

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Many Faces of Slavery

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This essay reviews the following works:

The Trade in the Living: The Formation of Brazil in the South Atlantic, Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries. By Luiz Felipe de Alencastro. Translated by Gavin Adams and Luiz Felipe de Alencastro; revised by Michael Wolfers and Dale Tomich. Albany: SUNY Press, 2018. Pp. xx + 606. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781438469294.

Freedom's Captives: Slavery and Gradual Emancipation on the Colombian Black Pacific. By Yesenia Barragan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xviii + 326. \$99.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781108832328.

From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas. Edited by Alex Borucki, David Eltis, and David Wheat. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. Pp. x + 350. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780826361165.

Una historia de la emancipación negra: Esclavitud y abolición en la Argentina. By Magdalena Candiotti. Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2021. Pp. 272. Arg\$3,892.00 paperback. ISBN: 9789878011134.

Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic. By Erika Denise Edwards. Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press, 2020. Pp. xvi + 168. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780817360313.

Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas: Performance, Representation, and the Making of Black Atlantic Tradition. Edited by Cécile Fromont. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. Pp. 224. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780271083308.

Constructing the Spanish Empire in Havana: State Slavery in Defense and Development, 1762–1835. By Evelyn P. Jennings. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 283. \$45.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780807173947.

Africanos livres: A abolição do tráfico de escravos para o Brasil. By Beatriz G. Mamigonian. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2017. Pp. 625. R\$74.90 paperback. ISBN: 9788535929331.

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The Story of Rufino: Slavery, Freedom, and Islam in the Black Atlantic. By João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes, and Marcus J. M. de Carvalho. Translated by H. Sabrina Gledhill. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. ix + 307. ISBN: 9780190224363.

Captives of Conquest: Slavery in the Early Modern Spanish Caribbean. By Erin Woodruff Stone. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Pp. 235. \$49.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780812253108.

Several decades of scholarship on slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean have profoundly illuminated the lives and experiences of Africans and their descendants, so that we now have dynamic subfields in the family, legal consciousness, religion, freedom, memory, and the slave trade. These subfields evolved because of efforts by scholars across the Americas to recover enslaved peoples' agency, a paradigm fraught with tension but that has unquestionably shown enslaved people as historical actors who consistently and creatively refused social death.¹ The writing of Latin America into Atlantic history has shifted the scale at which we study enslaved people, allowing us to move from the intimate spaces of the household to the Atlantic networks many forged in the face of slavery's violence. Long thought to be "voiceless," enslaved people and their communities are now the subjects of article- and book-length biographies drawing on multi-sited archival research, collaboration, and open access databases.

This essay reviews ten books that illuminate the many faces of slavery, understood here to mean both the multiple configurations of enslavement—from Indian slavery in the Spanish Caribbean to forms of unfreedom during the age of gradual emancipation—and the multiple identities forged under and beyond slavery. Treating enslaved agency as a starting point rather than a conclusion, these books show that slavery was not a monolithic institution or relation but rather shifted across time and space and in response to social, political, and economic transformations. In these books we encounter African descendants not only as slaves but also as mothers, Christians, geopolitical thinkers, and healers, generating new common grounds—beyond their relationship to labor—for understanding their experiences. These books highlight themes of geopolitics, honor, intimacy, motherhood, healing, and kinship, creating three-dimensional portraits that approach enslaved people on the complex and sometimes surprising terms through which they saw and expressed themselves.² The scholarship reviewed here provokes us to reassess some of the foundational categories, assumptions, and periodizations that inform our field, such as the meanings and definitions of slavery itself, but also why slavery is the first or only juncture at which scholars encounter Africans and their descendants in Latin America.³

The other faces of slavery in the Spanish Caribbean

Between 1493 and 1542, an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Indians were enslaved and traded throughout the Spanish Caribbean and the Iberian Peninsula. Indigenous forms of captivity existed in the Caribbean prior to European arrival, but Spanish conquest imposed new legal, political, and religious frameworks—some with precedents in the Iberian Peninsula, others of recent invention—that violently disrupted Indigenous lives and kinship networks. Erin Woodruff Stone's *Captives of Conquest: Slavery in the Early Modern Spanish Caribbean* carefully

¹ Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113–124. See also the articles in "The Question of Recovery: Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive," special issue, *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (December 2015).

² For a review of recent scholarship on Blackness in Latin America, see Erika Denise Edwards, "Racialization of Blackness in the Americas," *Latin American Research Review* 57, no. 2 (2022): 456–466.

³ James H. Sweet, "Reimagining the African-Atlantic Archive: Method, Concept, Epistemology, Ontology," *Journal of African History* 55, no. 2 (2014): 148.

reconstructs the formation of the Indigenous slave trade, revealing how that trade was intricately connected to Spanish conquest and, ultimately, shaped patterns of enslavement in the following centuries. Stone begins from the premise that a complete history and quantification of Indian slavery—what she calls “the other face of slavery in the early Spanish Empire”—is impossible (2). Colonial records are notoriously incomplete, while the silences and gaps in the records on Indian slavery reflect the illegitimate and informal nature of slave trading in the sixteenth century. Stone focuses instead on tracing the evolution of the trade and the legal frameworks that regulated it. She shows that a broader Spanish colonial infrastructure evolved alongside, and sometimes because of, changes in the policies of Indian enslavement, such that “by the 1530s the commerce in Indian slaves was one of the largest businesses in the Spanish Empire” (129).

