

Introduction

“*Reborn for Freedom*”

Her name was Magdalena.

We don't know how old she was when it happened.

But we know that she was young — “una joven” — and that her master deemed it a “moderate punishment,” a corrective measure for an alleged infraction. And so her master dragged her to the patio, tied up “her feet and hands,” and placed “an iron bar between her thighs,” a torture technique universally employed and perfected by the horrifying perpetrators of Atlantic slavery.¹ After repeated floggings, Magdalena was left alone overnight in the mildewed stocks, accompanied only by the steady rain, constellations of stars, and animals that roamed the village of Noanamá, a remote indigenous settlement tucked away in the secluded rainforest of Colombia's tropical Pacific lowlands in the late 1840s. Perhaps one or more of the five witnesses who later testified to Magdalena's torture that evening tried to comfort her. Perhaps she was tended to by the indigenous woman whom the judge eventually dismissed because she did not know her own age.² It is this endless “perhaps” and “perhaps” and “perhaps” that collapse into my failure to tell what Saidiya Hartman calls “an impossible story,” “to jeopardize the status

¹ Dating from Atlantic slavery, this torture technique is known by various names, including “bucking” in English, *passer à la broche* (hanging from the spit) in French, and *pau de arara* (the parrot's perch) in Portuguese. See Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 184, 306–307.

² Archivo General de la Nación (hereinafter AGN), 1853, Sección República (SR), Fondo Gobernaciones Varias (FGV), l. 185, fols. 560r–563r.

of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.”³

By the morning, the damage was plainly visible. The young girl emerged from the stocks “with her left hand permanently disabled . . . dislocated and atrophied,” bearing “large scars.”⁴ For many historians, Magdalena’s story is a profoundly familiar one of brutal unfreedom, replete with musty stocks, iron bars, broken bones, and other unspoken punishments that elude the archival hold. Such scenes of torturous subjection form the bedrock of the archives of Atlantic world slavery. Yet, perhaps surprisingly for some readers, Magdalena’s story is also one of violent freedom. Strictly speaking, Magdalena was not a slave. She was a child of the Free Womb, a new social subject established with the gradual emancipation law adopted in 1821 by slaveholding officials in the newly founded republic of Gran Colombia (present-day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama).⁵ This law, inspired by earlier gradual abolition laws in the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century Atlantic world, stipulated that all children born from enslaved women after the law’s promulgation in 1821 were legally free but bonded to their mother’s masters until the age of eighteen. The statesmen who crafted this policy thought themselves at the forefront of a revolutionary era in human history: “Neither Rome, nor Sparta, nor Athens, nor any of the recent republics could be prouder than Colombia,” declared one official, for this country’s “representatives were not satisfied with only loving justice theoretically . . . but had the pleasure of fulfilling its good orders.” With the law’s enactment, the official imagined that “a thousand unfortunate beings would suddenly be reborn for freedom and society.”⁶ But Magdalena’s torture tells a different story, one that somberly departs from the official redemptive narrative of freedom. Although Magdalena was ostensibly free, her peculiar condition as a captive within an evolving

³ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11.

⁴ AGN, 1853, SR, FGV, l. 185, fol. 562v.

⁵ During the colonial period, the territory encompassing present-day Colombia was part of the Viceroyalty of New Granada. From 1819 to 1821, the republic of Gran Colombia was declared. In 1830 and 1831, respectively, Venezuela and Ecuador split from Gran Colombia. From 1831 to 1858, the territory encompassing Colombia and Panama formed the Republic of New Granada. In this book, however, I will refer to both Gran Colombia (when discussing the period of the 1820s) and the modern-day name Colombia instead of New Granada for simplicity.

⁶ Congreso de Cúcuta, *Libro de Actas* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1923), Act 103, Session of June 28.

debt-bondage economy in nineteenth-century Colombia allowed her tormentor to believe that he could tear her apart without consequence.

For thousands of young individuals like Magdalena, freedom under gradual emancipation produced disastrous consequences. Magdalena's life-negating experience captures the paradox that has defined the making of the modern world in the greater Americas: how the rhetoric and politics of liberal freedom have supported and extended policies of unfreedom. Though theoretically undergirded by values of autonomy, citizenship, and liberty, in practice this politics produced a regime of unfreedom characterized by subjection, captivity, and individual and collective tyranny for many. At times these liberal politics could afford opportunities for meaningful participation and claims-making in the body politic for some; nevertheless, it is undeniable that they also promoted regimes of forced labor and deepened inequality.⁷ *Freedom's Captives* explores competing struggles over disparate modes of freedom, unfreedom, and bondage in Colombia – the country with the largest population of Spanish-speaking people of African descent in the Americas – and the Colombian Pacific during the age of gradual emancipation. I call the thirty-one years from the law's enactment in 1821 to the final abolition of slavery in 1852 the time of “gradual emancipation rule” in the northern Andes in order to see this period as a distinct moment in the history of liberal racial governance rather than an inconsequential and benign prelude to the final abolition of slavery.

