

*Freedom's Captives: Slavery and Gradual Emancipation on the Colombian Black Pacific.* By Yesenia Barragan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 344 p. \$29.99, paperback.

In *Freedom's Captives: Slavery and Gradual Emancipation on the Colombian Black Pacific*, Yesenia Barragán explores how the passage of the Free Womb Law of 1821 generated new forms of captivity and social domination in Colombia. Focusing on the department of Chocó, located along Colombia's northwestern Pacific Coast, Barragán highlights the "competing struggles over disparate modes of freedom, unfreedom, and bondage" that were unique to this region during the period of gradual emancipation between 1821 and final abolition in 1852 (3). Passed immediately after Colombia's independence from Spain, the Free Womb Law banned the importation of enslaved people to Gran Colombia, established *juntas de manumisión* to build support for the new republican government through ceremonially freeing a select number of enslaved people, and declared the children of enslaved women who were born after the law legally free but bound to their mothers' masters until the age of eighteen. Despite its design to destroy slavery in Colombia, Barragán contends that this law created new forms of captivity that left the children born after 1821 in a "tenuous space of

transitory bondage," as they were not legally enslaved but could still be bought and sold (10). Through her analysis of the formation and impact of this law, Barragán argues that "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," even after final abolition (6).

Drawing on the methods of Marisa Fuentes, Barragán reads the social, political, and legal archival fragments of this period "along the bias grain" to reconstruct the lives of the freed, enslaved, and Free Womb captives of the Colombian Pacific.<sup>5</sup> Barragán also incorporates methods of historical ethnography to emphasize the unique geographic and social world of the Chocó region, a frontier made up of mixed status families and characterized by its gold mines and rivers, which she argues created a "paradoxical culture marked by both relentless captivity and extraordinary independence" (8). Moving chronologically from the passage of the Free Womb Law, *Freedom's Captives* is divided into three parts that trace the formation and challenges to gradual emancipation and final abolition. Part I reconstructs the world of nineteenth-century Chocó to highlight the control that Afro-

---

<sup>5</sup> Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 7.

Colombians had over its rivers and gold mines in contrast to the region's capitals of Novita and Quibdo, where the majority of white slaveholders and mine owners resided. Focusing on life in Chocó, Barragán traces the increased use of Free Womb captives who replaced enslaved miners after 1821 and the trade of Free Womb children in cities until the 1840s. Part II examines the formation, application, and debates surrounding the Free Womb Law with a focus on the compensation and trafficking of Free Womb captives. In this section, Barragán emphasizes how lawmakers extended Free Womb bondage and legislated the intraregional trade of Free Womb children at any age and allowed the interregional trade of those past puberty. Barragán also highlights the ties between gradual emancipation policy and political movements in Colombia by demonstrating the ways that officials associated with the republican government used the promise of eventual freedom to maintain enslaved peoples' loyalty to the new national government. Finally, Barragán uses the reversal of Free Womb Law in 1842 to argue against the notion that abolition was guaranteed. Part Three examines the process and legacies of final abolition in Chocó and Colombia with a focus on the process of compensation and its place in the post-slavery economy. In the book's concluding epilogue, Barragán

borrowed from the methods of Sadia Hartman to consider the "afterlife of gradual emancipation" by connecting the continued attempts of social, political, and economic control of Afro-Colombians in this region to the continued and elevated violence that they have faced at the hands of paramilitaries during Colombia's most recent civil war (36).

*Freedom's Captives* makes many important contributions to the growing historical field on the Black Pacific, and the historiography of slavery and abolition in both Colombia and the larger Atlantic World. Barragán's focus on Chocó highlights the importance of geographic space on the experience of slavery and abolition, moving the field beyond the categorization of urban and plantation slavery to examine the institution in frontier cities and small-scale gold mines. Furthermore, Barragán shifts historical understandings of gradual emancipation away from Cuba and Brazil, which have long characterized the field despite being the final two nations in the hemisphere to adopt these policies.<sup>6</sup> Through her investigation of the formation and legacy of the Free Womb Law in Colombia, Barragán reveals a much longer history of gradual emancipation policy in the Americas that was emulated and altered across different nations throughout the nineteenth century, while also adding to the growing

---

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

number of historians who have emphasized the impact of specific regional and national politics on these laws.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, Barragán shifts the view of the Free Womb Law itself away from one that was designed only to bring abolition to Colombia and instead reveals the ways that it prolonged the use and trade of Free Womb children who continued to exist in a state of captivity, despite their status as legally free.

Overall, *Freedom's Captives* is an impressive and well-written book that uses new interpretations of old archives to shift understandings of the chronology and impact of gradual emancipation laws in Colombia and the Americas. Barragán's writing brings Chocó to life, providing new insights about slavery, abolition, and the shape of the most recent violence and dispossession in the region that will be important for scholars of Colombian history and politics, the Black Pacific, and slavery and abolition more generally.

Audrey Rankin  
PhD Student  
Temple University

---

<sup>7</sup> Marcela Echeverri Muñoz, "Slave Exports and the Politics of Slave Punishment during Colombia's

Abolition Process (1820s-1840s)," *Journal of Global Slavery* 7 (2022), 73-102.