The book’s major argument is that Indian slavery in the circum-Caribbean shaped and even advanced Spanish conquest in the mainland Americas. Despite several attempts by the Crown to regulate the Indian slave trade, which culminated in 1542 with the outlawing of Indian slavery, by the 1520s–1530s the trade reached its height, influencing colonial economies and expeditions. The exploration and conquest of New Spain significantly expanded, in numerical and geographical terms, the growing trade in Indians, as new captives from mainland regions were transported back to the Caribbean to resupply the dwindling labor force. Even as the search for gold and silver fully supplanted the search for Indians to enslave by the 1530s, conquistadors viewed Indians captured on their return voyages to the Caribbean as consolation prizes. Importantly, Stone shows the limited ways that Indigenous peoples, as forced or willing collaborators, imposed some influence over slaving expeditions and conquest, enabling them to escape some of the worst conditions of slavery under the Spanish.

Captives of Conquest will be of special interest to scholars working on slavery’s role in the early formation of the Iberian Atlantic. In Stone’s rendering, we observe the gradual imposition of Spanish imperial power over the Caribbean through various mechanisms regulating, legitimating, and outlawing slavery. *Captives of Conquest* also contributes to dialogues on the connections and coexistence of Indian and African slavery, which did not end with the promulgation of the 1542 *Leyes Nuevas* outlawing Indian slavery. Stone considers the linked histories of Indian and African rebellion in the 1520s and 1530s, while the book’s conclusion reminds us that an intercontinental trade in Indians continued well after 1542. This corrects commonly repeated narratives that African slavery entirely supplanted Indigenous slavery in the following centuries.

In *Constructing the Spanish Empire in Havana: State Slavery in Defense and Development, 1762–1835*, Evelyn P. Jennings explores the political economy of state slavery in Cuba following the British occupation of Havana in 1762. To do what Jennings calls “the constructive labor of empire,” which included the development of military defense and fortification projects, the Spanish mobilized pools of forced laborers, of which one distinct group was the *esclavos del rey*, slaves owned by the king (10). Jennings approaches state slavery as constitutive of a political economy of labor coercion that was at the heart of the Spanish Empire (7).

Jennings argues that “the physical construction of the Spanish Empire in Cuba was a key component of Atlantic capitalism, and state enslavement for that construction was crucial to the development of plantation slavery in Cuba in the nineteenth century” (17). Despite early Bourbon attempts to reform and strengthen Cuba’s defenses and to generate increased revenue from the African slave trade, Havana remained vulnerable to attacks owing in part to the state’s ad hoc policy of marshaling labor for fortifications. Cycles of warfare had tested Spain’s imperial defense since the sixteenth century, but it was the British invasion and occupation of Havana in 1762 that exposed Cuba’s military weaknesses and the limits of Bourbon reform. While some scholars have viewed the opening of free trade during the British occupation as a stimulus for the massive transformation of Cuba into a plantation economy dependent on the African slave trade, Jennings instead locates this transformation in the rapid, unprecedented growth of state slavery in the

1760s and 1770s (80–87). The failure to defend Havana against the British spurred a new policy of defense production and public works projects that systematically relied on the importation of African slaves. Between 1763 and 1765, Jennings estimates that 8,000 Africans were imported to the city, of which 4,359 were purchased by the Crown (87). This new way of mobilizing labor and capital, albeit short-lived, fostered commercial openings for Cuban elites and planters based on increased access to the slave trade, and, by extension, fomented the growth of plantation slavery. Jennings’s argument for the importance of state slavery to Cuba’s transition into its second slavery underscores how the violence undergirding the “constructive labor of empire” shaped Atlantic capitalism.⁴

Scholars will find many insights in Jennings’s book, and some lingering questions. First, Jennings demonstrates the “significant interpenetration of interests among colonial officials and Cuban elites” in the context of defense work (9). State actors and Cuban planters shared common ground in their commitment to mobilizing unfree labor, predominantly enslaved Africans. Jennings reminds us that the Spanish state not only governed slavery and the slave trade, but it also was at one point the largest enslaver in Cuba. Second, scholars of urban slavery will find thought-provoking Jennings’s complication of the distinctions between urban and rural slavery. While scholarship on urban slavery emphasizes increased opportunities for manumission and autonomy for the enslaved, Jennings argues that for eighteenth-century Cuba, it was the kind of work and the site of enslavement that mattered. State slaves doing the constructive labor of empire in urban and semi-urban spaces faced grueling and deadly regimes that Jennings suggests bore similarities to the brutality of rural labor. Still, Jennings’s focus on policy and political economy largely overlooks the experiences of state slaves themselves. She acknowledges that extant archives limit what we can know of Havana’s state slaves, but it is worth asking if this entirely forecloses analyses of their lives, worldviews, and agency. Geopolitics here appears as the realm of state actors, with enslaved people, state-owned or not, moved and acted upon. Attention to the geopolitics of the enslaved in the Caribbean would have balanced Jennings’s study. How did enslaved people strategically limit what the Spanish state could or could not enact through its labor policy?

