

Introduction

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As If She Were Free is about the emancipatory acts of African and African-descended women in the Americas from the sixteenth through the early twentieth century. The stories of some two dozen individuals discussed in these chapters constitute a collective biography that narrates the history of emancipation as experienced by women in the western hemisphere. This history began upon the arrival of enslaved people from Africa in the Americas in the early sixteenth century and continued into the twentieth century as their descendants pursued an ongoing quest for liberty. *As If She Were Free* narrates this individual and collective struggle – in which African-descended women spoke and acted in ways that declared that they had a right to determine the course of their lives. This book, a collective biography of women who renounced their commodification and exploitation, articulates a new feminist history of freedom.

As If She Were Free offers a new timeline for considering women's claims to emancipation. To be sure, change over time and particularity in historical context and place were always critical factors in shaping access to freedom. Yet, aspects of women's experience remained remarkably constant across the Americas in the early modern and modern periods and have remained stubbornly persistent into the present. Over centuries, polities have excluded African-descended women and denied them control over their bodies. The legacy of this reality is manifest in contemporary struggles over sexism, racism, and reproductive rights. The stories in this book show that in the context of slavery, racial discrimination, and sexual objectification, the personal has always been political. *As If She*

Were Free pays tribute to women's ongoing quest to live freely and control their own bodies, a pursuit that continues to the present day.

"As If She Were Free" – the phrase in the book's title – references the individual and collective experience of African-descended women in the Americas.¹ The "if" points to the conditional state of being free. Women always had to overcome legal and economic constraints to be able to emancipate themselves. And, however defined, freedom was never a certainty: it remained contingent on historical context and personal circumstances. The pronoun "she" underlines the idea that this collective biography narrates one story; that is, the history of women as tenacious and persistent agents of emancipation. The noun "free" raises the question of what that word meant to women. The individual stories narrated in the following pages show that women conceived of the state of freedom in a host of ways, but gender (social and cultural constructs) and sex (biology) often made their life experiences similar to one another and distinct from men.

Words matter in the retelling of history. Slavery, emancipation, freedom: all three words have a historical association with men – a gendered valence – that obscures women's experiences. For instance, the verb forms of these critical words – to enslave, to emancipate, to free – are based on Roman laws that buttressed patriarchal relationships. To emancipate or manumit was the act of freeing a child from her or his father's power (*patria potestas*) or the act of releasing someone from slavery (from the state of being chattel property under the law). To emancipate was to set someone free. These definitions insist that freedom was a status that was bestowed; that it was given. As such, to emancipate or manumit originally referred to an act that independent men with power and authority did to dependent others, and it continues to have that meaning.²

¹ The women in this collective biography were the foremothers of Saidiya Hartman's early twentieth-century wayward girls, black women who refused the constraints circumscribing their lives. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019). The idea of a collective biography of women has a history rooted in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British and American publishing. See Alison Booth, "Reconstructing a Genre of Publication," *Collective Biographies of Women*, Scholars Lab, University of Virginia <accessed 13 October 2019>, <https://womensbios.lib.virginia.edu/about.html>.

² In practice, women owned enslaved people and manumitted them, as several chapters in this book attest. When it came to the ownership of human property and, hence, the ability to free enslaved people, slave-owning women sought equal power to their male counterparts and found support for their claims in juridical and economic institutions. Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the*

Introduction

3

As If She Were Free recasts the word freedom to insist that women were agents of emancipation. Emancipation was deliverance from slavery; it was liberation from civil or other restraints; and it included efforts to gain economic, personal, political, and social rights.³ On all of these fronts, women emancipated themselves. When women ran away, they delivered themselves into a state of being free from the control of those who had previously claimed ownership over their bodies. When women filed freedom suits, challenged owners' abusive behavior, left philandering husbands, practiced healing, experienced spiritual rituals of possession, formed illicit trade networks, or participated in revolutionary movements, they gave themselves freedom. But what was freedom?