⁷ On liberalism's paradoxical histories in early national Latin America, see Elizabeth Dore, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Gender and the State in the Long Nineteenth Century,” in *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America*, Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 3–32; Nara Milanich, *Children of Fate: Childhood, Class, and the State in Chile, 1850–1930* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Christine Hünefeldt, *Liberalism in the Bedroom: Quarreling Spouses in Nineteenth-Century Lima* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Sarah Chambers, *From Subjects to Citizens: Honor, Gender, and Politics in Arequipa, Peru, 1780–1854* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Brooke Larson, *Trials of Nation-Making: Liberalism, Race, and Ethnicity in the Andes, 1810–1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For more on slavery and gradations of unfreedom, see Jared Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Hendrik Hartog, *The Trouble with Minna: A Case of Slavery and Emancipation in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Kristin O'Brasill-Kulfan, *Vagrants and Vagabonds: Poverty and Mobility in the Early American Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

Across Spanish America, the Wars of Independence against Spain in the early nineteenth century opened an explosive debate over the many meanings of liberty and freedom fiercely contested by indigenous, enslaved, free black, and other historically marginal peoples.⁸ As the dust of war settled and independence from Spain emerged, creole (American-born Spaniard) rulers in Gran Colombia scrambled to define the newly acquired “liberties” in the young republic’s economic, social, and political life – from the abolition of certain economic monopolies to the adoption of a limited free press. In other words, early republican officials in Colombia sought to *govern through the language and politics of freedom*.⁹ This was true elsewhere in the revolutionary Atlantic world, as Lisa Lowe notes in relation to the rise of indentured labor in the British

⁸ The literature on the racial and social struggles over liberty and freedom in Spanish America during the Wars of Independence is vast. See Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and Struggle for Independence* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Peter F. Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico's National State: Guerrero, 1800–1857* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Peter F. Guardino, *The Time of Liberty: Popular Political Culture in Oaxaca, 1750–1850* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Marixa Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia, 1795–1831* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007); Marcela Echeverri, *Indian and Slave Royalists in the Age of Revolution: Reform, Revolution, and Royalism in the Northern Andes, 1780–1825* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom: Slave Soldiers and the Wars of Independence in Spanish South America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008); María Eugenia Chaves, “Nos, los esclavos de Medellín: la polisemia de la libertad y las voces subalternas en la primera república antioqueña,” *Nómadas* 33 (octubre de 2010): 43–56; María Eugenia Chaves, “Esclavos, libertades y república. Tesis sobre la polisemia de la libertad en la primera república antioqueña,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 22, no. 1 (2011): 81–104; Gabriel di Meglio, *¡Viva el bajo pueblo!: La plebe urbana de Buenos Aires y la política entre la Revolución de Mayo y el Rosismo* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2007); Alfonso Múnera, *El fracaso de la nación: Región, clase y raza en el Caribe colombiano (1717–1821)* (Bogotá: Banco de la República, El Ancora Editores, 1998); Roger Pita Pico, *El reclutamiento de negros durante las guerras de independencia de Colombia, 1810–1825* (Bogotá: Academia Colombiana de Historia, 2012); Charles Walker, *Smoldering Ashes: Cuzco and the Creation of Republican Peru, 1780–1840* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Aline Helg, *Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770–1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁹ Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 108–110. For more on slavery and freedom as modes of governance, see Sherwin Bryant, *Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage: Governing through Slavery in Colonial Quito* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 4; Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (New York: Verso, 2003), 1; Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Thomas C. Holt,

Empire after the slave trade’s abolition in 1807: “the category of ‘freedom’ was central to the development of what we could call a modern racial governmentality in which a political, economic, and social hierarchy ranging from ‘free’ to ‘unfree’ was deployed in the management of the diverse labors of metropolitan and colonized peoples.”¹⁰ Certainly, notions of freedom in early national Colombia and Spanish America were historically rooted in monarchical Hispanic traditions, as they were products of colonial slavery and fugitivity. Especially critical to a burgeoning politics of freedom prior to independence was the emergence in the Atlantic world of liberalism and its revolutionary values of equality and liberty, perhaps best exemplified in the Spanish empire by the Bourbon economic and political policies of the late eighteenth century and the liberal Cádiz Constitution of 1812.¹¹

