

SLAVERY AND CHILD TRAFFICKING IN PUERTO RICO AT THE CLOSING OF THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE: *The Young Captives of the Slaver Majesty, 1859-18651*

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RESUMO

Quando quantificadas, as publicações sobre a escravidão africana nas ilhas “açucareiras” do Caribe dedicadas a Porto Rico são minoritárias. A escassa cobertura da colônia espanhola pode se explicar, em parte, pela sua tardia participação nas “revoluções do açúcar» fato que conduziu à consolidação do sistema de plantações organizado em base ao trabalho servil que foi implantado no Atlântico Sul. Porto Rico participou no comércio de escravos durante um período muito breve, aproximadamente entre 1765 e 1850, num clima interno caracterizado por uma escassez crônica de capital e por mudanças revolucionárias externas que, finalmente, levaram à proibição da trata de escravos por Inglaterra a partir de 1807. Como resultado da campanha inglesa a favor da abolição internacional do comércio de escravos, Espanha viu-se obrigada a assinar tratados com ela para terminar com a importação de cativos africanos nas suas colônias. Espanha o fez com reservas e pelo tanto não cedeu nas suas atividades, abastecendo com mão de obra africana suas colônias. Isto configurou as oportunidades e limitações que caracterizaram o tráfico de escravos para Cuba e Porto Rico durante a primeira metade do século XIX. Como resultado, não foram poupados esforços para ocultar a procedência africana dos carregamentos transportadas a Porto Rico nesses anos. Este ensaio pretende contribuir com um assunto pouco estudado, mediante a análise da última introdução que se conhece de escravos africanos em Porto Rico, acontecida em 1859 com a chegada clandestina de uns 1000

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Palavras-chave: servidumbre e comercio de escravos, escravidão Porto Rico.

RESUMEN

Cuando computamos el monto de publicaciones sobre la esclavitud africana en las islas “azucareras” del Caribe, la cantidad de aquellas dedicadas a Puerto Rico parece ser modesta en comparación. La escasa cobertura de la colonia española se puede explicar en parte por su tardía participación en las “revoluciones de azúcar” que condujo a la consolidación del sistema de plantaciones organizada en base al trabajo servil que fue implantado en el Atlántico Sur. Puerto Rico participó en tráfico negrero durante un período de tiempo más corto, aproximadamente entre 1765 y 1850, en un clima interno caracterizado por una escasez crónica de capital y por una serie de cambios revolucionarios externos que finalmente llevó a Inglaterra a prohibir la trata en su esfera imperial a partir de 1807. Como resultado de la campaña inglesa a favor de la abolición internacional de la trata negrera España se vio obligada a firmar una serie de tratados Anglo-Hispanos para poner fin a la importación de cautivos africanos en sus colonias indianas. España lo hizo a regañadientes, y por lo tanto no cedió en su empeño de abastecerlas con mano de obra africana. Este trasfondo moldeó las oportunidades y limitaciones que caracterizan el tráfico de esclavos en Cuba y Puerto Rico durante la primera mitad del siglo diecinueve. Como resultado, no se escatimaron esfuerzos para ocultar la procedencia africana de las cargazonas transportadas a Puerto Rico en esos años. Este ensayo pretende contribuir a este último tema poco estudiado mediante el examen de la última introducción conocida de esclavos africanos en Puerto Rico que se produjo en 1859 con la llegada clandestina de unos 1000 cautivos provenientes del Congo, la mayor parte de ellos niños y adolescentes, a bordo del barco esclavista Majesty.

Palabras claves: servidumbre y tráfico negrero, esclavitud Puerto Rico.

