laborante is perceived as the financial purveyor of the insurrection, in this case a woman and potential member of an organization like *La Junta Patriótica de Cubanas en Nueva York*. The laborante's financial profile is echoed in Merchán's *Diario Cubano*. In an article titled "Paralelo" the contributor depicts the laborante as inciting corruption and betrayal among colonial advocates through bribery in the Spanish press: "Those who write in *Universal*, in *La Discusión*, in *El Pueblo*, in *La República*, in *El Diario de Barcelona* are accused of exchanging their writings for the laborante's gold."<sup>25</sup> While the "oro de los laborantes" is being used to wage an ideological war in the Spanish press rather than purchase supplies, the laborante nevertheless maintains the status of financial purveyor of the war.

While the pro-Spanish and Cuban émigré periodical presses contextualized

25. "Paralelo," *Diario Cubano*, May 22, 1870, my emphasis.

the laborante in essays, articles, and political cartoons, H. Goodmann employed a different genre to craft the contours of this revolutionary figure. *Escenas de la Revolución de Cuba: Los laborantes* (1872) is a novel about a creole family whose patriarch, Don Pancho, owns a coffee plantation in the eastern province of *Oriente*. That Don Pancho's plantation is located in the same region where Céspedes initiated the Ten Years' War intimates his political profile. Indeed, Don Pancho supports the insurrection and opens his home for tertulias in the months leading up to armed conflict (Goodmann 1872, 47–48).

To categorize Goodmann's novel as an émigré publication raises questions about the author's identity, intended audience, and narrative frame, all of which have bearing on the conception of the laborante. Unlike the émigré texts examined earlier, *Escenas* was published in Paris rather than New York. Goodmann's profile is unknown and his surname likely a pseudonym. The author's pen name is fitting, for *Escenas* is as much a novel about moral "goodness" as it is the concealment of identity. Whether Goodmann is of Cuban, Spanish, or Anglo descent remains unclear. He establishes a framework that comes from intimate knowledge of Cuba, suggesting that he was either born on the island or resided there for some time. In the opening chapter, for example, he describes the geographic and physical attributes of the land with precision and reminisces about his experiences there. He provides the same detail in his description of Cuban society when he goes beyond the peninsular-creole binary to explain the socioeconomic standing of Catalán peninsulares, who were largely merchants. There is nothing conclusive, however, about the author's nationality. Instead, Goodmann claims he provides this intricate scenario for the benefit of a "foreign" public, revealing his intended Hispanophone readership in the Americas and Europe. Indeed, the novel's epigraph, a quote from Simón Bolívar, speaks to the anticipated and particularly Latin American audience.

The opening reference to Bolívar's "Cartas a un Americano" might seem out of place given the novel's focus on the Cuban insurrection and the laborante. Closer examination of the citation, however, evinces a consistency between the directives of Bolívar and other Cuban independence leaders: "Ideas always precede deeds, when a man conceives of an idea, work conforms to it. When a thought dominates a nation, she follows the same path." Bolívar's quote is reminiscent of Merchán's "Laboremus" with its emphasis on "thinking" the nation and the role of leadership. The opening chapter of the novel then goes on to discuss the political and moral underpinnings of *laborantismo*, which differ from the agendas examined thus far. Goodmann specifies the laborante's objective as the creation of social harmony and its greatest obstacle, the "social crime" of slavery (1872, 5–6). *Escenas* thus advocates not only Cuban independence but also abolition.

Despite the call to end slavery, the novel does not openly address the question nor does it present a vision for Cuba after independence. Instead, Goodmann alludes to abolition by according slaves greater agency in the narrative. For one, poor families and black slaves are regular participants in Don Pancho's tertulias. The renaming of the parlor where the tertulias were held as "la sala del negro" underscores the importance of these figures in the clandestine gatherings (47). In another instance, the domestic slave Adelaida watches carefully over Don