But the nature and governing logics of freedom shifted in Colombia with the advent of the republic and Spanish America’s codification of liberalism’s revolutionary principles, which abolished hierarchical racial categories and replaced subjecthood with individual citizenship – at least for those deemed capable of responsibly exercising the rights and responsibilities that came with citizenship, criteria that excluded women, the enslaved, and what I term Free Womb captives.¹² The promissory

The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), xvii; María Eugenia Chaves Maldonado, “El oxímoron de la libertad. La esclavitud de los vientres libres y la crítica a la esclavización africana en tres discursos revolucionarios,” *Fronteras de la historia: revista de historia colonial latinoamericana* 19, no. 1 (2014): 174–200; Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 24.

¹¹ Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, vol. 1 (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Echeverri, *Indian and Slave Royalists*, 13, 172; Bryant, *Rivers of Gold*, 3, 119; Jaime E. O. Rodríguez, *Political Culture in Spanish America, 1500–1830* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 1–30, 150–151; François-Xavier Guerra, *Modernidad e independencias: Ensayos sobre las revoluciones hispánicas* (México, DF: Editorial MAPFRE-Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992); Arlene J. Díaz, *Female Citizens, Patriarchs, and the Law in Venezuela, 1786–1904* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Frank T. Proctor III, “*Damned Notions of Liberty*”: *Slavery, Culture, and Power in Colonial Mexico, 1640–1769* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010); Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹² In this book, I use the terms Free Womb child(ren) and Free Womb captive(s) interchangeably. The latter usage seeks to emphasize Free Womb children’s particular social

freedom granted to the children of the Free Womb during gradual emancipation rule came to embody the quintessential paradox of liberal freedom in Colombia: These children were free yet captive, raceless yet black. By “liberal freedom,” I am referring to the discourse and political culture of individual legal freedom, grounded in explicit and implicit criteria of agency and responsibility, that developed out of Latin American liberalism in the national era. Following Karen Caplan, I understand liberal freedom as “less a proactive motivating ideology than . . . a set of ideas and institutions that governed quotidian contact with the state.”¹³ As this book contends, the liberal freedom generated through gradual emancipation rule came to constitute a modern mode of racial governance that birthed new forms of social domination while temporarily instituting de facto slavery.¹⁴ I argue that although gradual emancipation rule was ostensibly designed to destroy slavery, paradoxically, speculating slaveholders in Colombia came to have an even greater stake in slavery. *Freedom's Captives* explores how gradual emancipation rule expanded opportunities for diverse stakeholders to partake in the owning and exploitation of young black people at cheaper prices and established new political rituals that reinforced the disciplining logic of the slaveholding order.

and laboring conditions as unfree captives. It is similar to James Gigantino II's usage of the phrase “slaves for a term” to describe Free Birth children born after New Jersey's gradual abolition law in 1804 or Joanne Pope Melish's usage of the phrase “statutory slaves” to describe such children born after the adoption of gradual abolition laws in New England. See James Gigantino II, *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey, 1775–1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 7; Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 88.

¹³ Karen Caplan, *Indigenous Citizens: Local Liberalism in Early National Oaxaca and Yucatán* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 12. Also see Roberto Breña, *El primer liberalismo español y los procesos de emancipación de América, 1808–1824* (Mexico: Colegio de México, 2006); Reuben Zahler, *Ambitious Rebels: Remaking Honor, Law, and Liberalism in Venezuela, 1780–1850* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013); Milanich, *Children of Fate*; Timo H. Schaefer, *Liberalism as Utopia: The Rise and Fall of Legal Rule in Post-Colonial Mexico, 1820–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); James E. Sanders, *Contentious Republicans: Popular Politics, Race, and Class in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ On slavery and liberal freedom, see Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 115–124; Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*.

