6

An Exegesis of Liberty

In the judicial forum, slaves, former slaves, magistrates, lawyers, and informal legal aides interpreted slavery and freedom. As they discerned the legality of individual enslavement or collective captivity, even suggesting that slaves and their offspring had the potential to become law-abiding members of the polity, some developed antislavery arguments well before the political crisis of 1810. With the early revolutions, however, antislavery propositions took on a more transformative potential. Expectations that God might end slavery and punish the masters, that just monarchs would free all slaves by decree, and that slaves could collectively petition municipal authorities for freedom and political belonging seemed to converge with the revolutionary idiom of liberty from Spain. Provincial revolutionary leaders spoke loudly about a natural right to shake off Spanish bondage, but slaves quickly noted that this liberation would be incomplete unless their own enslavement came to an end.

Some turned their interpretations of slavery and freedom into an exegesis of liberty, explicitly tying the cause of slave emancipation to the cause of emancipation from Spain. Seeking to expand the transformative potential of the representative form of government and the constitutional legal order, the Antioquia slave petitioners emerged as vanguard abolitionists in 1812. They scrutinized the policies, constitutions, and laws of the early provincial revolution, folding critical antislavery conventions from the judicial forum into emerging

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anti-Spanish, egalitarian, and republican doctrines. The metaphorical rejection of "slavery" and "chains"[1] should be perfected by making the liberation of slaves an immediate purpose of the new republic. Elaborating on the theme of political belonging, the petitioners suggested that slaves (and future freed people) fully belonged in their homeland of Antioquia – a critique of limited citizenship under the Constitution of 1812.

Rather than simply embracing republicanism, some slaves became its first critics.[2] Suggestions that republican liberty and the dignity of independence also encompassed slaves constituted an early critical assessment of the new polity. Evidence of this radical interpretation is not limited to the petition of 1812, since Antioquia's manumission law of 1814 generated comparable criticism. To some slaves, the manumission law must have seemed limited in its reach. They turned, therefore, to the notion that high government decisions (an emancipatory decree by the king or, in this case, a law with the blessing of the State's president) possessed hidden abolitionist potential. Just months after the passing of Antioquia's manumission law, Cornelio Sarrazola, a slave, would be arrested for questioning the limitations of the republican government's antislavery initiatives.[3]

With Colombia's manumission law of 1821 based on the form and logic of Antioquia's earlier legislation, critical observations made by some slaves during the early revolutionary period would remain valid during the Colombian republic of the 1820s.[4] As the leading antislavery legislator during Colombia's first General Congress, Félix José de Restrepo introduced a manumission law that was shot through with the ambivalences that had been scrutinized and criticized by Antioquia slaves. Unsurprisingly, he claimed that the slaves' immediate liberation would bring about the chaos that had been long predicted by the anxious masters. Slaveholders continued to insist that people of African descent inherited unspeakable criminal impulses from their ancestors. In other words, free, propertied, male Colombians deserved equality and citizenship, but slaves must be kept under control and continue to toil for the masters.[5] Congress closed the possibility of immediate abolition. Most of the legislators simply set aside their qualms about a slaveholding representative republic, which Restrepo himself recognized as a dangerous oxymoron.[6]

Some slaves and former slaves continued their efforts to untangle the meanings, true potential, and limitations of antislavery in the new

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republic. Before his execution, for example, José María Martínez embarked on a legal quest for formal recognition of his informal freedom. This slave, who had run away from his owners as early as 1806 and again in 1816, entered the judicial forum in 1822 with an eclectic and illuminating petition. His own exegesis recalled his services as a loyal slave and later a soldier of Colombia, proposing that even if his enslavement was allowed by law he was "in Justice a free man."[7] This and other litigants in early Colombia insisted on measuring antislavery initiatives (individual, collective, judicial, and legislative) against the overarching principles of natural law, equity, equality, republicanism, and Christianity.

Despite its concessions to the masters, Colombia's manumission law sparked a counter-exegesis, a series of arguments by slaveholders seeking to demonstrate why slaves had to remain in their natural, inferior place. In this counter offensive, even the constitutional principle of equality was openly questioned. In the old governorate of Popayán, where the majority of slaves and the most intransigent slaveholders still lived, alarmist petitions to reform Colombia's antislavery legislation were drawn up and sent to the central authorities.[8] Following his last efforts to bring to heel the slaves of San Juan, Gerónimo Torres arrived in Bogotá, where as a senator he represented the interests of Popayán masters, depicting slave liberation as the trigger of a war of "black" against "white" – a disingenuous position that failed to recognize that some people of color, too, owned slaves.[9] A case in point was Pedro Antonio Ibargüen, whose early arguments regarding equality for former slaves now seemed vindicated by the Colombian Constitution.

As he resumed his quest for property and standing in Popayán, Ibargüen celebrated the fall of the "the colossus of aristocracy," and the egalitarian "destiny" of Colombia.[10] He knew all too well, however, that equality was a continuing struggle. Yet considering Colombia's formal commitment to equality and slave emancipation, he now spoke with increased force and clarity, opposing the "greed and monopoly" of patricians who refused to concede that freed slaves could become lawful citizens making their own way in the world.[11] Though a small slaveholder himself, as an ex-slave discriminated against for his African ancestry, Ibargüen recognized that former slaves were fighting for equal opportunity, dignity, and respect – and

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that this was a fight for political belonging against vestiges of the Spanish hierarchical order rather than a war against whites.

Abolition and Political Belonging

Enslaved people who spoke their minds in the judicial forum often expressed a preoccupation with their political belonging after slavery. An unavoidable corollary to freedom, political incorporation after emancipation was at the heart of many of their legal efforts. Freedom took on a substantial meaning when freed people ceased to be persons who could be bought and sold and began to exercise the privileges and duties associated with membership in the larger community. Some slaves hoped to form their own sub-municipal congregations, to live *en policía* under the authority of a priest and a magistrate, paying taxes "like Indians." The slaves of La Honda in 1799 and Antioquia slaves, as early as the year 1781, stated similar aspirations. This was not, however, an atavistic desire on the part of the slaves.