Pancho's daughter, Cachita, when her Spanish suitor, Enrique Cuellar, comes calling. During one particular visit, Adelaida drives Enrique out of the house (34). Adelaida consequently not only protects Cachita's reputation; she also exerts her dominance in the domestic realm and, on a symbolic level, expresses anticolonial sentiment. While Adelaida establishes her authority through her dominion of the household, Imbeque has the most significant role among the slaves. Like the protagonists of other Cuban abolitionist narratives, including Juan Francisco Manzano's *Autobiografía de un esclavo* (1835), Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (1841), or the anonymous *El negro mártir* (1854) from the Cuban émigré periodical *El Mulato*, Imbeque has extensive knowledge of the land; his primary function is to serve as guide or facilitate transport. Yet, unlike the protagonists of other abolitionist texts, Imbeque is a skilled fighter who eagerly and skillfully confronts the Spanish.

Imbeque's identity and his role in the revolution, however, are more thoroughly defined when he leads Joaquín and Cachita to the safety of an abandoned tunnel after Spanish forces have overrun Don Pancho's house. Once Joaquín and Cachita are sheltered, Imbeque informs them that he had frequented the underground cavern to lead Bodú religious practices. Imbeque's identity as savior thus has both political and spiritual dimensions. Yet Imbeque is not the only character with this profile. Joaquín, a creole and independence advocate, shares Imbeque's traits and carries out a similar role, thereby creating parity between the two figures. During the attack on Don Pancho's house, Joaquín finds a wounded Spanish captain at the opposite entrance to the tunnel and provides him refuge. Joaquín's decision to rescue his adversary is initially perplexing. His motivation to spare the Spanish captain's life, we soon learn, is spiritually and politically inspired. That is, while Joaquín tends to the captain's wounds, exhibiting a compassion for human life, he also seeks to convince the Spanish officer to join the rebel forces. That Joaquín approaches his discussion as if it were a question of the soul conflates political ambition with religious principle. More specifically, and given the officer's critical condition, Joaquín convinces the captain that he has died and will endure eternal suffering for his support of the colonial regime. The captain's destiny, however, is not sealed. If he renounces his colonial convictions and recognizes, instead, the efforts of the revolutionaries, Joaquín assures the captain he is worthy of salvation. As Joaquín works to "heal" the captain, two shadows appear on the tunnel wall. Joaquín intimates the projections are a miracle and incorporates them into his plea for political conversion:

The rose-colored light of the ancient bonfire gave all of the objects a *supernatural color*. . . . in the distance they projected *gigantic shadows of beings from another world*, and he, with his enormous machete in hand, with which he had replaced the rifle that he left resting on the ground, should have impressed the imagination of the weak soldier. . . . Those two shadows that he [the captain] saw in the distance are the spirit of Washington and Bolívar, that come to give their inspiration to the Cubans and that look for a body to incarnate themselves! (Goodmann 1872, 191–192, my emphasis)

That Washington and Bolívar appear in the aura of a "supernatural color" and as "gigantic shadows of otherworldly beings" imbues these figures with divine

power and is in keeping with Joaquín's role of political and spiritual savior. Yet we soon learn that the shadows of Bolívar and Washington are the projections of Imbeque and Fructuoso, a neighbor of Don Pancho (189–191). These phantasmagoric images ironically espouse a vision that is grounded in Cuba's socioeconomic reality and maps the island's revolutionaries to the slave and creole planter. As such, the projections intimate the integration of all sectors of Cuban society, regardless of national origin, class, or race, in support of Cuban independence. At the same time, they mark the physical and explicit joining of two characters—Imbeque and Joaquín—who until this point have been acting in parallel, but without direct communication.

Although Imbeque serves as a catalyst in Joaquín's attempt to convert his adversary, Imbeque is unaware of the shadow he casts and, consequently, his agency in winning over the Spanish captain. Moreover, Imbeque's person is masked by white Latin American and US independence leaders, which suggests that Cuban political consolidation subsumes black racial identity. And yet Imbeque, through his association with independence leaders and his role in rescuing Cachita, exhibits both agency and empowerment. Imbeque's dual persona thus represents the ambiguous place of the slave in the revolutionary project, in which recognition of the island's African population as revolutionaries and Cubans is either an aspiration approached with caution or a fear to be suppressed.