Yet, the rule of individualizing liberal freedom contended with the vernacular practice of freedom rooted in place and collectivity.¹⁵ As the late historian Stephanie M. H. Camp wrote, “Space mattered: places, boundaries, and movement were central to how slavery was organized and to how it was resisted.”¹⁶ Likewise, place shaped how liberal and vernacular freedoms were constantly managed and contested, from the portside urban markets of Cartagena on the Caribbean coast to the “White City” of Popayán in the southwestern Cauca Valley, where generations of the country’s wealthiest slaveholders resided inside the city’s infamous whitewashed walls. This book examines the frontiers of freedom in the Colombian Pacific – a center of the Black Pacific world that constantly escaped white governability. By the Black Pacific, I am referring to the construction and rise of African-descended communities and relations along and across the Pacific Rim and expansive Pacific Ocean. A product of the Black Atlantic, the Colombian Black Pacific was and is one the main nodes in the racial cartography of the Black Pacific world, offering its own distinct history of black dispossession and possibility.¹⁷

¹⁵ On vernacular freedom, see Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 269; Rebecca Scott, “Public Rights and Private Commerce: Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Creole Itinerary,” *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 2 (April 2007): 237–256. On place, see Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

¹⁶ Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁷ On the Black Pacific in Latin America, see Nina S. de Friedemann, *Criele, criele son. Del Pacífico negro: arte, religión y cultura en el litoral Pacífico* (Bogotá: Planeta, 1989); Heidi Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 2006); Michael Quintero Birenbaum, *Rites, Rights & Rhythms: A Genealogy of Musical Meaning in Colombia’s Black Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Rachel Sarah O’Toole, *Bound Lives: Africans, Indians, and the Making of Race in Colonial Peru* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Bryant, *Rivers of Gold*. On the Black Pacific in the African diaspora and Asian Ocean World, see Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Gerald Horne, *The White Pacific: U.S. Imperialism and Black Slavery in the South Seas after the Civil War* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007); Quito Swan, *Pauulu’s Diaspora: Black Internationalism and Environmental Justice* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020); Guy Emerson Mount, “The Last Reconstruction: Slavery, Emancipation, and Empire in the Black Pacific” (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2018); Etsuko Taketani, *The Black Pacific Narrative: Geographic Imaginings of Race and Empire between the World Wars* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014); Vince Schleitwiler, *Strange Fruit of the Black Pacific: Imperialism’s Racial Justice and Its*

The rivers, jungles, and gold mines of this extraordinary, little-known place of the Colombian Black Pacific presented a formidable challenge to the governing logics of liberal freedom as they enabled enslaved and Free Womb captives to carve out diverse forms of vernacular freedom grounded in powerful networks of affective bonds. *Freedom's Captives* focuses especially on the riverine province of Chocó, which comprised the northern Pacific lowlands of Colombia, a rural region that is larger than Jamaica or Puerto Rico and famed for its vast rainforest, hundreds of rivers and tributaries, endless downpours, and rich gold mines worked by kidnapped African captives beginning in the late seventeenth century. Officially one of the rainiest places in the world, the Colombian Pacific lowlands (a region encompassing the modern-day departments of Chocó and parts of Valle del Cauca, Cauca, and Nariño), with its remote, physical geography and gold-mining economy, at once facilitated terror and afforded unusual opportunities for black autonomy, the most notable feature of vernacular freedom in the region. Chocó was described as both a “demon’s paradise,”¹⁸ where slaveholders from elsewhere in Colombia would threaten to send their slaves, and a world of autonomy, where free black boatmen and black female gold miners commanded the rivers through family and kinship networks and where fugitives of all classes could easily commit disappearing acts amid the immense expanse of the lowland jungle.

The aquatic environment of the gold-rich Colombian Pacific gave birth to a paradoxical culture marked by both relentless captivity and extraordinary independence, distinct from the more familiar regimes of plantation slavery that form the basis of our understanding of slavery in the Atlantic world. This history suggests why today the Pacific lowlands are home to Colombia’s famous autonomous black collective territories – territories that in the late twentieth century witnessed some of the most horrific violence of the civil war and that, despite the record peace accords, continue to be plagued by paramilitary violence against Afro-Colombian land rights activists, the descendants of the people whose

Fugitives (New York: New York University Press, 2016). For a theoretical and historiographical analysis of the Black Pacific, see my paper “Toward a Black Pacific” (paper delivered at the American Historical Association Conference, New York, January 6, 2020).

¹⁸ Orián Jiménez Meneses, *El Chocó, un paraíso del demonio: Nóvita, Citará, y el Baudó, siglo VIII* (Medellín, Colombia: Universidad de Antioquia, 2004), 25.

stories make this book possible.¹⁹ It is here in the Colombian Black Pacific, a place with an extraordinary history of black collectivity, autonomy, and captivity, where we can fully witness the political horizons of liberal freedom under gradual emancipation rule.