Cautiously articulated, to be sure, aspirations that lowly slaves could become free and worthy of a better status were nonetheless radical in their political implications. In Popayán, the former slave Pedro Antonio Ibargüen argued that emancipated slaves should be held as "equal vassals."[12] A paradoxical notion in an unequal slave society, this proposition had an affinity with ideas expressed by other slaves well before the notion of equality before the law gained traction following the crisis of 1810. Slaves who suggested that they too could enjoy the benefits of being vassals – that they were worthy of spiritual care by the clergy and justice distribution by the magistrates – were thus palpably forward-looking. They aspired to expand political membership, seeking a practical redefinition and clarification of the boundaries of the moral community under the king and the society of individuals under the constitutions. In effect, they proposed that the stigmas of African, enslaved ancestry should be discarded as politically irrelevant, offering slaves a chance to move from mere denizens to explicit members of the polity.

Slaves expressed these general aspirations through the language of corporate belonging and municipal politics, both before and after 1810. Usually, such aspirations were limited to discrete enslaved

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communities, as happened with La Honda slaves, who expected to be manumitted while arguing that the estate could be incorporated as a settlement of free parishioners. In other cases, as was typical in Antioquia, some slave leaders aspired to a substantial shift in status for everyone enslaved within the boundaries of their municipal and provincial jurisdictions – the primordial sphere for the practice of political belonging under both the Spanish monarchy and the early republics.[13] Indeed, both spiritual membership in the church as well as a specific position in the social hierarchy remained the foundations of political belonging after 1810. Republican Antioquia held Roman Catholicism as the "religion of the State," and the new category of "citizen" was limited to free men of property and standing within a parish.[14]

The slaves' petition in 1812 elaborated on the importance of municipal membership while questioning the limitations of the new franchise and envisioning a more inclusive alternative. On the one hand, the slaves who led the judicial quest in 1812 reiterated a preoccupation with political belonging after slavery at the municipal level. Declaring themselves "poor little captives" who had longed suffered under the harsh and unjust yoke of the masters, the petitioners complained that slavery tore families apart, for Antioquia masters sold enslaved children to "foreign lands."[15] Selling slaves away from their homeland was unjust because it violated the new principle of equality, the slaves mentioned, but it also undermined the old principle of corporate, municipal belonging, for children sold to foreign lands would be "subject to no one." Individuals with no attachment to a parish, without villa or without city, could not comport themselves as Christians or live under the tutelage of a social superior or a magistrate.

On the other hand, the petition implied the existence of a more abstract level of belonging, explicitly mentioning that the document was filed on behalf of all Antioquia slaves. Slave petitioners powerfully built on municipal politics by presenting all slaves as potential legitimate members of a supra-municipal community – the community of Antioquia citizens, equal under the law. Signed or ghost-signed by dozens slaves from a cross-district alliance, the petition addressed the high magistrates as "we ten thousand and seven hundred slaves." Ten thousand people was the estimated slave population for the old

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province of Antioquia. Slaves had long communicated across different jurisdictions in this province, typically with the aspiration to press their claims in the judicial forum. Relying on old tactics, in 1812 the leaders expanded their legal strategy with the urgency and possibility brought about by revolution.[16]

To emphasize the condemnation of slavery contained in the petition, the legal activists also mixed old and new sources of meaning. Filed with the State of Antioquia's Supreme Tribunal of Justice, the petition affords a glimpse of the coexistence of different antislavery propositions. The writers of this document clearly referred to Antioquia's Constitution of 1812 as a legal touchstone whose principles, if taken seriously, rendered slavery unjust and illegitimate. They agreed with the new republican, representative principles of individual freedom and rights, but proposed that such principles might extend to the entire population. And they continued to rely on a religious paradigm, writing that "God our lord" had "made us free." Their captivity was thus an affront to Providence itself and therefore a sin in any Christian polity. God and political coherence demanded that the "insufferable yoke of slavery" be abolished in the new Catholic State.[17]

Some slaves constructively criticized representative government and constitutional republicanism. Suggesting that the republic's liberty, the dignity of independence, and the rights of citizens might also include the enslaved constituted a powerful critique of the new order in Antioquia. Such suggestions highlighted substantial limitations and tensions in the region. As we know, republican leaders interpreted this criticism as an illegal act. In 1812, officials alerted military personnel about a conspiracy allegedly lurking behind the petition, referring to the situation as the "movement of the Ethiopians"– an attempt by "wicked" slaves of African descent to take their freedom by force. Secretary of grace and justice, José Manuel Restrepo, who insisted that Antioquia was on the brink of a slave uprising as early as 1811, took immediate measures to stop what he called "this revolution."[18]

If the subsequent manumission law of 1814 was a partial answer to the questions posed by the petition in 1812, as well as an effort to defuse slaves' growing expectations, some slaves would demonstrate their disappointment in this answer. Revolutionary leaders, in turn, would again try to prevent slaves from scrutinizing too closely the ambiguities and true potential of the ongoing political transformation.

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The manumission law did not deliver general slave emancipation, which many anticipated. Already in 1812, as slave leaders prepared to file their petition, a man who had saved money to purchase his wife's freedom was advised to suspend the payment on account of the current efforts for the "general freedom of all slaves."[19] In September 1814, five months after the approval of Antioquia's manumission law, the slave Cornelio Sarrazola publicly stated his propositions on the end of slavery. He questioned the limited scope of republican antislavery initiatives, revealing that a fresh collective petition regarding the new law was in the works.

About to be sold to a new master, Sarrazola advised the potential buyer against completing the transaction. The purchaser would lose both the money and the slave, Sarrazola told his prospective new owner, because slaves were now free. "Heaven" itself supported this liberation, he claimed, thus interpreting the manumission law beyond its apparent limitations and proposing that true abolition was the providential righting of a sinful wrong. His idea of providential abolition also implied imminent punishment for those who would oppose the liberation of the slaves. Indeed, Sarrazola was accused of prophesying that within a month the world would dramatically change, and should this change be stopped, "there would be fire." Reminiscent of the slave who had prophesied a divine reckoning for the masters during the Mompox fires, Sarrazola also asserted that the "road had been opened" to the slaves, who would not "remain silent" any longer.[20]

Other slaves also broke their silence to discuss and broadcast their views on the government's antislavery measures. Sarrazola individually expressed his opinion, but he reportedly participated in a "junta" with other slave leaders who collectively discussed the situation. They planned to petition the government, presumably to clarify and expand the scope of the manumission law. Despite the legally tinged label ascribed to the slaves' organization (a junta), authorities saw their collective efforts as a new instance of "suspicious" and "criminal" meetings. Sarrazola was charged with trying to take his own freedom by force, though he had only participated in a collective effort to file a new petition and had openly expressed his ideas on the end of slavery.[21] However, only citizens were allowed by Antioquia's Constitution to "examine the procedures" of the government and "write, speak, and freely print" their political opinions.[22]

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By discussing and organizing a new legal effort, some slaves sought to discover the abolitionist potential in Antioquia's manumission law. Specifically, they scrutinized the legislation's free womb principle, asking whether it could somehow apply to adult slaves. The slave Vitorino Garro, a witness in the trial against Sarrazola, declared to have talked to his fellow slave Juan de Dios about potential ways that adult slaves might also be freed, given the liberation of their future children. For these slaves, enslaved parents of freeborn children presented a contradiction. Garro's interrogators asked what he would do if freedom proved impossible to achieve. Answering with tact, Garro said he would continue to "serve his master with love, as he has done so far, and with manly good will."[23] Slaves had to tread carefully in the judicial forum, abiding by the conventions of patriarchy and order while bravely suggesting that a truly free polity was feasible.