ABSTRACT

When contrasted to the extensive amount of published work on the enslavement of Africans in the mature “sugar” islands of the Caribbean, the magnitude of such work devoted to Puerto Rico seems modest by comparison. The sparse coverage on the Spanish colony may be partly explained by its comparatively late participation in the “sugar revolutions” that led to the consolidation of a slave-based plantation

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complex in the South Atlantic. Puerto Rico partook of these changes over a shorter time span, roughly between 1765 and 1850, in a domestic climate characterized by a shortage of capital and by a series of external revolutionary changes that eventually led England to abolish the slave trade within its imperial domain starting in 1807. An intense British-led international abolitionist campaign followed, and Spain was compelled to sign a string of Anglo-Spanish treaties to cease the importation of African captives in its American colonies. Spain did so reluctantly, and continued to look for ways to supply Cuba and Puerto Rico with bonded African labor. This background helped shape the opportunities and constraints under which the nefarious commerce that serviced both islands functioned during the first half of the nineteenth century. As a result, during that interval no effort was spared to conceal the African provenance of the involuntary migrants taken to Puerto Rico. This essay seeks to contribute to this latter under-explored theme by examining the last known introduction of enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico that occurred in 1859 with the clandestine arrival of nearly an estimated 1000 Congolese captives, mainly children and adolescents, aboard the slaver *Majesty*.

Key works: slavery and slave trade , slavery Puerto Rico.

When contrasted to the trajectory followed by the mature “sugar” islands of the Caribbean, Puerto Rico’s participation in the “sugar revolutions” that led to the consolidation of a slave-based plantation belt in the South Atlantic was a rather late development. It followed an ambitious imperial administrative, economic, political and social overhaul that was gradually implemented by the Spanish Crown during the eighteenth century, which laid the initial groundwork for the island’s future transition to commercial agriculture. The Caroline reforms, as the reorganizational measures implemented from the late 1750s came to be known, sought to strengthen royal control in the Spanish American colonial periphery with the opening of new ports, the creation of mercantile companies, the establishment of Economic Societies and the liberalization of slave trading. Another institutional incentive, the 1815 *Cédula de Gracias*, authorized foreign immigration and trade in Puerto Rico over the following 15 years. Coupled with the devastation of Saint Domingue’s sugar and coffee estates during the Haitian Revolution, these forces helped stimulate the rise of slave-based

sugar plantation enclaves in Puerto Rico during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The timing of Puerto Rico's participation in the sugar revolutions helped shape the distinctive character that slave trading took in the Spanish colony, particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century. Although there was a noticeable influx of enslaved Africans after 1765, the upsurge largely benefited a reduced number of landowners who had sufficient capital to acquire them. As a result, most of the slaves introduced by the *Real Compañía de Asiento de Negros* were re-exported to *Tierra Firme*. The majority of the landowners did without *bozales* or procured alternate supplies of bonded labor via clandestine channels, as they had done throughout much of the pre-plantation era. The slave population of Puerto Rico rose considerably after about 1800, aided by revolutionary-era transfers first from Hispaniola and later from Venezuela. After Spain signed successive accords with England starting in 1817 to ban African imports in the Hispanic Caribbean, their influx continued in disguised form under the provisions of the 1815 *Cédula*, which allowed planters to purchase slaves in the Eastern Antilles. This last maneuver was part of a concerted effort on the part of Crown officials and their colonial representatives, working more or less in tandem with interested third parties, to conceal the African provenance of the shipments (DORSEY, 2003).

This essay seeks to contribute to this latter under-explored theme by examining the last known introduction of enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico that occurred in 1859 with the unauthorized arrival of nearly an estimated 1000 Congolese captives, mainly children and adolescents, aboard the slaver *Majesty*. The clandestine operation failed when the vessel ran aground and was forced to make land near the east coast of Puerto Rico, where the Spanish authorities confiscated it. The case prompts many questions of interest to students of the African Diaspora: who financed the unlawful slave-trading expedition? If the voyage's intended destination was Puerto Rico who, if any, were its accomplices in the island and/or abroad? Where in the Congo region or elsewhere in west central Africa did the mostly children and young adults originate? What was their fate in Puerto

Rico? According to the historian Joseph Dorsey, unearthing the full story of this sad episode would require a thorough investigation of all parties who may have been involved in Spain, France, England and their respective American colonies. It might also be useful to do likewise in the Danish Caribbean, where the captain, the first mate and the pilot of the *Majesty* fled to evade justice shortly after the barque capsized; the United States, where the ship was rumored to have been built; and in the west central African region where its victims may have originated.