Stone and Jennings show how enslavement was foundational for the expansion and later defense of the Spanish Empire. Both reveal the limits of royal power and weaknesses of the Spanish state in governing slavery. Stone documents a struggle between private interests in Indian slaving and the Crown’s measures to regulate Indian slavery, while Jennings shows the vulnerabilities of Spanish defense in Cuba during and after the British occupation in 1762. However, the scholars diverge in how they approach archival silences. Stone emphasizes the creative ways that some enslaved Indians influenced Spanish slaving expeditions and how they contributed to “determin[ing] both where the Spanish settled and which locations were successful” (Stone, 157). In this way, Indians were key geopolitical actors in the expansion of Iberian empires, some of whom used “their knowledge of Spanish culture and practices, as well as the larger Atlantic system” against the Spanish (Stone, 99). Jennings draws on the archives of Spanish bureaucrats, revealing warfare and state slavery as catalysts of Cuba’s nineteenth-century transformation. The book claims to attend to “the human costs and violence embedded in the physical structures of the Spanish Empire in Havana,” though it misses opportunities to see royal slaves as geopolitical actors in their own right (Jennings, 192).

Roots and routes

Luiz Felipe de Alencastro’s *The Trade in the Living: The Formation of Brazil in the South Atlantic, Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* offers a useful bridge between the discussion of empire

⁴ For a review of recent scholarship on second slavery, see Karen Y. Morrison, “Sustaining Freedom and Second Slavery in Nineteenth-Century Brazil and Cuba,” *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 2 (2018): 411–417.

above and the discussion of the slave trade. The book was originally published in Brazil in 2000, when the country commemorated the fifth centennial of European “discovery,” and recently was translated into English. In the preface to the English edition, Alencastro notes that celebrations of Brazil’s centennial “favored narratives that interpreted the Brazilian past through the prism of its current national territory” (xvii). As a study of the formation of the Iberian South Atlantic, *The Trade in the Living* instead reveals how Brazil was formed through imperial expansion and warfare in West and West Central Africa, giving shape to an Atlantic corridor between Portuguese America and Africa.

Alencastro views the slave trade as “one of the constituent elements of the whole Atlantic system” (22), a system that “yielded close complementarity between the zones of slave production in Brazil, and the zones for the reproduction of slaves in Africa” (184). So central was slavery in Brazil and the slave trade in Angola to Portugal’s South Atlantic empire that both became the targets of Dutch attack in the seventeenth century. While not all the book’s arguments are (or were) necessarily new, *The Trade in the Living* is a landmark study for showing how transatlantic connections were forged, asking readers to see Brazil’s formation in the crucible of early modern global forces. In one frame, it brings together Portuguese and Luso-African merchants, enslaved Africans and Indians, Jesuits, and the Crown to detail imperial consolidation, warfare and defense, and political economy, all of which were predicated on sustaining the slave trade.

Studies of the slave trade to Brazil have increased in the last two decades, introducing new questions about cultural exchange, experience, and identity. Moreover, scholars of and in Brazil and Latin America are increasingly engaging with African history. Originally published in Brazil in 2010 and recently translated, *The Story of Rufino: Slavery, Freedom, and Islam in the Black Atlantic* embodies these trends, as well as the micro-historical turn in slavery studies. Using the massive documentation of the African slave trade over four centuries, scholars have traced, with some accuracy, the broad identities and homelands of Africans arriving in the Americas. Even as this documentation generates important demographic data, it overwhelmingly effaces the experiences of the enslaved through its calculus of listing, taxing, and distributing. In exceptional cases, and through collaboration, scholars can trace and recreate the life trajectories of individual Africans, as Brazilian historians João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes, and Marcus J. M. de Carvalho accomplish with their biography of Rufino José Maria.

Born into a Yoruba Muslim family in the interior of the Bight of Benin and trafficked to Brazil in the early 1820s, Rufino lived from the height of the slave trade to its suppression and eventual abolition. He journeyed throughout Brazil, passed through the hands of slave owners, and ultimately gained his freedom. In the late 1830s he returned to the slave trade, now as a freed person and ship’s cook. After joining the crew of the *Ermelinda*, the vessel was captured in 1841 by the British Royal Navy and taken to Sierra Leone, where it stood trial before the Mixed Commission Court. In Sierra Leone, Rufino found a diasporic community of liberated Muslims from his birthplace of Oyo, a community with which he deepened his study of Arabic and Islam in a local Qur’anic school. In Sierra Leone, he completed his training as an *alufá*, defined as “a religious counselor for Muslims, a teacher, guardian, and preacher of the word of Allah” (242). In Recife, Rufino was arrested under suspicion of conspiring to rebel and was interrogated by the police.