Sarrazola further used his unexpected entry into the judicial forum to assert the justice of the cause of general slave emancipation, insisting on his associates' good intentions. Instead of leading a revolt, he oversaw a legal effort to formally ask for the "grace" of freedom. The plan was to plead before the State's president "as though asking Mercy from God." His "junta" associates were even prepared to pay for their emancipations by covering the taxes imposed on slaveholders by the manumission law. His premonition of change within the month, therefore, only referred to the expectation that the petition would be favorably answered by a top official. Sarrazola denied ever mentioning "fire," but only because no such threat was needed given the justice of the claim. Pressed by magistrates, Sarrazola tempered his views, stating that the new petition stemmed from a misunderstanding of the manumission law rather than from its critical interpretation. He understood that only children would be freed, and only with time would all slaves phase out of their captivity; for now, he was forced to agree with the gradualist logic of Antioquia's antislavery legislation.[24] Nevertheless, the magistrates decided that Sarrazola and his colleagues had criminally conspired to "defend their system of liberty by force."[25]

Only a few people seemed willing to recognize the political nature of the slave's critical interpretation of Antioquia's manumission law. Sarrazola's sympathetic legal defender was one of these lone voices in the wilderness. He believed that the slaves soundly understood the

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official logic of the law; however, he wrote, they had been carried away over the course of their conversations by their enthusiasm and their "hope of LIBERTY." The capitalized word in the defender's handwritten argument suggested the explanatory relevance of this notion. Nothing less than enthusiastic discussions about freedom could be expected from slaves who were everywhere exposed to the revolutionary idiom of liberty from Spain. Slaves were "aware of their dignity as men," he argued. They knew of "many public papers" publishing statements against slavery, and now, in light of the manumission law, they had simply come together to bring a petition before the president. This was clearly not a crime, the defender insisted.[26] José Manuel Restrepo, in his capacity as the State's secretary of grace and justice, intervened. Sarrazola was to be returned to his master, who should ensure that this slave would never try to organize other slaves again. The manumission law, the secretary reiterated, stipulated that all adult slaves were to remain under the authority of their owners.[27]

Despite revolutionary leaders' efforts to curtail the criticism and radical interpretation of the manumission law, the conversation and discussions continued among the enslaved. In March 1815, José Manuel Restrepo reported that slaves continued to organize and hold meetings, and word circulating through the slave grapevine was that the manumission law had ended slavery altogether. Restrepo's report suggested that slaves were disappointed with gradual slave emancipation and planned to pressure for immediate abolition, even if they had to pay some taxes to facilitate the process.[28]

Critical interpretations of Antioquia's Constitution and antislavery law pivoted on the tension between corporate and individual political belonging. The idea that slaves could become free, law-abiding, taxpaying members of society after final and general emancipation drew on aspirations and propositions articulated before 1810. Some, as we know, evoked the corporate status of Indians as a potential blueprint. Many referred to collective membership in parishes and municipalities as a measure of meaningful freedom. After 1810, some hoped that freed slaves could become members of the broader citizenry. However, the idea that single citizens could claim equal rights under law, including former slaves, became a more widely accepted possibility in the wake of Simón Bolívar's successful campaign. The triumph of the libertadores in 1819 and the rise of the Republic of Colombia opened

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the door to litigation strategies and legal interpretations emphasizing individual accomplishments and the individual franchise.

Servile Freedom

Before his demise at the hands of a firing squad, José María Martínez had set out to finally complete his long quest for autonomy and manumission. After enlisting in the libertador army in 1819 and pursuing his old master the royalist Faustino Martínez, José María joined the campaign to liberate Cartagena. Deployed to Magangué, another riverine port town near Mompox (see Map 4), one day in 1821 Martínez came across other people from Antioquia who were also serving in the army.[29] In the group were three relatives of his former master: Manuel del Corral (Juan del Corral's son, and the husband of María de los Santos Martínez, Faustino Martínez's sister); Celestino Martínez (Faustino's cousin); and Julián Arrubla (Juan Pablo Pérez de Rublas' nephew). The encounter with these men might have alerted José María to the imminent threat to his informal freedom. They informed him that his former master's father, Juan Esteban Martínez, was determined to re-enslave him.[30] To make matters worse, in August 1822 José María learned that the Colombian government had authorized masters to reclaim wartime runaway slaves.[31]

José María left the army and set out for Antioquia, where he hoped to obtain formal freedom once and for all from any would-be masters. In Antioquia, he crossed paths again with Julián Arrubla, who provided him with a letter attesting to his work as a patriot soldier. Along with this document, José María filed a petition for emancipation in September 1822. However, given that he had left the army early, his judicial strategy did not rest on his military service alone. His petition contained a perceptive, multi-layered legal and social interpretation of slavery and freedom written by an aspiring equal citizen under republican law. Crafted with the aid of a papelista, his petition is an example of an old practice that thrived during early Colombia, as slaves and former slaves stepped even more eagerly into the judicial forum.[32]

José María's petition was an ingenious legal take on the ambiguities of slavery as it was experienced by mobile and relatively autonomous slaves in Antioquia since before independence. José María and others had taken advantage of the mobility required by their jobs, sometimes

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straying from their masters and even defying their authority – these were tactics he had practiced in his early days at the Jaramillo farmstead, and even during his travels with his master Faustino. Because his enslavement had unfolded as a tug-of-war experience, a near-constant back-and-forth with his enslavers, José María now asserted that his legal status was not clear cut. Instead, he presented the idea that he had long enjoyed *libertad servil* – "servile freedom."[33] This proposition blurred the line separating slave from free. It evoked the notion that slavery was not an immutable status.