Due to space limitations, this paper will not attempt the systematic examination which this case justly deserves. Rather, it is a modest effort to explore, through the use of secondary sources and primary materials, how this incident fits into the larger history of slavery in Puerto Rico, what it reveals about slave trading in the age of abolition and what we may be able to learn about the identity and ethnic origins of its victims. The paper is divided into five concise inter-related sections. The first one surveys the history of bondage of both Native Americans and Africans in the Spanish colony, and highlights the transition from the *encomienda* to African slavery. Emphasis is placed on the legal and extra-legal schemes used to exploit Indians and Africans. The next segment deals with the attempts to conceal the African provenance of the human cargoes shipped to Puerto Rico during the first half of the nineteenth century. The third part aims to link the ethnic identities of the young captives to their potential places of origin in west central Africa. A fourth section extends the previous discussion to the sociohistorical context of slave trading in west and west central Africa, with a particular focus on the circumstances behind the enslavement of the young captives. The final section traces the whereabouts of the captives in Puerto Rico, and shows how their status was transformed over time, which changed from *emancipados/as* to *colonos libres* before their reclassification as *jornaleros libres*. None of the name changes shielded them from the servile conditions to which they were subjected.

Native and African Workers: unmasking Servitude in the Pre-Plantation Era

The *Majesty* incident exposed the ineffectiveness, if not the futility of British pressure on Spain to cease the importation of slaves in the Hispanic Caribbean. After banning the traffic within its domain in 1807 England turned to diplomatic appeals, economic pressure and naval power to persuade other nations to do likewise. On paper, Spain went along by signing several anti-trade treaties, starting in 1817. In practice, however, it resisted British demands in favor of accommodating the growing laboring needs of Hispanic Antillean planters who had recently begun establishing sugar and coffee plantations. Spain's duplicitous position dovetailed with the interests of unscrupulous speculators seeking to join, or to expand their participation in, the illicit business that serviced Puerto Rico. They found ample encouragement from Hispanic Antillean colonists with a deeply entrenched penchant for getting their way on matters of self-interest, with or without the support of metropolitan overseers. Some of them had more than a passing familiarity with African slavery, which had been instituted in Puerto Rico around the early 1500s to supplement or replace the *encomienda*, another coercive scheme through which Iberian conquerors exacted tribute and personal services from Native Americans. Ever since 1542, when the New Laws banning the *encomienda* were enacted, the conquistadors began complaining of the "disappearance" or extinction of the indigenous workers. Nevertheless, they continued to subjugate Amerindians within their reach, including those arbitrarily seized on the island and/or during slaving raids across the Greater Caribbean. In some instances, they passed them off as rebels captured in "just wars" or reclassified them as *mestizos* (SUED BADILLO, 1995, p. 32).

When holding on to their "servants" became untenable—not only because of growing legal challenges and the continuing decimating effects that warfare, diseases and overwork had on the remaining native workforce, but also because of the prohibitive cost of capturing replacements in *Tierra Firme*, marronage and other acts of Indian resistance—they turned

increasingly to enslaved Africans to satisfy their unmet needs for tractable workers (BRAU, 1972, p. 303-305; COLL Y TOSTE, 1922, p. 302-303). Prior to the large-scale introduction of enslaved Africans Indian servitude shifted from “legal” (through *encomiendas* and *repartimientos*) to illegal enslavement (or some other less contentious form of servile status). That option was not readily available to colonists who wished to acquire new supplies of *bozales*. Throughout the sixteenth century African captives were being brought into the island via legal licenses, *arribadas forzosas* (unplanned or “accidental” landings) and contraband (GELPÍ BAÍZ, 2000, p. 18-19). For the most part only colonists with adequate financial resources or credit could purchase enough of them to keep their enterprises economically viable.

Since the successful transition from Indian to African labor generally favored economically solvent colonists, their financially-strapped peers were still able to acquire slaves intermittently through transfers, inheritances, gifts, or from smugglers and privateers. Regardless of the strategy used, Caribbean slave owners were on borrowed time. The Iberian overseas expansion became increasingly driven by the extraction of precious metals. After the profitable exploitation of placer deposits in the archipelago ceased around the middle of the sixteenth century, Spanish colonization was redirected to *Tierra Firme*. Concurrently, the “legal” influx of enslaved Africans in most of Cuba, Santo Domingo, Jamaica and Puerto Rico dwindled precipitously.