The words freedom and liberty, nouns that are often conjoined, have problematic meanings because the usual definitions relate to liberation from legal bondage or dependency; both refer to a state of not being

American South (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Yesenia Barragan, "Gendering Mastery: Female Slaveholders in the Colombian Pacific Lowlands," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2017); Christine Walker, "Pursuing Her Profits: Women in Jamaica, Atlantic Slavery and a Globalising Market, 1700–60," *Gender & History* 26, no. 3 (2014); Frank T. Proctor, III, "Gender and the Manumission of Slaves in New Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 86, no. 2 (2006).

³ Some works on the history of African-descended women in the Americas include: Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018); Aurora Vergara Figueroa and Carmen L. Cosme Puntiel, eds., *Demando mi libertad. Mujeres negras y sus estrategias de Resistencia en la Nueva Granada, Venezuela y Cuba 1700–1800* (Cali: Universidad ICESI, 2018); Camillia Cowling, Maria Helena P. T. Machado, Diana Paton, and Emily West, "Mothering Slaves: Comparative Perspectives on Motherhood, Childlessness, and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies," *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 2 (2017); Michelle A. McKinley, *Fractional Freedoms: Slavery, Intimacy, and Legal Mobilization in Colonial Lima, 1600–1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Giovana Xavier, Juliana Barreto Farias, and Flávio dos Santos Gomes, *Mulheres negras no Brasil escravista e do pós-emancipação* (São Paulo: Selo Negro Edições, 2012); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Calder Miller, *Women and Slavery: The Modern Atlantic*, 2 vols. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano en la capital novohispana, siglos XVII y XVIII* (México: INAH, 2006); Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, eds., *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); David B. Gaspar and Darlene C. Hine, eds., *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, revised ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); David B. Gaspar and Darlene C. Hine, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

4 Erica L. Ball, Tatiana Seijas, and Terri L. Snyder

chattel property. Based on this understanding, to be free or to be in a state of liberty has also been historically gendered male. Freedom has been generally equated with men having power and legal control over themselves and their family members in the tradition of the *paterfamilias*. Liberty, in this sense, is demonstrated in the ability to exercise political capacity, that is, in the modern sense of being accorded the full privileges and obligations of citizenship.

The stories that follow, by contrast, offer a new history of freedom. They show that African-descended women often sought to experience freedom in alternative ways. Some showed that aspects of the power and authority generally associated with freedom could be experienced – however briefly – while living in a state of legal bondage or under the constraints of racism. The laws of men excluded women from male freedom, so women articulated and embodied freedoms beyond conventional legal and political constraints that empowered them in alternative ways. To run away was a similar self-emancipatory act, as was to file a successful freedom suit, to campaign for the abolition of slavery, or to assert oneself as an intellectual and write black people into history.⁴

In contrast to emancipation and freedom, slavery has a singular definition. The race-based, hereditary chattel slavery that developed and thrived in the Americas cannot be conflated with other forms of exploitation or confused with other forms of bondage or servitude. This slavery, often called New World Slavery, was inextricably bound up with European processes of colonization and imperialism in the Americas, as well as the rise of capitalism. This slavery was constructed out of the flesh of over twelve million Africans who were forcibly relocated via the Atlantic slave trade to the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century.⁵ It was sustained

⁴ We are inspired by recent work that expands the parameters of what constituted black women's activism and considers black women's activism across national boundaries. See Keisha N. Blain, Tiffany M. Gill, and Michael O. West, eds., *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

⁵ This forced migration constitutes the fourth major movement in the long history of the African diaspora. Colin A. Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 1–2 (2000). The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database documents the ongoing quantitative recovery of this history; the estimates data

through legal and political systems that commodified their descendants over centuries. And it birthed new forms of racism and exploitation that matured after its official eradication.⁶

Racialized slavery shaped women's bodily relationship to freedom. Slavery in the Americas was initially confined to Native Americans and forcibly-imported Africans and Asians.⁷ However, beginning in the late seventeenth century, slavery in European-dominated regions shifted into a legal status almost exclusively accorded to Africans and their descendants.⁸ Just as blackness became linked to slavery, freedom conversely became a privilege of whiteness under the law and by social association. The following stories bring to life how women claimed freedom in those areas of the Americas first colonized by Europeans invested in the Atlantic slave trade.