José María combined two apparently contradictory words to convey that, although legally a slave, the services he had rendered to his master had emanated from his own decision to serve the Martínez family. After all, freedom was legally defined as the natural ability to do whatever a person pleased if his or her actions did not violate the laws or the existing privileges of others.[34] The petitioner had interacted with the members of the Martínez clan in a context of autonomy within slavery, enjoying a wide berth to exercise his free will. He now implied that he could have easily run away for good earlier but had instead decided to remain and serve his owners.

To lend credence to this paradoxical proposition, José María argued that he had willingly provided the Martínez clan with his services without ever fully giving himself up as property. Instead, he had comported himself with the assertiveness of a free person. This was clear during his trip to Jamaica. An eyewitness maintained that the alleged slave had disrespected him en route to the island. Despite the witness's complaint at the time, the putative master proved unable to punish the slave. The witness, therefore, told the supposed master that he would treat the supposed slave as a free man. The master did not object. The witness thus concluded that "José María was a free man." The petition, moreover, claimed that the master Faustino repeatedly claimed to have brought Martínez to Jamaica "as a companion, and not as a slave."[35] While there was no evidence to support this last assertion, there was evidence that José María was treated as free man even by his reputed master.

With the aid of his hired legal helper, José María may have bent the facts somewhat, but this served to illustrate an understanding of slavery and freedom as processes rather than essences. The petition relied on the notion that slavery was an unhappy, unnatural, not

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necessarily everlasting state of captivity. Slavery could be left behind by running away temporarily, but freedom could also be permanently secured by paying masters for manumission. José María ingeniously expanded on this, proposing that the very work performed by slaves was equivalent to a freedom payment. He had been "humbly born a slave," José María explained, and as a slave he had been later purchased by Faustino Martínez from the widow Jaramillo. But José María argued that Faustino had been duly compensated for his investment by his "loyalty during seven years, in which I accompanied him in long journeys to Bogotá and Jamaica, and a thousand different services, these being so well-known that I choose not to mention them."[36] His loyal, hard work amounted to a return on the master's initial investment and the equivalent of a manumission payment.[37]

Unlike the collectively organized slaves aspiring for abolition, José María seemed willing to concede that a period of work under the tutelage of masters was a fair requisite for freedom. This potential acceptance of the gradualist approach was, again, built on past experiences and on Spanish legal culture. About a decade earlier, José María had sought to emancipate his little godson, also a slave to the Martínez family. After saving Juan Esteban Martínez's life in a street fight, José María had received the gratitude of the family and the promise of freedom for his godson, which was to be delivered upon his acquiring of "a little bit of experience."[38] Whether or not this promise had been made, José María apparently thought of this apprenticeship as an avenue to a particular type of freedom, one that could be earned through labor and bestowed in gratitude.

José María presented work, good deeds, and loyalty to his master as legal grounds for his claim to freedom, obliquely suggesting that his exercise of free will had never trumped the privileges of slaveholders. The street fight episode, in which he allegedly risked his own life to save that of his master's father, was thus recalled as a paramount example of the individual merits supporting his claim to formal manumission. In a grandiloquent turn of phrase, José María asserted that, second only to God, he himself had given life to the old patriarch Juan Esteban.[39] The petition painted the street fight as a true ordeal and José María's actions as heroic and loyal. The surviving criminal records concerning this episode in 1811 reveal that José María accommodated the events to better serve his present legal needs. He had

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defended Juan Esteban, but Juan Esteban's life seems never to have been at risk. But according to the Spanish *Partidas*, still in use in early Colombia, a slave who saved a masters' life, uncovered their murderer, or avenged the crime became eligible for manumission.[40]

José María recounted his entanglements with his master's family, but his claim to freedom rested heavily on his individual situation. Because he was seriously wounded in the fight, José María presented the episode as evidence of his love for his master's family. This also reinforced his reflection on free will, the idea that he had made his own choices even while legally held as property. The episode was presented as an instance of his "servile freedom" status. The manly display of loyalty had emanated from his deliberate desire to serve the Martínez family well, not from obligation or coercion. His military "services" to the Republic, also mentioned in the petition, rounded up his claim to freedom on individual choice and meritorious work.[41]

And yet the proposition that José María had enjoyed "servile freedom" also relied on the unwillingness or inability of masters to actively exercise authority over the alleged slave. In other words, the 1822 petition tacitly used the principle of prescripción – which Félix José de Restrepo had invoked in Popayán. To claim freedom by prescription, we may recall, litigants had to establish that they had lived as free people for a period of ten years. In this way, the attribution of slave status rested not on the understanding of enslavement as an unchanging "legal fact" but rather as a set of "social relations" and "practices that needed to be interpreted."[42] It was precisely within social relations that José María hoped to find enough leads to make his case. Evidence of his freedom in the world of social relations should lead to his freedom in the world of the law.

This eclectic petition relied on shifting legal concepts intersecting in the nascent republican judicial forum. It would be a threat to "reason," José María claimed, for him to be returned to his "ancient slavery."[43] In other words, it would be unreasonable to consider José María the subject of an outdated system of domination. To decide the case in favor of his former owners would be to irrationally ignore what, in his view, was self-evident: that he should be "in Justice a free man," "emancipated" as "equity" would suggest.[44] By referencing equity, however, the petitioner and his legal aid also recognized that a favorable decision might emanate not just from "reason" alone

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(a disinterested interpretation of the law in light of supposedly self-evident facts) but from the judge's own sense of fairness (a personal inclination to favor freedom over slavery). Best understood as "judicial compassion," the old principle of equity referred to moderation in law enforcement, a sense of tolerance for discrepancies between written law and specific circumstance. More recently, the notion of equity had even taken on the meaning of a personal quality that magistrates might sometimes possess. Because the facts of the case were not exactly congruent with formal stipulations (he had not lived as a free person for at least a decade, he was in theory a runaway slave, and he had not served long enough in the army to gain manumission), José María hoped to benefit from a lenient, equitable judge.[45]

In the end, José María Martínez seems to have found no magistrate who would adjudicate his case with the equity he expected. He apparently dropped his legal bid before returning to the army, where he likely hoped to find a firmer path to freedom. As we know, however, José María found instead further difficulties, legal trouble, and ultimately – death. Meanwhile, other former slaves resurfaced in the republican tribunals to defend their egalitarian aspirations. The new Republic offered equality as a constitutional mandate, but equal standing would prove elusive for those who took on the old "aristocracy" seeking to realize their aspirations for dignified lives after slavery.