As the Caribbean phase of the Spanish colonization in the New World came an abrupt end, the colonists who remained on the islands were left to their own devices. Some began carving out *hatos* on the vast, unenclosed lands where they raised cattle and draft animals, harvested timber and grew provisions and cash crops. Others orbited towards piracy and subsistence farming, supplementing their livelihoods with fishing, hunting and an assortment of artisanal trades. Although these pursuits were not as financially rewarding as mining and sugar production, the most resourceful among them took advantage of the enslaved Africans they could get their hands on. They did so by bartering

local products for captives and other goods hawked by illegal traders operating out of the non-Hispanic Caribbean. By their very nature, most of these transactions went unrecorded, in no small part because they implicated practically every social sector. Metropolitan authorities may have grumbled about the dangers of contraband, but in the face of more important priorities, they tacitly tolerated it. In some cases, they fully endorsed it, as demonstrated by the unmitigated support the Spanish Crown gave to the corsair-smuggler Miguel Enríquez in exchange for his privateering service (LÓPEZ CANTOS, 1994). Smuggling became the proverbial “elephant in the room.” Colonial officials half-heartedly investigated allegations involving contraband (LÓPEZ CANTOS, 1975, 249-284). One of the probes conducted in the 1690s revealed that slaves were among the chief commodities purchased illegally from the foreign suppliers (OQUENDO RODRÍGUEZ, 2015, p. 170).

Although much of the illicit activity was cloaked by a code of silence, David Stark’s recent study of the baptismal, marriage and burial parish records of nearly two dozen Puerto Rican communities for the years 1660-1800 has revealed important insights about the role which the African slave trade and slavery played in the island around that time. He reported that sugar planters relied on slaves imported illegally from the British Caribbean to fill their chronic need for tractable labor after the *asiento* with Portugal was cancelled in 1640. Without capital or credit, neither planters nor the ranchers who succeeded them following the consolidation of the *hato* economy were rarely able to afford buying more than one adult African slave at a time. The author also reported that *hateros* typically had less use for male slaves than did sugar planters, and regularly depended on the labor of women and children (STARK, 2015, p. 75; 79; 124). Both of those two trends—low acquisitive power and a demand for workers that met stipulated gender or age criteria—hints at the possible preference during this period for enslaved women and children, the latter of whom would have fetched a lower price. Stark concluded that the more successful of these landowners managed to preside over a relatively small but naturally reproducing enslaved workforce. The government’s

breakdown of the *hato* system over the course of the eighteenth century would lead to the subsequent rise of *haciendas* devoted to large-scale commercial agriculture (GIL-BERMEJO GARCÍA, 1970; MOSCOSO, 2001, p. 99-250).

After a long hiatus, large-scale slave importations in the Hispanic Caribbean resumed gradually after about 1765, most conspicuously in Trinidad, Cuba and Puerto Rico. Prompted by the imperial reorganization launched by the Bourbon monarchy, especially under the rule of Charles III, *asientos* were again awarded to private suppliers who agreed to furnish the Spanish American colonies with assigned quotas of the involuntary workers. This influx included enslaved African children, who were classified chiefly by age for sale and taxation purposes (ÁLVAREZ NAZARIO, 1974, p. 336-339; for a comparison with the importation of children in eighteenth-century Brazil, consult Gutiérrez, 1989). The *asiento* arrangement fell apart soon afterward when the contractors failed to fully comply with the agreements and/or engaged in contraband. They also found very few prospective buyers in Puerto Rico able to buy their human merchandize in hard currency. The cash-strapped farmers were financially unprepared to take full advantage of the program of economic revitalization. Very few of them had the hard currency at hand needed to purchase slaves. Eventually most of the 12,575 slaves landed by the *Compañía* between 1766 and 1770 were re-exported to other points in Spanish America (CHINEA, 2014, p. 81).