Of course, to be a free African-descended woman in a slave society was a very different experience than being black in a post-abolition society. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, most of the former European colonies in the Americas began to emerge as independent nation-states with republican governance or constitutional monarchies. Except for Haiti, the transition in government did not necessarily bring about the abolition of slavery, as can be seen in Brazil and the United States. The parallel emergence of formal anti-slavery organization and activism in some nations held up the institution as incompatible with constitutional ideals – a tension that followed after the abolition of slavery. Those

set (www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates) suggests that 12,521,337 people arrived in the Americas from 1501–1866 (search October 4, 2019).

⁶ We might here note that, while the specific practice of racism varies according to context and culture, the violence of antiblackness has remarkable range. In this way, as Christina Sharpe argues, we continue to live “in the wake” of slavery. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁷ On Asian slaves and racialization in Mexico, see Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁸ The justifications for enslaving individual members of these groups – other than that their mothers were enslaved – were that they were pagan, captive enemies taken in a “just war,” or had already been sold as slaves. In theory, laws proscribed the enslavement of Indigenous people in Spanish America after the mid-sixteenth century, but this prohibition was easily dodged and openly ignored. Similarly, in British America, Indians were regularly enslaved, even in jurisdictions that banned the practice. Sue T. Peabody, “Slavery, Freedom and the Law in the Atlantic World, 1420–1807,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, edited by David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

nation-states that did abolish slavery tended to do so in stages, through gradual emancipation or “free womb” laws.⁹

Moreover, after abolition, new political, economic, and cultural forces emerged to shore up racism across the Americas. Poverty and containment, state-sponsored violence, and new carceral technologies ensured that people of African descent remained, at best, second-class citizens.¹⁰ In the midst of these campaigns, nations created myths about the history of slavery and crafted new narratives about the place of people of African descent. Some countries sponsored official “whitening” programs designed to “blend” the African-descended into other populations. Others characterized themselves as “racial democracies.” Others embraced a proslavery version of history that insisted that slavery had always been a benign and benevolent civilizing enterprise for people of African descent who, ultimately, were better off in slavery than they were in freedom. Despite their distinctive regional and national variations, these mythologies served to support political agendas that oppressed people of African descent throughout the Americas.¹¹

While the timeline of abolition is useful, it does not capture the history of women as agents of emancipation in the Americas. The timeline is anchored to traditional ideas of citizenship – citizenship equals freedom – that are associated with patriarchal privilege and the experiences of men. *As If She Were Free* proposes a different timeline based on women’s experiences and definitions of emancipation and freedom. For the women in this collective biography, the typical ruptures on the timeline of slavery in the Americas – colonization and imperialism, the rise of capitalism, the era of republican revolutions, second slavery, and state-sanctioned abolition and emancipation – do not fully capture their understandings of freedom or their history

⁹ For this history, see Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777–1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Hebe Clementi, *La abolición de la esclavitud en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Pléyade, 1974).

¹⁰ Hartman refers to these realities as “the afterlife of slavery.” Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). See also Magdalena Candiotti, “Abolición gradual y libertades vigiladas en el Río de la Plata. La política de control de libertos de 1813,” *Corpus* 6 (2016), <http://journals.openedition.org/corpusarchivos/1567>; Sharpe, 2016.

¹¹ For the politics of racial mythology and the memory of slavery in the US, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). For a comparative study of the politics of the memorialization of the Atlantic slave trade, see Ana Lucia Araujo, *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

PERIODS BETWEEN
THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY
AND WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE

In many of these countries, African
descended women were prevented,
by law or practice, from voting for
decades after women’s suffrage.