Republicanism and Aristocracy

As early as 1791, the former slave Pedro Antonio Ibargüen and his then legal adviser Félix José de Restrepo argued that even freed people deserved equal protection by the government. Rich and poor alike, Ibargüen further and paradoxically argued, were "equal vassals of His Majesty."[46] Now the Constitution of the Republic of Colombia, sanctioned on August 30, 1821, by Restrepo and other delegates to the first General Congress, timidly but explicitly listed equality, along with liberty, security, and property, as one of the most prized benefits of citizenship. The fruits of revolution and the new emerging republican, representative order should be equally enjoyed by all Colombians.[47]

As its provincial predecessors, however, the new polity offered only limited citizenship. Colombians, the Constitution declared, were the "free men" born in the country and their children – or naturalized free

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men. This restrictive extension of political belonging excluded free women and all slaves. Moreover, to vote and to be elected to public office, a Colombian citizen had to be literate and possess 500 pesos worth of real estate or 300 pesos in annual income. Citizens with a scientific or professional degree or practice, regardless of income, were also eligible to participate in representative government. Some free people of color held minor administration posts at the local level and some rose to become officers in the army. A few were elected to high office in the Senate and House of Representatives, but they endured deep-seated prejudice against former slaves and their offspring.[48]

Long existing stereotypes about slaves and their descendants underpinned this political exclusion and the difficulties in enacting the principle of equality. A Cartagena merchant declared in 1806 that he regarded Africans and their descendants as barbarians and as the "natural enemies" of white people.[49] In 1827, a former secretary of foreign affairs would lament that Colombia contained within its borders an "African belt," imagining that the country would be better off without black people – in his view, they were a burden and a danger.[50] Simón Bolivar and José Manuel Restrepo, the first president of the Republic and secretary of the interior respectively, seem to have been convinced all along that recruiting slaves was crucial to the war effort and to "keep the equilibrium among the different races." They sought to prevent the potential growth of the "African" population by sending as many people of color as possible to the battlefields.[51]

More important, the survival of slavery revealed a tension between Colombia's commitment to equality and its tolerance for odious manifestations of the old hierarchical order. Popayán slaveholding patricians reluctantly threw their lot behind the libertadores' new republic so long as they could keep slavery. Some Colombian officials had envisioned slave recruitment as a tactic to undermine Popayán's elite, but influential and committed slaveholders truncated slave recruitment, shoring up the slavery-based gold economy in the early 1820s.[52] Both Félix José de Restrepo and Pedro Antonio Ibargüen specifically elaborated on this theme, asserting that the existence of an "aristocracy" within a republic of equal citizens constituted a brazen political contradiction. Both men believed that Republicanism was, by definition, incompatible with aristocracy, and the aristocracy of the country was constituted by large slaveholders and arrogant patricians.

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Restrepo pointed out this tension during the debates on the 1821 manumission legislation. At the General Congress, he stated that slavery contradicted the egalitarian principles of the Colombian Republic. The persistence of slavery would prevent the Republic from reaching its potential as a country under a popular and representative form of government. Comparable to "lords of vassals" and to "little absolute sovereigns," Restrepo asserted, the slave masters made Colombia look more like an "aristocracy" than a "democracy," more like the old Spanish monarchy than a new republic. Preventing rule by the people and instead stimulating rule by a few powerful men, slavery was a despicable inheritance from the tyrannical Spanish past, and tolerating slavery would render Colombia's political system a "feudal government." In practice, masters agglutinated the three powers (legislative, executive, and judicial) which ought to be separated by constitutional mandate.[53] Instead of a society of equal citizens, slavery made Colombia a polity of corporations with unequally distributed privileges. For Restrepo, in a theory he only partially practiced, slavery negated the revolution.

Ibargüen shared this notion of egalitarian republicanism, articulating even more forcefully the proposition that Popayán aristocrats undermined Colombia's egalitarian foundations. As a minor slaveholder himself, Ibargüen paid less attention to the slaveholding practices of his enemy aristocrats. As a free man of color still struggling for property and standing, he focused on the prejudices and discriminatory attitudes of the Spanish-descended patriciate. Ibargüen's vision of egalitarianism had been developing alongside his legal quest to work a gold claim on the Pique River, and litigation pitted him against well-to-do Popayán families. Expelled from Pique, Ibargüen returned to work his gold diggings after obtaining a favorable ruling in 1804. As he would explain in an 1824 petition, he had recovered the mining site with his "sweat" and against the "opulence of arrogant people."[54]

His "arrogant" adversaries, however, kept up their pressure on Ibargüen. In 1818, he traveled once again in serach of justice, making the long trip to Santa Fe. Here he met the seasoned lawyer José Ignacio de San Miguel. Active since 1768, San Miguel had maintained in 1777 (in Mompox) that slaves were simply people who had lost their freedom. He would later become a theorist of Colombian independence, asserting that Colombians of African descent, of better blood

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than "arrogant" Spaniards, had proved their merit on the battlefields.[55] San Miguel and Ibargüen co-authored a new petition regarding Pique, but the case was returned to the local authorities. Meanwhile, Ibargüen continued to exploit the mines, valued at over 3000 pesos by 1824. José Ignacio de Castro, who had challenged Ibargüen's right to set up an operation at Pique since the 1790s, now revived his attacks on the former slave. Agents of the Grueso family, most importantly Guillermo Antonio Segura, a younger member of this clan, also sought to take over the rich deposits. In 1825, they successfully expelled Ibargüen from Pique once again.[56]

Almost eighty years old, Ibargüen continued to litigate. Between 1825 and 1827 he traveled several times to Popayán to plead his case. His opponents argued that this was a dispute over landed property, as opposed to mining rights, a take on the situation unfavorable to Ibargüen. Although legally entitled to mine for gold, Ibargüen had never produced notarial documents to prove that he had ownership of land. In June 1827, the Superior Court of Popayán decided that Ibargüen had no property rights over Pique.[57] Still, he spoke his mind in the judicial forum, always painting his case as an episode in the larger drama of political and legal change.