The ambivalent treatment of Imbeque plays out in both the political and spiritual (or cultural) dimensions of his character and corresponds to elite anxieties of the time. Throughout the Ten Years' War creoles sought the incorporation of blacks in the revolutionary movement, mainly to bolster the military ranks. Yet creole treatment of blacks and mulattos remained conflicted. Carlos Manuel de Céspedes's proclamation at the start of the uprising is a case in point: while he espoused the equality of all men he later proposed the gradual and indemnified emancipation of slaves to be realized only after the war's end (Thomas 1971, 245). Imbeque's role, though undoubtedly the most robust of all slaves depicted, is confined to only six consecutive chapters of the novel's twenty-five. In the final chapter of his appearance, Imbeque provides refuge for Cachita and Joaquín and is an integral part in the articulation of the independence agenda in the tunnel scene mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, he does not appear in the subsequent chapter, entitled "Los Libertadores de Cuba," nor in any of the remaining segments. Goodman's novel thus does not escape the contradictions of an elite program with its egalitarian principles of democracy and its ambiguous treatment of abolition. And yet *Escenas* does advance the role of the slave protagonist in Cuban abolitionist narratives by according Imbeque agency as a revolutionary fighter as well as conflating his identity with that of American independence leaders Washington and Bolívar.

In *Insurgent Cuba* Ada Ferrer explores the cultural tensions within the revolutionary project. She explains, for instance, that former slaves were expected to conform to creole culture and shed evidence of African customs (1999, 36–37). While Goodman's novel does not evince any explicit turmoil between the slaves and the family of Don Pedro, offering instead a vision of family loyalty that caters to an elite vision of revolutionary solidarity, it does reveal resistance to African

culture. In an attempt to acculturate Imbeque to Spanish colonial culture we learn that he was baptized as “Pánfilo.” That Imbeque later becomes known by his African name is the result of his steadfast refusal to succumb to the impositions of a dominant culture (1872, 140). Moreover, Imbeque pursues the teachings of the Bodú religion and rejects earlier attempts of Catholic indoctrination. The persecution of Imbeque’s African heritage is likely the reason why he hides his religious affiliation as Bodú priest from Don Pancho and his family. Imbeque’s supposition is given credence when Joaquín and Cachita encounter the object of Bodú veneration, the serpent, and react with fear. The chapter’s title, “The offensive things about Imbeque,” confirms the Catholic sentiment of individuals like Joaquín and Cachita, who see the serpent as a symbol of evil and denounce Bodú practices. Although Imbeque is praised for his loyalty to the family of Don Pancho, his ability to navigate the land, and his skill in combat, his African cultural identity is marginalized, thereby revealing the incongruities of the elite program of national consolidation.

While Goodmann’s novel promotes an integrated Cuban identity that subsumes racial, if not cultural, differences for a shared political cause, it also calls for transnational solidarity. Curiously, *Escenas* appropriates the laborante to project this broader coalition. That is, Eduardo and Joaquín discover a text titled “Laboremus.” Neither a copy of Zenea’s publication nor Merchán’s essay, the “Laboremus” of *Escenas* is a letter. In it the author affirms his support for Cuban independence but also suggests the expanded scope of laborantismo to include the liberation of Puerto Rico and the formation of a Latin American collective (67–69). Eduardo finds the letter in a book about Simón Bolívar that was recently delivered to him. The “Laboremus” missive and the context of its discovery thus echo the idea of a consolidated Latin American independence movement, including the Cuban insurgence, first presented by the opening epigraph from Bolívar. Closer examination of the letter’s discovery, however, suggests another matrix of international solidarity. The book, *La vida de Simón Bolívar*, was published in New York, where, as we know, Cuban émigrés “worked” for the island’s independence from Spain. Since the “Laboremus” letter was enclosed in a book about a revolutionary figure published in New York, Goodmann establishes a connection between the Cubans on the island and their émigré compatriots in the North American republic, positing international solidarity in this case as a joint effort between a people divided by political status and place, between Cuba and the United States.