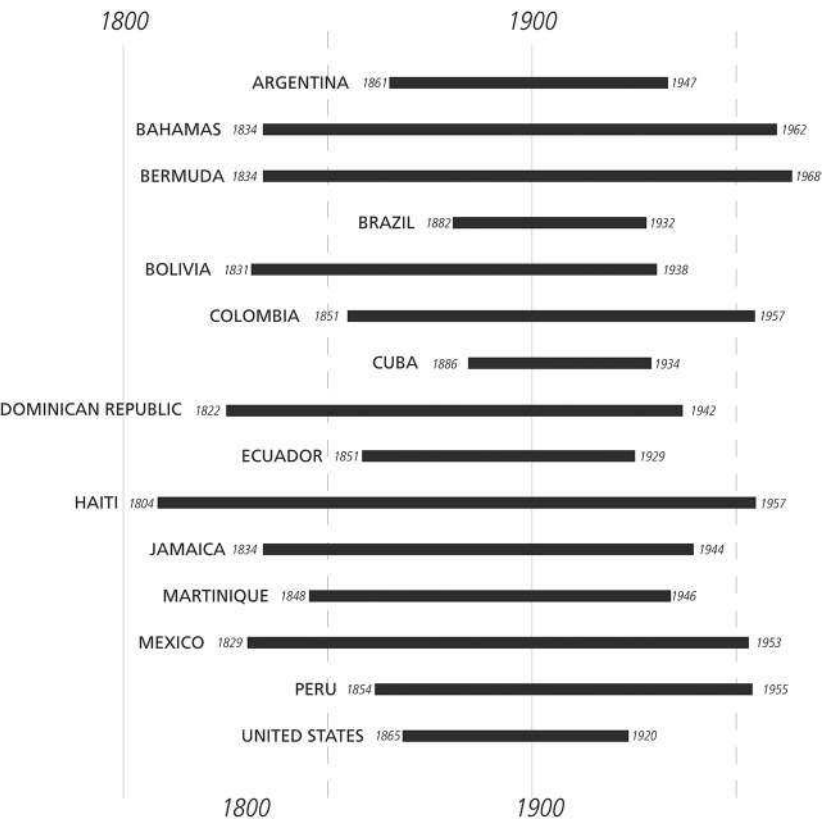


FIGURE I.1 Legal freedom versus citizenship
This timeline illustrates why African-descended women had to protect and speak up for their communities in a range of ways. For women, citizenship remained constrained by patriarchal definitions of political capacity well into the twentieth century. Across the hemisphere, women’s quest for freedom necessitated an ongoing and multifaceted campaign, even after the abolition of slavery.
Source: Timeline made by Alex Killough.

as agents of emancipation. From European contact to post-abolition, African-descended women in the Americas found avenues to freedom in colonial and then national/imperial contexts. But the full privileges of citizenship remained elusive for African-descended women into the twentieth century, as Figure I.1 strikingly demonstrates.

The following stories offer meditations on a women's history of emancipation and freedom. Women measured freedom in degrees, claimed it in stages, and experienced it multidimensional ways. For some women, freedom meant legal protection from slavery, while, for others, something akin to freedom was experienced in the context of a family, a community, or a political association. Freedom could be understood to mean rights to personal autonomy in one context, or equality in another. *As If She Were Free* addresses these more granular meanings of freedom to elucidate ideas of freedom and women's relationship to freedom in the Americas.

Finally, *As If She Were Free* tells one story: it is about women as freedom seekers. The chapters offer a collective portrait. These women took different routes toward emancipation and freedom, but they all did so in hierarchical, highly racialized societies where the very engine for the perpetuity of slavery as an institution rested in the wombs of women. Their lives, rooted in a collective experience, form part of the gendered history of slavery and emancipation in the Americas. The lens of life history allows for a comparative examination of the many ways that women conceptualized freedom and their various strategies for emancipation.¹² Each chapter features the life history of an individual woman from across the African diaspora in the Americas who was born during slavery or immediately after the abolition of slavery.¹³ Regardless of time,