In narrating his Atlantic odyssey, the authors argue that Rufino’s choices “suggest that . . . questions posed by historians and anthropologists regarding cultural formation, ethnic identity, and creolization in the New World, Brazil in particular, become much more complex and hard to assign to all-encompassing models” (243). Indeed, the book not only reveals the many paradoxes of Brazil’s illegal slave trade but also adds texture to individual experience, resulting in surprising conclusions (244). At the center of this book stands Rufino’s voluntary decision to work in the slave trade as a cook, a decision which may surprise some readers unfamiliar with South Atlantic slavery. Rufino’s arrival in Brazil

coincided with a wave of rebellions led by enslaved Muslims, creating a political context so tense that his decision to work in the slave trade likely represented an escape from persecution and perhaps a potential return to West Africa. Although it occurred in ways that even Rufino could not have imagined, it was his participation in the trade that facilitated his return to the study of Islam to become an alufá. Rufino's successes and his participation in the trade leads the authors to conclude that his life "enables us to observe the broad range of possibilities that were open to and pursued by Africans enslaved in Brazil, at least some of them" (244). To push this conclusion further, these were possibilities that Africans like Rufino created for themselves.

The original Brazilian edition was titled *O alufá Rufino* (Rufino the alufá), emphasizing his identity as a spiritual leader in his community. Rufino's identity as an alufá may be the ideal lens for understanding his life that pushes the book's conclusion even further. His identity as an alufá, at least after his time in Sierra Leone, reflects his and his community's enduring connections with their homeland of Oyo. In many ways, Rufino was an intellectual who invites comparison with the eighteenth-century West African healer Domingos Álvares.⁵ While the authors frame their study as a social history (ix), this book is also an intellectual history of a West African man and his dispersed community in the context of ruptures and connections. As such, new questions emerge: What did slavery mean to an alufá? What was the relationship between Rufino's enslavement, freedom, and his intellectual life?

The scholarly literature on the slave trade to Spanish America is less developed than that on Brazil. The recent volume *From the Galleons to the Highlands: Slave Trade Routes in the Spanish Americas*, edited by Alex Borucki, David Eltis, and David Wheat, sets out to address this gap by reassessing the transatlantic and intra-American slave trades to a region the editors describe as "the part of the Americas with the most enduring links with Africa" (1). The book's premise is that a full and renewed assessment of the slave trade to Spanish America offers a new appreciation of the African diaspora, the Spanish Empire, and Atlantic history. The editors, whose individually authored works have been at the forefront of such reassessments, estimate that 2.07 million Africans were imported into Spanish America (24). The editors highlight several reasons why the histories behind these numbers remain obscure: nationally bounded historiographies (1); portrayals of Spanish merchants as passive and secondary agents of the slave trade (11); discourses of *mestizaje* that erase Africans and their descendants (36–37); and works that favor post-1789 Cuban plantation slavery over earlier periods and other colonies (5; Schneider, 267). To this list can be added a general lack of awareness of the specificity of slave trafficking in the Spanish American empire, which, as several contributors underscore, require us to reassess categories and definitions assumed to be consistent across space and time. Chapter 1, "The Size and Direction of the Slave Trade to the Spanish Americas," authored by the editors, offers a conceptual vision for reassessing the slave trade to Spanish America that stresses the need to look beyond even the numbers they offer to examine Africans' experiences in the region.

Contributors build on this vision by sketching intra-American and transatlantic trade routes. Marc Eagle and David Wheat's chapter, "The Early Iberian Slave Trade to the Spanish Caribbean, 1500–1580," dialogues nicely with Stone's and Jennings's books discussed above by emphasizing the centrality of the slave trade in the Caribbean to the formation of Spain's empire. Eagle and Wheat ask readers to think about the sixteenth-century slave trade on its own terms, rather than on those of the better-known eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trades. The payoff is a reinterpretation of categories like slave, slave ship, and slaving voyages, which allows readers to understand this early period as "marked by diverse forms of slave trafficking and overlapping, multinational,

⁵ James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

and geographically wide-ranging commercial networks only partially controlled by the Spanish Crown” (49). For some enslaved Africans, the route from Africa to the Caribbean went through the Iberian Peninsula, revealing a process of multiple dislocations. Eagle and Wheat insist that, by the period of the Iberian Union (1580–1640), a “transnational system” was well established, one which would be built on, rather than remade, in subsequent centuries (65).

Two chapters focus on the transatlantic and interregional slave trade in Mexico, the former of which peaked in the early seventeenth century and slowly declined following the dissolution of the Iberian Union in 1640, creating an interregional trade. Pablo Miguel Sierra Silva represents the experiences of enslaved Africans moving from the coastal lowlands to slave markets in the highlands, focusing on the travel conditions along routes linking Nueva Veracruz to urban slave markets. In addition to the ten weeks that African captives spent aboard a slave ship, they spent at least three weeks on rugged overland ascents into highland slave markets. This overland passage stimulated local economies, so that “demands for adequate lodging, food, and medical care also increased along the slave routes and altered the everyday practices of muleteers, innkeepers, and food vendors” (75). Sabrina Smith shifts the focus to interregional and intercolonial trade, which she argues, at least for the case of Antequera (Oaxaca), “supplied more captives to the city than the transatlantic slave trade” (129). Smith shows that after 1640, slavery in Antequera was characterized by the interregional movement of enslaved creoles, and to a lesser extent, enslaved Africans, who were sold in transactions involving smaller independent parties (129, 134). Smith challenges the idea that slave trading in New Spain merely declined in the late seventeenth century, instead showing that trade within the colony represented its own traffic coexistent with an Atlantic one.

