

Freedom's Captives

Freedom's Captives is a compelling exploration of the gradual abolition of slavery in the majority-black Pacific coast of Colombia, the largest area in the Americas inhabited primarily by people of African descent. From the autonomous rainforests and gold mines of the Colombian Black Pacific, Yesenia Barragan rethinks the nineteenth-century project of emancipation by arguing that the liberal freedom generated through gradual emancipation constituted a modern mode of racial governance that birthed new forms of social domination, while temporarily instituting de facto slavery. Although gradual emancipation was ostensibly designed to destroy slavery, she argues that slaveholders in Colombia came to have an even greater stake in it. Using narrative and storytelling to map the worlds of Free Womb children, enslaved women miners, free black boatmen, and white abolitionists in the Andean highlands, *Freedom's Captives* insightfully reveals how the Atlantic World processes of gradual emancipation and post-slavery rule unfolded in Colombia.

Yesenia Barragan is Assistant Professor of Latin American History at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. She is the author of *Selling Our Death Masks: Cash-for-Gold in the Age of Austerity* (2014) and principal investigator of the bilingual digital database “The Free Womb Project.”

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Freedom's Captives

*Slavery and Gradual Emancipation on the
Colombian Black Pacific*

YESENIA BARRAGAN

Rutgers University



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For Xavi and Mark
For the sunflowers

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How are new forms of bonded labor engendered by
the vocabulary of freedom?

Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror,
Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*

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“At any given time,” Walter Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*, “the living seem themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table.” The dead – and almost dead – seated at the table of this book have always guided this project. Its roots span back more than a decade to when I organized a solidarity event for an Afro-indigenous Colombian activist named Eustaquio Poló Rivera, formerly vice president of the Major Leadership Council of the Curvaradó River Basin in Chocó, Colombia. In 1997, paramilitaries arrived in his community, threatened and murdered his family members and friends, and violently displaced them from the Curvaradó River Basin as part of a horrifying paramilitary action that would become known as Operation Genesis. Palm oil plantations were erected on their collectively titled lands, which, I was informed, came into being during the abolition of slavery. I wanted to follow that elusive thread of time, hoping it might offer some answers. In the end, other questions emerged. As the herald of this table, I must first acknowledge Eustaquio, his ancestors, and my own enslaved *antepasados* for their courage and spirit in the continuing face of terror.

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