The lack of capital slowed rather than end the transition to an export-based farming economy. Ever since the collapse of the mining cycle, the islanders dealt with the ensuing demonetization by building a “subterranean economy” that linked Puerto Rico and the non-Hispanic Caribbean (MORALES CARRIÓN, 1974, p. 35-99; LÓPEZ CANTOS, 1985) into a mutually rewarding barter system. Even the Bourbon-authorized Barcelona Company, which the Crown chartered in 1756 to help redirect colonial production to the Hispanic American mercantile system, became embroiled in contraband. According to Governor Miguel de Muesas, the majority of the slaves toiling on the island’s *haciendas* in the late 1760s had been introduced illegally (CHINEA, 2014, p.

70). Unable to satisfy the growing demand for tractable labor, the colonial government intensified the drive to congregate and control the dispersed, spatially mobile rural population (Scarano, 1989). These measures paved the way for future plans to harness the labor of peasants known as *desacomodados* (landless or unpropertied) and *agregados* (squatters). Mounting complaints about their alleged vagrancy and idleness would ultimately lead, over the course of the following century, to the implementation of legislative measures to mold them into a rural workforce.

Faced with the *hacendados*' growing need for cheap labor, concerned about the significant loss of valuable island resources and custom revenues to smugglers and anxious to convert Puerto Rico into a self-sustaining, thriving agricultural colony, the imperial regime liberalized slave trading. A 1765 report of conditions in Puerto Rico found that the enslaved population numbered just over 5,000. One third of them was comprised of children who were probably sixteen years old or younger ("Memoria," 1765, p. 399). Just how many of them were recently imported is not known. In addition to the Africans brought by *asentistas*, scores of refugees fleeing the revolutionary convulsion in Hispaniola transferred their slaves to Trinidad, Puerto Rico and Cuba. A decade later *emigrados* escaping the turbulence of the Spanish American wars of independence followed suit. Additionally the 1815 *Cédula*, a royal concession that rewarded Puerto Rican Creoles for their loyalty during the aforementioned anticolonial revolts, authorized the acquisition of slaves from the nearby non-Hispanic Caribbean over the next fifteen years. Island-wide, the enslaved population doubled from 17,536 in 1812 to 51,265 in 1846 (DIETZ, 1986, p. 36). Propelled by this influx, by 1840 Puerto Rico became one of the world's leading exporters of slave-produced sugar and its byproducts. Enslaved African labor helped the island attain the dubious distinction (CHINEA, 2014, p. 162).

The Repeating Island: concealing the African Slave Trade during the Age of Abolition

A series of Anglo-Spanish accords signed in 1817, 1820, 1835 and 1845 banned the introduction of African slaves in the Hispanic Caribbean. While in each case Spain pledged to cease its participation in the nefarious commerce, *bozales* nevertheless continued to pour into Puerto Rico through the 1840s. In circumventing the anti-slave trading provisions, the first line of defense that Spanish officials in Puerto Rico relied on was to remain silent, just like the *encomenderos* and *hateros* who saw no enslaved Amerindians or Africans in their midst did. If pressed by British or French consular agents, the next response was to deny that the reputed landing occurred or to ask for evidence of the landing. If the inquisitor contested both deceptive answers, the fall back rejoinder was to claim that the cargo consisted of slaves shipped from the non-Hispanic Caribbean under the provisions of the 1815 *Cédula* or a special license approved by the governor.

The Spanish bureaucrats' last response left out a crucial piece of information: that slavers servicing the island first transported their human cargo from Africa to the Dutch, French or the Danish Caribbean. From there, the African captives were transshipped to Puerto Rico to complete the final leg of their involuntary transatlantic journey. In this way, the local officials or their peninsular supervisors remained in compliance with the letter but not the spirit of the Anglo-Spanish treaties. The deceptive scheme had all the makings of Antonio Benítez-Rojo's (1996) "repeating islands" metaphor: the illegal trading strategy which the *encomenderos* and *hateros* perfected over the previous two centuries in order to overcome their peripheral status within Hispanic American imperial economy comes back with a new twist. In the repeated version, the imperial state appropriated its colonial subjects' "subterranean economy" and covered it with a veneer of legality in order to ensure a steady supply of enslaved African labor for the Puerto Rican plantation enclaves. As the last and perhaps best known of many slave trade voyages to reach

Puerto Rico, the aborted *Majesty* voyage falls squarely within this well-established legacy of clandestine double-dealing.