The volume also delves into the commercial, cultural, and geopolitical activity of Africans and their descendants. Rachel Sarah O’Toole draws our attention to the participation and activity of free African descendants in seventeenth-century Pacific economies that linked the northern Andes to regional and global markets. In notarial records from the Peruvian northern coast, O’Toole finds free women and men of African descent who, despite exclusion from the most lucrative profits of regional commerce, empowered themselves and constructed their freedom through economic exchange. In doing so, these women and men “accumulated the wealth and the reputational networks to achieve financial security and to articulate their positions as political subjects of the Spanish Crown” (151). O’Toole concludes that in a context deeply shaped by the slave trade, freedom could represent not only a transition in one’s legal or economic status, but also a form of political belonging through subjecthood (166). In a similar fashion to Sabrina Smith, who questions common assumptions about slave trading in late seventeenth-century New Spain, Elena Schneider argues for the importance of the slave trade for eighteenth-century Cuba prior to the liberalization of the trade to the island. Schneider highlights multiple routes that transported enslaved Africans into Cuba, then considers processes of community formation and creolization. Schneider’s chapter makes a strong case for reevaluating the eighteenth century as a key moment in the development of an interconnected and vibrant diasporic community. Schneider demonstrates the formation of a diasporic geopolitics.

The rich essays in *From the Galleons to the Highlands* make several interventions into the history of slavery and the slave trade in Spanish America. First, the authors’ revised estimates for regional and Atlantic trades enable a new appreciation of the demographic presence of Africans and their descendants in Spanish America, a presence, the editors argue, that has been largely obscured by discourses of mestizaje. Second, the essays make a strong case for rethinking periodization. While many studies have emphasized slave trading during the Iberian Union (1580–1640) and after the liberalization of the slave trade in 1789, these essays argue for the centrality of diverse forms of slave trading during periods often assumed to be in decline or of little importance. Third, in rethinking periodization,

contributors also show that some of the most basic categories that inform the history of slavery and slave trading require greater specificity in Spanish America. For instance, how do histories of the early slave trade account for slave trading that took place between the Iberian Peninsula and the Spanish Americas? How do we account for the African-descended men discussed by O’Toole who “pushed aside distinctions between enslaved and free” (157)?

Troubling freedoms

Yesenia Barragan’s *Freedom’s Captives: Slavery and Gradual Emancipation on the Colombian Black Pacific* opens with a piercing epigraph from Saidiya Hartman, who asks: “How are new forms of bonded labor engendered by the vocabulary of freedom?”⁶ Recent scholarship on freedom questions the strict dichotomy between freedom—through manumission or abolition—and slavery. Many scholars now view the transition from slavery to freedom as nonlinear, conditional, and fractional. Seen this way, African-descended peoples’ struggles for freedom, like Rufino’s discussed above, are recast as attempts to *make* freedom in the face of forces that tried to stymie it. The emergence of liberal regimes of freedom within newly independent Latin American nations troubles our understanding of freedom even more when we consider how gradual emancipation engendered new forms of unfree labor. This problem and its legacy for contemporary political struggles and national memory is at the heart of the next three books reviewed here.

Freedom’s Captives examines what Barragan calls the “time of ‘gradual emancipation rule’” along Colombia’s Pacific Coast, from the passage of a gradual emancipation law in 1821 to abolition in 1852 (3). Though gradual emancipation rule appeared on the surface to attack slavery, it merely promoted a *de facto* version of it. The 1821 law granted promissory freedom to all children born to enslaved women thereafter, yet bonded those children to their mother’s owner until they turned eighteen. The law produced a new social and legal subject: the free womb captive. Barragan argues that “the kind of freedom produced through gradual emancipation rule functioned as a rhetorical and legal form of racial governance over enslaved people and their kin during the Colombian republic’s uneasy construction” (280). Freedom became the terrain on which Colombian elites, politicians, and slaveholders governed people of African descent and managed their inclusion into the new republic. Barragan draws on wide-ranging sources, from local notarial records that rendered free womb captives into moveable property to legislative debates over the boundaries of who and what defined free womb captivity. The book’s historical ethnographic approach offers readers a chance to think beyond the limits of slavery’s archive to glimpse the autonomy and masterless sovereignty that Black Pacific lowlanders pursued.

Freedom’s Captives interrogates discourses of liberal freedom and recovers Black vernacular freedoms. The opening chapter of the book, for instance, highlights the remarkable autonomy that Black lowlanders wrested from the state before and during gradual emancipation rule. Barragan characterizes this freedom as “small-scale, ordinary revolutions in the face of Colombian white supremacy” (281), which reminds scholars to cast a wide net on what can be considered resistance to the state. Scrutinizing the language of liberal freedom and the brutalizing calculations of children’s value and salability, Barragan also exposes racial governance and domination through unfreedom at the heart of Colombia’s gradual emancipation.⁷ The free womb law, for instance, enabled the creation of “a marketplace in Free Womb children” and even a trade, exposing the economic

⁶ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 118.

⁷ For a review of scholarship on the intertwined histories of race and nation, see Nancy P. Appelbaum, “Blood, Nation, Science, and Language: Essentializing Race from the Sixteenth Century to the Present,” *Latin American Research Review* 55, no. 2 (2020): 352–359.

motivations of the law's authors. Still, enslaved women like Juana del Concilio, whose daughter, free womb captive María Brigida, had been sold away from her home, used the courts to secure María's return, appealing to her rights as a mother (168–169). Barragan reveals that while at every turn, gradual emancipation rule reaffirmed the logic of colonial slaveholding in a new national context, Afro-Colombians negotiated and indeed asserted their own freedom outside of this logic.