While *Escenas* appeals to international solidarities, both Latin American and US, as uncontested, it returns in the concluding chapter to the more conflicted notion of Cuban consolidation and its namesake, the laborante. In the final scene Don Pancho and Eduardo have just returned to Cuba with much-needed wartime supplies. Their use of the “laborante’s map” to determine their point of entry into Cuba reaffirms their political allegiance and the revolutionary’s profile as elite. Goodmann, however, makes one last reference to Imbeque. In the only footnote to the concluding chapter, Goodmann discusses a commonplace revolutionary moniker: *mambi*. The term in its contemporary usage, Goodmann informs us, refers to any black soldier who fights in the Caribbean and could thus apply to Imbeque (231). Goodmann’s brief explanation, however, stresses the term’s origin.



*Mambi* is the surname of a Dominican slave who assisted Spanish forces during an uprising on the island. As such, the term initially referenced blacks who were colonial advocates. Because the epithet was first employed by the Spanish it took on a positive connotation. Goodmann's contextualization of *mambi* highlights the discrepancy between its original reference as colonial advocate and its current-day usage, which erases political allegiance. Thus he implicitly questions the appropriateness of the denomination *mambi* for a figure like Imbeque, who has joined the insurrection against Spain. Moreover, he reveals the ethos of colonial sentiment that considers the physical markers of race as determinants of individual and social attributes like political affiliation. Despite the many analogies between Imbeque and his elite revolutionary counterparts, Goodmann does not explicitly identify him as a laborante. Nevertheless, Goodmann evinces the anachronous usage of *mambi* for someone like Imbeque and leaves open the possibility of a more fitting term: *laborante*.

In his closing chapter, Goodmann is undoubtedly concerned with the physical manifestation of a political ideal. Imbeque, though not present in the flesh, is invoked through a racialized revolutionary symbol. The preoccupation with the physical body and the ascription of power is likewise revealed through the chapter's textual elements. By inserting the commentary on the *mambi* in the footnote, Goodmann visually and thematically designates race as a topic of secondary, yet lasting, importance to the reader. The substantive relation between the footnote and the body of the text, however, is not readily apparent. That is, the last paragraph makes no mention of the laborantes in terms of race but rather political allegiance. The thematic discrepancy between the main text and its gloss is displaced by the author's consistency of technique in questioning Spanish colonial discourse. That is, just as Goodmann presents the Spanish colonial definition of *mambi* in the footnote in order to undermine its validity, so too does he adopt a similar approach when discussing the laborante mentioned in the main text. More specifically, Goodmann reiterates the Spanish claim that laborantes are to blame for "the infinite assassinations of the most inoffensive men" at the hands of the Spanish government (231). By presenting the laborante in Spanish colonial terms, Goodmann implicitly invites the reader to give precedence to the largely sympathetic vision of the revolutionary fighter that has been developed throughout the entire narrative. Moreover, since the footnote occupies the final lines of the novel, the reader is left to contemplate the racial contours of the laborante and the identification of Imbeque as both revolutionary and Cuban.

Approximately five years after the publication of Merchán's "Laboremus," a contributor to the illustrated periodical *La América Ilustrada* (founded in 1872) puts forth an ideological view of nation where individual distinctions are eclipsed by solidarity and leadership is predicated on the adoption of principles.<sup>26</sup> The anonymous author points to a "modern" figure that is praised by his counterparts. Although the author makes no mention of the laborante as this "modern" figure, he does not abandon the image of the worker in thinking the nation. His harbinger of the future, as announced in the article's title, is the "obrero moderno." While

26. "El obrero moderno," *La América Ilustrada*, April 20, 1873.

the modern worker has the potential for not one but many national affiliations, his appearance in the Cuban émigré publication *La América Ilustrada* and Cuba's tradition of the worker as revolutionary makes this rather universal modern worker have a particular meaning. In the context of the Ten Years' War the "obrero moderno" points to a time when the laborante is no longer an advocate of the insurrection but rather a citizen in a postrevolutionary and independent Cuba.

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