GRADUAL EMANCIPATION RULE IN COLOMBIA
 AND THE ATLANTIC WORLD

Two years after declaring the republic of Gran Colombia in 1819, representatives of the new nation in the northern Andes passed a gradual emancipation law. Known as *La ley de 21 de julio sobre la libertad de partos, manumisión y abolición del tráfico de esclavos* (The law of July 21 on the free womb, manumission, and abolition of the slave trade), the law would alter the destinies of the more than 100,000 enslaved people (half of whom were living in the present-day nation of Colombia), their future progeny, and those who sought to govern them.²⁰ The 1821 law banned the importation of new slaves into the territory of Gran Colombia; established *juntas de manumisión* (manumission juntas), or local councils that were responsible for manumitting “the most honest and industrious” slaves on behalf of the republic; and installed a Free Womb law that declared legally free the children of enslaved women born after the law’s promulgation while bonding these children to their mothers’ masters until the age of eighteen.²¹ Of these three provisions, the Free Womb law most significantly transformed the institution of chattel slavery, by terminating its legal foundation: *partus sequitur ventrem*, the idea that the status of the child derives from the mother. It was thus, borrowing from Christina Sharpe, one of the earliest “afterlives of *partus sequitur ventrem*” in Colombia.²² After 1821, the children of

¹⁹ For more on the contemporary political situation, see my article, “‘To End 500 Years of Great Terror’: Struggles for Peace in the Afro-Colombian Pacific,” *NACLA Report on the Americas, Issue 1: #BlackLivesMatter Across the Hemisphere* 49 (2017): 56–63.

²⁰ Jorge Andrés Tovar Mora and Hermes Tovar Pinzón, *El oscuro camino de la libertad: los esclavos en Colombia, 1821–1851* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Economía, 2009), 53.

²¹ The Free Womb provision of the gradual emancipation law was also referred to as the *ley de libertad de los vientres* (“law of the freedom of the wombs”). See, for example, *Gaceta de Colombia*, no. 291 (13 de mayo de 1827): 211.

²² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 78. For more on “*partus sequitur ventrum*” in the history of Atlantic world slavery, see Camillia Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom: Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 53–59; Jennifer L. Morgan, “*Partus sequitur ventrum*: Law, Race,

slaves born in Gran Colombia would no longer inherit their mother's legal condition of enslavement.

This book reveals how while the children born after 1821 were no longer legally enslaved, they were birthed into Free Womb captivity, a tenuous space of transitory bondage regulated by private slaveholders in often-uneasy partnership with public officials. Actively incorporated into Colombia's economy, Free Womb captives were fungible and liquefiable commodities who could be bought and sold at profitable prices. As per the law, enslaved people born before the law's promulgation in 1821 remained enslaved. They could only acquire their freedom through long-established routes, whether legal or extralegal – self-purchase, manumission, or flight – or through the local, often erratic manumission juntas. But gradual emancipation rule equally governed the lives of enslaved people born before 1821, by maintaining their enslavement, creating novel political rituals that reinforced slavery's hold, and demanding their allegiance to the new republican order. The vice president of Gran Colombia, Francisco de Paula Santander, explicitly expressed this demand in 1822 when he urged local priests to make the enslaved understand “the great benefit they have received from the Government of Colombia in the freedom conceded to their children” and that “none of these benefits shall be enjoyed by them or their children if they return to the Spanish Government.”²³ Much as Colombian insurgents tried during the Wars of Independence to link racial hierarchies with Spanish despotism and equality with patriotic nationalism (as expertly chronicled by Marixa Lasso), postindependence Colombian officials sought to guarantee enslaved people's political loyalties by juxtaposing antislavery republicanism with proslavery Spanish colonial rule.²⁴ Targeting the enslaved family, gradual emancipation rule instantiated one of the earliest examples in Colombia of racialized liberal “progress,” characterized by the logic of gradualism, by attempting to appease enslaved parents and children with the promise of eventual freedom.

and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery,” *Small Axe* 22, no. 1 (March 2018, no. 55): 1–17; Martha S. Santos, “‘Slave Mothers,’ *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*, and the Naturalization of Slave Reproduction in Nineteenth-Century Brazil,” *Tempo* 22, no. 41 (September–December 2016): 467–487; Jerome S. Handler, “Custom and Law: The Status of Enslaved Africans in Seventeenth-Century Barbados,” *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 1 (2016): 1–23.

²³ Archivo Central del Cauca (hereinafter ACC), 1822, Independencia CIII-2g 6902, fol. 1.

²⁴ Lasso, *Myths of Harmony*.