Gradual emancipation unfolded in a starkly similar manner in Argentina. There the passage of an 1813 free womb law initiated what one enslaved woman named Francisca Albarado called “el tiempo de los libertos,” a forgotten era in Argentina's national memory that ushered in new relations of unfreedom behind the guise of slavery's disappearance. In *Una historia de la emancipación negra: Esclavitud e abolición en la Argentina*, Magdalena Candiotti positions her study of slavery and freedom as a counternarrative to the country's national racial narratives, which have largely effaced the presence and history of Africans and their descendants on the basis of false assumptions of their demographic disappearance or of slavery's benign character.

Candiotti focuses on the legal formation of the *liberta/o*. In other parts of the Americas, *liberta/o* has been used to describe manumitted peoples, while in Argentina it came to designate children freed by the state by virtue of their birth after the country's 1813 law, as well as men who gained their freedom through military service (17). Libertas were required to serve their mother's owner until the age of sixteen, while for libertos, until the age of twenty. Informed by a thoughtful historiographical engagement with slavery throughout the Americas, Candiotti argues that in an era of gradual emancipation marked by racial exclusion, people of African descent asserted their freedom, stretching the intended limits of the legal category *liberta/o* to meet their own imperatives beyond survival (233).

Candiotti's methodological approach is largely informed by themes of “intense negotiation and daily struggles,” themes familiar to the scholarship on slavery and freedom for the last several decades (73). Candiotti demonstrates that the nascent nation used the language of freedom to extend “the rights of slave owners and made the status of liberto much closer to slavery than ever before” (74). But the focus remains on people of African descent, especially libertas/os and their families, as social and intellectual agents engaged in a constant struggle happening within “the courts, the home, and in the street” (73). Candiotti's intervention is to examine negotiations for freedom in a context when it would otherwise seem unnecessary because of gradual emancipation. Candiotti, like Barragan, understands free womb birth as a form of freedom that was “uncertain, negotiated and policed” (102), closely approximating slavery (54) and engendering resistance (98). The three paths to legal freedom discussed in the book—by free womb birth, by manumission, and by military service—illuminate processes by which freedom had to be seized, paid, or negotiated and the ways in which this was done through local, familial, and communal solidarities. Candiotti presses readers to think about how the long road to emancipation was made through the everyday actions and relationships of Africans and their descendants.

Beatriz G. Mamigonian's *Africanos livres: A abolição do tráfico de escravos no Brasil* tells the history of Brazil's protracted abolition of its slave trade from the perspective of some eleven thousand Africans emancipated from their illegal enslavement yet subjected to what can be described as temporary re-enslavement. The book focuses on Brazil's anti-slave-trade law of 1831, political and legal debates around its enforcement, and the contested meanings of freedom it spurred in the decades leading up to final abolition in 1888. The law of 1831 banned the African slave trade, penalized slave traders who trafficked slaves into Brazil, and conferred on those illegally enslaved Africans the status of *africano livre* (emancipated African). Following British anti-slave-trade legal frameworks, the law subjected africanos livres to a fourteen-year “apprenticeship” during which they

performed compulsory labor for the state and private owners until they achieved their *plena liberdade* (full freedom). Despite the 1831 ban, between 1830 and 1856, an estimated eight hundred thousand enslaved Africans entered Brazil illegally; only eleven thousand Africans were ever formally emancipated. It was not until the Lei Eusébio de Queirós in 1850 that Brazil fully enforced its ban on the slave trade. Mamigonian shows that even as the Brazilian state legislated against the African slave trade, it was ultimately complicit in slavery's expansion before final abolition. As Mamigonian writes, "the system that was supposed to promote occupational training and future autonomy was reinvented in the Regency to guarantee more control over africanos livres and to facilitate the exploitation of their compulsory labor" (461).

While richly detailing the international history of Brazil's 1831 law, Mamigonian focuses on the experiences of emancipated Africans between the 1820s and 1860s. Even though the 1831 law declared that africanos livres would be exported back to their homelands, officials continued a practice of subjecting them to terms of compulsory labor (95). The cruel tragedy of this "emancipation" was that they became slaves in nearly all aspects but name, vulnerable to exploitation, sale, and auction and to physical abuse from their so-called guardians. Emancipated Africans handed over to private urban residents often worked side-by-side with enslaved Africans and performed the same gendered labor as their enslaved counterparts (135–138). Using petitions and police records, Mamigonian shows that emancipated Africans developed a keen sense of their limited rights and adopted forms of "resistance and negotiation used by slaves" (156), including legal petitioning and even flight. She shows that many africanos livres refused the coercive conditions they found themselves in and asserted their own understandings of freedom against liberal gradual emancipation. She also argues that the same category that emancipated Africans into unfree work regimes—that of *africano livre*—would later be amplified and refashioned among other enslaved Africans to claim their own freedom. Because all Africans who entered Brazil after 1831 were illegally enslaved, some came to assert identities as *livres* whether they were formally emancipated by the state or not (414–418).