¹² Scholars have made great strides in piecing together the biographies of women who managed to claim and maintain their freedom, with its multivalent, ambiguous, and changing meanings, in the shadow of slavery. Some examples include: W. Caleb McDaniel, *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: 37 Ink/Atria, 2017); Lisa A. Lindsay and John W. Sweet, eds., *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Sandra Lauderdale Graham, *Caetana Says No: Women's Stories from a Brazilian Slave Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2004); Jean F. Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004); Júnia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva e o contratador dos diamantes: o outro lado do mito* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003); María Eugenia Chaves, *María Chiquinquirá Díaz: una esclava del siglo XVIII. Acerca de las identidades de amo y esclavo en el puerto colonial de Guayaquil* (Guayaquil: Archivo Histórico del Guayas, 1998); Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

¹³ Reconstructing the lives and worldviews of enslaved and freed women is challenging and it requires a willingness to interrogate the content and organization of historical archives, which are often shaped by the point of view of slave owners, traders, and abolitionists.

they shared a history of emancipation. Their story is a *longue durée* history of female activism.

FREEDOM IN BODY, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

The book's organization reflects that African-descended women sought out liberty and experienced freedom from the moment they arrived on the shores of the Americas until well after state-sanctioned abolition. The four parts of the book reflect both the continuity of claiming freedom across centuries, as well as the ways in which doing so varied over time and place. The chapters in Part I examine how women claimed freedom during the rise of New World Slavery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁴ Part II focuses on women's routes to emancipation as slavery expanded and became entrenched across the eighteenth-century Americas. Part III examines how women envisioned emancipation in the context of Second Slavery and against the backdrop of organized abolition movements in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁵ Part IV considers how, after slavery's end, women continued to enact emancipation through their political, intellectual, and community work. This final part also considers the modern memory of women as agents of emancipation.

Chronology, however, tells only part of the story of women claiming freedom. The chapters in *As If She Were Free* are interconnected by their focus on the gendered nature of freedom. Ideal gender roles, as articulated by religious and political authorities, circumscribed women's freedom by insisting on women's subservience to and dependence on men – their fathers, husbands, and owners in the case of enslaved women. Freedom for male property owners included the right to control women's bodies

Piecing together the experiences of African-descended women with archival fragments requires care, alternative methodologies – including black feminist epistemologies – and a readiness to read sources in ways that foreground and consider their individual perspectives. Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008); Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002).

¹⁴ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (London: Verso, 2010).

¹⁵ Dale Tomich, "The 'Second Slavery': Bonded Labor and the Transformation of the Nineteenth-Century World Economy," in *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

and that of their children, and it also meant excluding women from the full privileges of citizenship as democratic republics emerged in the eighteenth century. The metaphor that justified male power was that men protected women; the assumption undergirding this metaphor was that women were incapable of protecting themselves. The stories in *As If She Were Free* demonstrate that African-descended women expanded and complicated this male definition of freedom by protecting themselves, their children and families, and their communities. In doing so, women reconfigured what it meant to abide by a social contract (to be a subject or a citizen) and drew strength from an ever-widening conception of community.

While the chapters of *As If She Were Free* are arranged chronologically, they share thematic links. Three of the most prominent of these are based on key aspects of women's expressions of freedom – care for and defense of self, family, and community. This framework highlights individual women's experiences in order to expand traditional conceptions of freedom beyond labor, property, and the privileges and obligations of male subjects and citizens, terms that have, until only recently, dominated scholarly discussions about the history of emancipation.¹⁶ These stories show that, in addition to seeking aspects of freedom associated with subjecthood and citizenship – which they did – women continually endeavored to gain and maintain bodily autonomy, they attempted to protect their families, and they pushed back against the coercion and containment of their communities.

Women's quest for bodily autonomy, personal safety, and some measure of independence in the context of racialized slavery and antiblackness

¹⁶ Scholarship on the abolition and aftermath of slavery in the United States has begun to explore the new forms of coercion that arose in slavery's wake – phenomena that were all experienced in gendered ways. See Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Talitha L. LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). For Argentina, see Florencia Guzmán, "¡Madres negras tenían que ser! Maternidad, emancipación y trabajo en tiempos de cambios y transformaciones (Buenos Aires, 1800–1830)," *Tempo* 24, no. 3 (2018).