His was a transcendental legal cause. It stood in for the struggle between propertied families and dispossessed individuals, a battle in the war against corporate privileges and the influence that came with high social standing. Over three decades into this fight, Ibargüen reiterated that despite his African ancestry and enslaved past, he was equally entitled to the protection of the law, and to make a living by exploiting resources long monopolized by families of Spanish ancestry.[58] He usually had great difficulties convincing magistrates and officers. Over time, however, his claims on legal equality and the undue power of Spanish ancestry gained crucial currency. Deemed outlandish under the monarchy, such arguments resonated with the new republic's ideology and legal order. After 1819, revolutionaries more cogently articulated the ongoing conflict as a clear-cut struggle of Colombian versus Spaniard. This was now an epochal quest against tyranny, pitching oppressed natives against foreign invaders.[59]

Even though Ibargüen's early, egalitarian arguments now seemed vindicated, he still faced the prejudice that was directed against people

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of African descent. As a literate, free man with some capital, Ibargüen had a claim to Colombian citizenship and a measure of respectable social standing. His opponents, however, continued to regard him as a person of inferior worth and rebellious inclinations. Vicente Olave, an attorney for Guillermo Antonio Segura, called him a "usurper" and an agitator introducing "disorder" among those "of his color."[60] Defeated in court, he was insulted with the usual slander that was levelled at people of color who were seen as a threat to the social order. However, Ibargüen did not accept this slander quietly.

Unable to find a lawyer who would take on his case, Ibargüen hired a papelista in July 1827. Appealing the Superior Court's ruling, Ibargüen articulated his understanding of legal equality as a safeguard against abuse of power and the vitriol of prejudice. He came from those of the "humiliated color of the Africans," Ibargüen wrote, from people condemned to "horrific slavery" by "greed and monopoly." Though his opponents might not concede that a former slave could be a worthy, peaceful citizen, he wrote, the "wise Laws of Colombia," based on the principles of nature, reason, and philanthropy, would prove them wrong.[61] In light of the new legal order, his fight against those who denied the merits of people of color and opposed their aspirations to property and political belonging had been just all along, even under Spanish rule. Otherwise, he asked, how could a "black," "abject" and "lay" individual have dared to confront powerful lawyers in the royal tribunals? His claims had always been legitimate – and even more so now that "the colossus of aristocracy has fallen, and equality is inscribed in the destiny of Colombia."[62]

Nevertheless, Ibargüen understood that persistant prejudices and hierarchy made it near-impossible to achieve his goals. His rivals prevailed thanks to their "influence" and because they benefitted from the continuing division of society according to ancestry. Influential Popayán families "drowned" his rights and treated him "worse than a donkey" because they were white and rich in a caste society where people of color were meant to be poor and servile. His opponents had power to abuse, Ibargüen insisted, but no sound legal arguments to back their claims. They drew on false information and tendentious interpretations. Even if Pique had legally belonged to others, their property rights had expired by prescription. Since the original owners had not exploited

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the mines for an extended period, Ibargüen argued that his continuing usufruct of the property made the mine his by rights.[63]

Turning the prejudice of ancestry on its head, Ibargüen painted himself as a virtuous Colombian opposed by wicked Spaniards, a weak mortal "fighting against gods." Ibargüen further described himself as a "sad African" dueling with the "descendants of the Goths." A derogatory term for Spaniards in the parlance of the time, the expression Goth allowed Ibargüen to highlight the wider implications of his case, depicting haughty Popayán families as Colombians only in name. Once again, Ibargüen likened his own struggle against Popayán elites to Colombia's struggle against Spain, equating his fight to that of a Christian against a Sultan and painting his cause as nothing less than a holy war.[64]

Ibargüen again traveled to Bogotá, where he appealed before the High Court of Justice. During the appeal process in 1827 he learned that the chief magistrate of Colombia's highest justice tribunal was his one-time legal counsel Félix José de Restrepo. Almost four decades had passed since their first encounter back in Popayán, and Restrepo could barely remember Ibargüen. By contrast, Ibargüen remembered well that Restrepo had recused himself from the case in 1791 on account of his friendship with the Castro family. Ibargüen now asked that Restrepo recuse himself again.[65] Restrepo did so, and on September 26, the High Court ruled that Ibargüen indeed had mining rights over Pique.[66]

However, weeks away from Bogotá, at the gold diggings in the Pacific region, Ibargüen's enemies prevented enforcement of this final ruling, and local authorities thwarted him from regaining full access to his gold claim. In 1828 and 1829, he traveled again between the Pacific mining districts and the city of Popayán, seeking total control of the gold deposits.[67] From surviving notarial records, we can infer that Ibargüen was unable to become the sole gold miner and formal owner of Pique. Indeed, the Castro family continued to mine the river, and the Segura clan would also exploit the deposits for another forty years.[68] Ibargüen visited a Popayán notary in 1829 for the last time. Squeezed by other miners and unable to translate a court ruling into effective property, he ceded his rights over Pique to his friend Manuel Agustín Varela, free of charge.[69] After this transaction, Ibargüen disappears from the records.

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A Seigneurial Counter-Exegesis

Some members of the families Ibargüen called "aristocrats" showed only mild enthusiasm for the representative government of Colombia. In the end, Popayan's elite accepted the libertadores' triumph and supported Bolívar, but leading patricians made every effort to defend the old hierarchies and ensure that slavery remained unchanged.[70] They showed equal zeal in their fight over gold deposits owned by former slaves as in their opposition to Colombia's antislavery initiatives. In the process, they practiced a counter-exegesis of liberty, an interpretation that was, unsurprisingly, founded upon stock accusations made against slaves. These slaveholders relied on the prejudice, censured by Ibargüen, consisting of the long-held idea that slaves were the natural enemies of hierarchy and the principle of authority, and that their liberation would accelerate the ongoing destruction of the mining economy.

Gold production figures reveal the extent of the losses incurred by Popayán gold mining elites during the revolutionary period. Between 1801 and 1810, the Royal Mint forged coins valued at around half a million pesos. By contrast, during the turbulent years between 1811 and 1822, the total came to just over 126,000 pesos.[71] The slaveholding gold economy, alongside Spanish ancestry, underpinned Popayán high patricians' livelihoods and sense of purpose. The sharp economic and political disruption that accelerated after 1810 brought great uncertainty to this seigneurial way of life. Long accustomed to litigation and now represented in the Senate, the upholders and beneficiaries of the old order would not submit to their own decline without a fight. In their view, their survival hinged on keeping slaves working and under their patriarchal watch.