Returning to Hartman's inquiry about freedom and bonded labor, Barragan, Candiotti, and Mamigonian respond in ways that bring into stark and troubling relief gradual emancipation's cruel illusion. What is generative in their answers for the study of slavery is that all emphasize the coexistence of multiple forms of unfree labor that marked Latin America's "age of emancipation." We are reminded, as was the case in the preceding centuries, that no one definition of freedom existed, but rather multiple gradated freedoms were negotiated and contested among national elites, slaveholders, and the enslaved. How each group made visible and negotiated their understanding of freedom leads, in many ways, to an even more nuanced understanding of slavery in its multiple forms. Each scholar is careful to recognize how legal categories of gradual emancipation produced unfreedom. They also foreground resilience and creativity. All firmly reject nineteenth-century liberal discourses of freedom in Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil to instead recover rich counternarratives. The stakes are clear as they explain in their respective conclusions: these countries have inherited the paradox and violence of nineteenth-century gradual emancipation rule, rendering African-descended people at the margins, if not invisible, in national memory and historiography.

Beyond slavery?

Writing on seventeenth-century Mexico, Herman Bennett asks why "Afro-Mexican history appears as either the story of slavery or the story of the upward social mobility of free blacks."⁸ Bennett calls on scholars of the African diaspora to write histories of Africans and their descendants that look through but ultimately beyond slavery as the defining

⁸ Herman Bennett, *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 6–7.

feature of their lives. The next two books ask what other identities and experiences surface when slave and slavery do not structure the study of the African diaspora. At stake is not new answers to old questions—such as those about slave culture—but rather a fundamental epistemic shift in how we conceive of subjectivity and experience.

As we saw above, Argentinian national memory has largely effaced the presence and contributions of Africans and their descendants to the country's formation, insisting that they died in military service or simply disappeared. In *Hiding in Plain Sight: Black Women, the Law, and the Making of a White Argentine Republic*, Erika Denise Edwards explores the issue of Black invisibility as a distinct politics of resistance, which yields a set of conclusions about Afro-Argentines that is different though complementary to Candiotti's. Edwards opens by describing doing research "as a young black woman in a very white country" while consistently being told that, in Argentina, "there are no blacks. They disappeared" (1). Rather than accept this narrative, Edwards brilliantly turns the issue on its head: What if rather than "disappearing," African descendants in Argentina made their Blackness invisible? Focusing specifically on Black women in Cordoba's late colonial and early national period, Edwards argues that Black invisibility was a deliberate strategy among women to create better lives for themselves and their children, thereby shedding the stain of their Blackness and former enslavement while pursuing the privileges of white (and sometimes Indian) womanhood. At the heart of this strategy was the articulation of identities—as mothers, wives, daughters, lovers, and honorable women—that asserted distance from slavery and proximity to whiteness.

Black women's lives are viewed through, but ultimately beyond their relationship to slavery in ways that attend to how they saw themselves. The book's first two chapters examine Spanish social and legal privilege as well as shifting conceptions of freedom. African and Indian defiance of racial hierarchies prompted colonial and national authorities to govern freedom against the threat of moral ignorance and miscegenation. In this context, Black women such as Bernabela, who pursued an illicit relationship with a Cordoban vicar, "actively sought the privilege and status reserved for elite Spanish women by forging sexual relationships with elite Spanish men" (49). Through performance, dress, and intimacy, Edwards argues that Bernabela socially transformed herself from enslaved to *señora*—importantly, not just enslaved to free—disrupting social norms and conventions. In contrast to Bernabela's extralegal strategies, other women pursued the legal avenues of intermarriage and manumission to achieve the privileges of whiteness. By the time of independence, institutionalized whitening through education provided yet another opportunity for women of African descent and their children to not only ascend to whiteness, but to do so as virtuous citizens capable of birthing a white nation.

Edwards foregrounds other themes beside bondage—honor, pleasure, intimacy, privilege, motherhood—that frame Black women as three-dimensional historical subjects whose aspirations may surprise us. Edwards centers the intellectual worlds of Black women whose lives were not overdetermined by their enslavement. Within these worlds, Black women recognized and understood the porous nature of social boundaries and hierarchies that permitted movement between and within different societal groups. They negotiated but also created their own inclusion in the new national landscape. Freedom was not only a legal or labor status but rather a set of values and lived experiences contested among Black women and the colonial and later national state. In this way, women became active participants, rather than victims, in their own invisibility. These provocative arguments are possible because Edwards reads Cordoba's archives not just for a history of slavery but for Black women's subjectivity.

Religious practices have long concerned scholars of slavery and the African diaspora, generating often-polemical debates about creolization, retention, and syncretism. Such debates often juxtapose European Catholicism against Africans' non-Catholic religions, rather than considering how aspects of Catholicism might be African in their own regard.

Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas: Performance, Representation, and the Making of Black Atlantic Tradition, edited by Cécile Fromont, explores how the Central African Catholicism forged in the early modern Kingdom of Kongo became an engine for the formation of a Black Atlantic tradition expressed throughout the Americas in festive performances and rituals. The Kingdom of Kongo converted to Christianity in the sixteenth century, giving rise to a Kongo Catholicism that migrated across the Atlantic with millions of Africans trafficked from Central Africa. The contributors to this interdisciplinary volume make Central African Christianity a focus because it “stood as an experiential common ground that brought cohesion and empowerment to forced migrants from the region and their descendants across the Americas and throughout the centuries” (11).

Part 1 explores performances of two ritual battles, the Kongolese *sangamento* and the Iberian *Moors and Christians*, arguing for the creativity of Central Africans in forging diasporic festive traditions. For instance, Kevin Dawson argues that by performing the *Moors and Christians* ritual battle off the coast of the Island of Itamaracá, Central Africans infused the Iberian ritual with Kongolese maritime meanings, thus honoring their aquatic traditions and the water spirits who crossed the ocean with them. Similarly, Miguel Valerio examines African festive expressions during a two-day festival in Tenochtitlan in 1539, noting that the performances bear a striking similarity to a Kongolese *sangamento*. By tracing the movement of *ladinos* (acculturated Africans) from Kongo to the Iberian Peninsula and to New Spain, Valerio emphasizes cultural continuities, creativity, and the expression of distinct identities in early Afro-Catholic festivals. In part 2, Lisa Voigt and Junia Ferreira Furtado each explores archival representations of African royalty, diplomacy, and culture. While Voigt focuses on African interventions in their own archival and narrative representations, Furtado considers the cultural filters that kept African backgrounds illegible to Luso-Brazilian culture despite the large presence of Africans in Brazil. Together, their essays raise crucial questions about how and when we read agency and power in narratives describing African diasporic performance.

These methodological questions carry into part 3, “Reconsidering Primary Sources,” in which Cécile Fromont and Dianne Stewart think beyond frameworks of acculturation and syncretism. Fromont closely examines a nineteenth-century lithograph by Johann Moritz Rugendas that depicts a black *congado*, a festival that celebrated the coronation of Black kings and queens. By giving the image a critical framing, Fromont arrives at a new appreciation of the image that is at once cognizant of its limits and yet adamant about its importance for studying Kongo festive expression. Focusing on the Orisa religion in Trinidad, Stewart reflects on a complex dialogue between Yorubans and Afro-Christians, arguing against viewing Orisa as a syncretic religion and instead emphasizing “instances of religiocultural collaboration and cooperation that prevailed among diverse African descended populations” (153). Together, Fromont’s and Stewart’s chapters trouble rigid characterizations of Christianity as European and African religions as non-European, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of understanding African religious identities in the diaspora as either acculturation or syncretism, a viewpoint shared by ethnomusicologist Michael Iyanaga, who asserts in the book’s conclusion that Catholicism is in its own way a Central African religion.

The innovative and bold essays in *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas* challenge “the a priori position that nothing Catholic can also be African or Afro-American” (Iyanaga, 167). By focusing on festive expressions, contributors highlight Kongo Catholics’ creativity in making, expressing, and reinventing their Catholicism and in dialogue with other religious forms. In their focus on Central African Christianity and the festive performances it engendered, the contributors bring into stark relief assertions of sovereignty and autonomy that forged a Black Atlantic tradition outside the economic logics of slavery.

Pleasure, privilege, festivity, and performance—these emerge as critical themes for narrating histories of Black women in Argentina and Kongo Catholics throughout the

Americas, even as enslavement shaped their worlds. That neither Edwards nor Fromont places “slavery” in their books’ respective titles only underscores their approaches to understanding African descendants as people who were more than slaves and often insisted as much, privately and publicly. Importantly, neither book rests on archives entirely unfamiliar to scholars of slavery, teaching us that the archives of slavery are never *only* that. Each book shows that revisiting archives common to the study of slavery can illuminate subjectivities shaped, but not overdetermined, by enslavement.

Conclusion

If, as mentioned above, no singular definition or experience of freedom existed across centuries in Latin America, we should ask how the same was true for slavery. The books reviewed here add nuance to our understanding of slavery in its multiple forms and invite new, arguably broader conceptualizations attuned to time, place, and experience. Such nuance generates innovative interventions and questions, such as those posed by contributors to *From the Galleons to the Highlands* about definitional categories like slave and slave ship in the early modern Spanish Caribbean, or those raised in *The Story of Rufino* about the alufá’s relative autonomy in both slavery and freedom. Moreover, works like Stone’s and Jennings’s on Indian slavery and state slavery, respectively, challenge our assumptions about who is included (and why) when we invoke something called the “history of slavery.” To many, these might be “other faces” of slavery, but both Stone and Jennings show Indian and state slavery to be foundational in their own ways for experiences more commonly implied when one invokes *the* history of slavery, that of African plantation slavery. Broader conceptualizations of slavery also draw our attention to what Barragan calls gradual emancipation rule, a period we are inclined to think of as a transition to freedom, but which produced new forms of unfreedom.

These authors show that agency is not a conclusion but rather a starting point, opening the field to more complex investigations into empire, diaspora, the slave trade, freedom, and even the meanings and definitions of enslavement itself. The result is that Africans and their descendants come into focus as more than “slaves”; they do so as intellectuals, healers, geopolitical actors, Kongo Christians, kin groups, and mothers. These identities and others could not be constrained by slavery and were sources of strength from which African descendants confronted the violence of slavery. But these identities also generated rich histories beyond slavery—of festivity, sovereignty, desire, healing—that remain to be written.

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