To keep control of mining workers, slaveholders took steps to undermine Colombia's antislavery efforts. Besides successfully opposing slave recruitment by the libertadores' army, they blockaded new avenues to manumission opened by the law of 1821. Moreover, they set out to reform the legislation itself, defending the increasingly dated notion that the unequal order of the world was natural, and its undoing would cause only chaos. To liberate slaves, in their eyes, was to turn the world upside down.[72] Against the backdrop of conflict with their slaves at the San Juan gold mine, the Torres y Tenorio family,

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particularly Gerónimo Torres, championed the cause of the masters. He publicized his criticism of the law in the city of Popayán, as well as in the Colombian legislative chambers in Bogotá. Above all, he sought to retain the enslaved work force under the hierarchical power of the masters for even longer than the law seemed to anticipate. His pro-slavery politics reveal the seigneurial, anti-egalitarian logic of the efforts to shore up slavery in early Colombia.

At the San Juan gold mine, where slave leaders had long been engaged in a continuing struggle with their putative masters, the years between 1810 and 1818 saw little intervention from Popayán. Slave leaders seemed to have communicated with royalist agents, apparently collaborating with them, but stopped communication with their masters. In 1818, the slave captain Juan Camilo Torres, alongside another twenty male slaves, unsuccessfully filed for their emancipation on account of their support for the king's cause. The San Juan slaves had also openly declared their freedom during the conflict with Spanish governor Miguel Tacón, refusing to collaborate with him, and thus their political inclinations were less than clear-cut. Not all the slaves participated in this legal effort to acquire formal emancipation, however.[73]

Gerónimo Torres, the would-be master of the San Juan community, finally found an opportunity, and the courage, to travel to the mining enclave in 1819. He arrived at the mine hoping to peacefully bring the men and women there back under his formal control. As he recalled later, he did not challenge members of this community in any way. Instead, he claimed to have provided them with fresh tools and medical care, allowing them to remain in possession of their garden plots, and declaring that he would not charge anyone for whatever property might have been lost or destroyed over the previous years. Torres even allegedly said that the slaves could continue to mine for their own gold, and expressed his willingness to grant further concessions. But his position was a tenuous one. It seems that it was the slaves who gave Gerónimo a concession by allowing him to enter San Juan in the first place.[74]

By his own admission, Gerónimo Torres's plans were thwarted. His "indulgent" approach, he had anticipated, would allow him to dispense with "the severity and rigor that have always been deemed necessary for governing the blacks." Nevertheless, he had traveled to

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San Juan with a guarantee from the governor of Popayán that, if necessary, authorities would use force to subdue the San Juan community. The slaves, Torres mentioned, had at first clearly faked "an apparent submission to their master's dominion," but they soon showed him their "pride" and "insolence." Pushback from the slaves, in Torres's perception, only confirmed his prejudices. He believed that slaves had an "innate and irreconcilable hatred" against masters. This hatred, Torres wrote, originated as soon as slaves ceased to feel the burden of their master's authority.[75]

In Torres' view, effective enslavement rested on the threat and actual use of force. He specifically mentioned the scare tactics and the violent means available to a slaveholder in the Pacific mining districts. When a particular male slave proved openly belligerent, Torres threatened to send him to Barbacoas, where he would be sold to the infamous slaver Casimiro Cortés. This would scare other members of the San Juan community into submission, Torres expected. Cortés, who enjoyed much influence in the district of Barbacoas, had been accused in 1787 of causing the death of two slaves he severely punished and tortured. In 1798, his slaves brought a legal complaint for cruel punishments.[76] Even under threat to be sold to Cortés, the individual in question remained at San Juan and "considers himself a free man." Unless the government acted to "subjugate" this and the other slaves, Torres believed, his authority as master could not be restored. However, his request to the governor for a commissioner and soldiers to travel to San Juan, arrest the community leaders, and sell them off to Cortés was rejected.[77]

Although the residents of San Juan did not achieve formal emancipation, neither did the Torres family succeed in enforcing their full authority as masters.[78] Apparently the last member of the Torres y Tenorio family to ever set foot on San Juan, Gerónimo Torres left Popayán for Bogotá soon after his failed attempt to bring the autonomous slaves to heel. But he would continue the fight by other means. As elected senator (he was a member of Congress from 1821 to 1828),[79] Torres inaugurated Popayán's campaign to modify the manumission law to reflect even more accurately the masters' needs and perceptions. This campaign rested once again on the propagation of the prejudiced narratives about the alleged "wicked" social and moral condition of the enslaved. This was a counter-exegesis of liberty,

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a rejection of the propositions that bound labor should end as soon as possible, and that slaves and former slaves were not innate criminals or childish entities but people worthy of political belonging on an equal basis.

Torres's main contribution to this counter-exegesis, a printed pamphlet denouncing the manumission law as an affront to proper social order and hierarchy, evidently drew on his family's failure to fully subjugate the community of San Juan to the yoke of slavery. It also reflected his own personal failure to fully restore the world to its old seigneurial order. Despite the fact that Colombia's antislavery legislation safeguarded the masters' right to hold other human beings as property, Torres insisted that the manumission law undermined the property rights of slaveholders. Moreover, he declared that the law seriously threatened the health of the body politic, the peace of the republic, and the legitimately unequal order of the world. High Popayán patricians defended the old social order both publicly and in private, and they questioned whether fulfilling the constitutional mandate for equality was even feasible in Colombia.[80]

Torres proposed that Congress decree the absolute freedom of all slaves, but with no intention of allowing freed people to simply walk away from their masters. Once the slaves were freed, their monetary value would be recognized as national debt, with the government paying the former masters a 3 percent annual interest until the value of the slaves was paid in full. Torres proposed that the freed people be deemed minors, thereby remaining under the control of their former masters as their legal guardians. As wards of their social betters, the former slaves would remain bound to the mines and haciendas where they labored; they would work for wages, paying an annual tax of eight pesos from their salary. The collected funds would be then redistributed among the former masters as compensation for the liberated slaves – even though these freed people would still be toiling under their old master's authority, and as minors who were not actually emancipated.[81]

Besides ensuring compensation for lost property, keeping former slaves under the control of their former masters was seen as a way to prevent otherwise "inevitable" upheaval, and the final upending of social order. Torres insisted that the sudden liberation of thousands of individuals who had lived on the fringes of society would usher in a

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violent cataclysm. Their "indolence" and lack of education and property would lead slaves to behave improperly after an abrupt transition from slavery to freedom. Tacitly and inaccurately drawing on the example of San Juan, Torres wrote with no little vitriol that freed slaves would naturally fall into criminal behavior, claiming to have seen it happen with his own eyes. He reported to have witnessed slave gangs avoiding "the dominion of their masters, taking over all the properties, gold sources and mine tools." He had seen how a decade of "complete freedom" among slaves had led them to "a life of leisure, libertinage, and all sorts of vices, robbing, destroying, and killing each other."[82]

Torres even claimed to have witnessed how the libertine slaves, appalled at the horrific consequences of their freedom, willingly returned to the authority of the masters. The libertines he described decided to return to slavery, "frightened by the horrendous abyss of disorders in which they had fallen." The excess of liberty left them "naked, hungry, loaded with misery, corruption, superstition and crime," anxious to return to slavery, imploring "protection and shelter from their masters." Life in slavery, unlike life in freedom, was a peaceful paradise in Torres's estimation. His pamphlet described slavery as an orderly existence in which slaves lived "with affluence, overflowing with basic and even sumptuary food, had many garments, and all had abundant gold jewelry."[83] Torres turned his distorted version of the San Juan episodes into a cautionary tale, a prefiguration of what would happen throughout Colombia unless even liberated slaves were firmly kept in their place.

Keeping manumitted slaves in their place was also a tactic used to prevent the alleged "natural" animosity among blacks and whites from turning into a new kind of war. "The black man will never mix with the white man," Torres explained, and "the black man will forever be the white man's enemy." Visibly and naturally different from each other, blacks and whites were predestined to fight in an epochal struggle for power. Since Colombia's weak government was unable to prevent this conflict, the responsibility of containing the former slaves fell to the masters. They alone could keep those dangerous minors under close watch. This guardianship, moreover, had one final and chilling goal: it was deemed a necessary step toward the gradual dissolution of Colombia's "African belt," to "extinguish the black color." Torres suggested that vagrants and prostitutes be sent to

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gold mines and haciendas, where they would presumably initiate the work of miscegenation to "whiten" the Republic.[84]

It seems that Ibargüen's assessment of aristocratic sentiment was on point. Members of the Popayán elite despised those of his calidad, and leading patricians of Spanish stock proved unwilling to accept the principle of equality, clinging instead to stereotypes about slaves, former slaves, and people of African descent. Further adding to Torres's counter-exegesis, the newly established Electoral Assembly of Popayán and other Popayán slaveholders joined the effort to undermine the antislavery initiatives. Like Torres, they could not help but reveal the hierarchical ideology, patriarchal sensibility, and essentialist perceptions underpinning their anxieties about slave emancipation. Colombia's manumission law, another senator from Popayán would declare in 1829, "undermines the foundations of society."[85]

The alarmed slaveholders' apprehensions, however, were founded on ideas shared by most Colombian framers and legislators in 1821. Popayán patricians defended a seigneurial order based on the conviction that severing the bonds of dependency tying the slaves to the masters would have fatal consequences on the larger social order. This conviction was built into the manumission law since its early conception in Antioquia. As in 1814, in 1821 Félix José de Restrepo espoused the free womb principle and gradualism on indemonstrable premises. He assumed as a matter of fact that an unconditional, immediate liberation of slaves would bring about "disasters," the "ruin" of the "white" slaveholders, "great inconveniences," and a "violent explosion."[86] Dispensing with his knowledge that people of color also owned slaves, Restrepo adopted the tendentious view of the end of slavery as an inevitable clash of black against white rather than as a matter of politics in the age of republican independence and representative government. Restrepo's own authority over his slaves, after all, was not predicated on his now anathematized Spanish ancestry. It rested, instead, on his continuing legal competence to buy, sell, and hold other human beings as property.[87]

* * *

What revolutionary leaders called Spanish enslavement ended soon after 1821, but domestic slavery continued. Rather than a passive

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inheritance from the Spanish period, this was a deliberate continuity. Many slaves, former slaves, and some magistrates and legislators cast serious doubts on a limited, gradual approach to antislavery. Liberty from Spain, some argued, would be incomplete without freedom from slavery. For some powerful masters, however, the tension between the two seemed less alarming. For many scions of the Popayán Spanish clans, keeping an enslaved workforce was central to their effort to revive the gold economy and uphold their place in the world. They even offered to end slavery in name only, so long as the freed people remained under their power. Mastering others constituted and made visible their standing as true patricians in a seigneurial, unequal order that they refused to relinquish.

Committed to slaveholding, Gerónimo Torres avoided employing free people of color, preferring to exercise authority over enslaved servants. From Bogotá, he sent to Popayán for an enslaved page and an enslaved cook. He would take a free person as a cook only if there was no other choice. In the end, he grudgingly compromised. The young slave Rafael had recently married a manumitted woman working as a cook. Torres received news in 1827 that the couple was to move to Bogotá to enter his service. Rafael would be his page, but Torres would have to suffer Rafael's free wife cooking his meals. Rafael's wife, though legally free, would enter the household of a severe master, with her husband still enslaved and liable to physical punishment.[88] Freedom from slavery was thus a rare and mixed experience, an ambiguous situation in a new age of limited slave emancipation and complete liberty from Spain.

The Republic of Colombia lasted only about ten years, and its manumission law failed to stimulate slave emancipations. By 1830, only seventy-three slaves had been manumitted in the old governorate of Popayán, where most slaves were still concentrated. Popayán's slaveholding elite systematically undermined and dramatically mismanaged the manumission boards. In the city of Cartagena, 101 slaves were freed by 1831. Even in Antioquia, with its early and more palpable commitment to slave emancipation, only eighty-four manumissions took place between the passing of the Colombian manumission law and 1830. Only four of these emancipations were formalized with no compensation for the masters. Most of these freed slaves paid for their own freedom. The commitment to humanity once expressed

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by Antioquia's republican leaders had dissipated, at least in practice. Overall, manumissions in Antioquia sharply declined between 1820 and 1830.[89]

Corral expressed his desire to end forced labor altogether and Restrepo painted his 1821 antislavery convictions and actions as an "abolition," the "radical remedy" of slavery. Slaveholding, Restrepo claimed, was an illegal act of force.[90] The voices of many slaves during sundry judicial encounters, however, encourage us to interrogate the place of those assertions in the history of abolition. Slaves developed a radical, complex politics of antislavery. For some, antislavery politics hinged on the possibility of actually and immediately ending slavery. Soon after 1810, moreover, a new conception of what it meant to abolish slavery emerged. Founded on slaves' exegesis of liberty and rooted in the judicial forum, this idea of liberating all the slaves was indistinguishable from liberation from Spain and equality before the law. For vanguard abolitionists, the time was now.

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