Of course, Spain was not the sole promoter or beneficiary of the illegal activity. Others partook in it for a variety of reasons. The motivations for those engaged in the supply side of the trafficking business varied depending on what role they performed, but the vast majority clearly valued financial gain above humanitarian concerns. For many involved in the receiving end, principally planters, the anti-slave trading restrictions were just another unwelcome byproduct of international politics. Like their agrarian forebears—*encomenderos* and *hateros*—they carefully maneuvered around the new impediments. With rare exceptions, colonial officials in Puerto Rico literally looked the other way and vehemently denied that prohibited slaves had entered the island with their knowledge or consent. They also suppressed compromising evidence, such as slave importation tax entries that exposed the government's complicity. Some corrupt functionaries may have been driven by a patriotic impulse borne out of their resentment towards British intrusion in Spanish colonial affairs; others, especially *intendentes*, felt an obligation to make the colony productive for the metropolis in view of the declining fortunes of the shrunk Spanish empire following the wars of independence; and still others, acting out of self-interest, were tempted by the substantial bribes and other inducements generated by the illicit activity. Hence the underhanded commerce lingered on, nourished by the Machiavellian machinations of insatiable financiers, profit-minded planters, and crooked or incompetent Spanish administrators.

With so much at stake, the international anti-slave trading conventions had practically no deterrent effect in Puerto Rico. *Negreros* and their associates operating at strategic locations within the Triangular Trade System defied the prohibitions by refitting slavers to resemble passenger and merchant vessels and by falsifying log books, shipping manifestoes, and sale receipts in order to camouflage the African provenance of their victims. Or they relied on bribes, dual citizenship papers and neutral flags. The slavers aimed for a single-stop trip from the west coast of Africa to Puerto Rico or Cuba in order to reduce slave mortality

en route and thus maximize profits. If all else failed, they ferried their secreted cargoes to slave markets in the non-Hispanic Caribbean for subsequent transshipment to the Spanish colonies. In fact, Spain issued the 1815 *Cédula* two years prior to signing the 1817 agreement with England, thus ensuring that planters in Puerto Rico would have a future source of slave labor within easy reach (Dorsey, 2003, p. 104). As could be expected, some 70,000 slaves entered the island from Africa or indirectly from the non-Hispanic Caribbean between 1815 and 1847 (CHINEA, 2014, p. 45).

Children were part and parcel of this influx. The large-scale importation of enslaved children in the southern coastal town of Ponce began in 1818 when 125 African children ranging in age from 11 to 15 years old were introduced from neighboring Guadeloupe. Another 25 were brought the following year. An additional 403 *negrillos*, as slavers widely called them, were imported between 1825 and 1830 with the legal authorization of the Spanish authorities. A greater volume of slaves was introduced without government permission (Pérez Vega, 2005, pp 28; 38). Aided by the coerced immigration, slave-grown sugar quickly began to spread across Puerto Rico's coastal expanse, leading to the emergence of several sugar plantation enclaves. In 1838, just over 50 percent of the rural slaves in Ponce was born in Africa, a proportion that exceeded the one reported for Jamaica in 1807, the last year in which the slave trade was legally permitted in the British Caribbean colony (SCARANO, 1993, p. 217).

There's general consensus that the 1840s marked the effective end to the introduction of enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico. Given the lack of evidence to the contrary, the conclusion seems warranted. But old habits die hard. Governor Francisco Cotoner appears have had just such a cliché in mind when he informed superiors in Spain on January 1859, one month prior to the *Majesty* incident, about his suspicions that enslaved Africans were being illegally introduced in the island (Bursset Flores, 2012, p. 85). Hence, he was not totally surprised when the three-mast slave ship *Majesty* ran aground with nearly a thousand severely emaciated enslaved Africans on board near the eastern coastal

town of Humacao. The same could be said of many of those who rushed to site of the maritime accident/ clandestine landing, which included local residents, planters, merchants, representatives of foreign powers, and municipal and military officials, each of them with different agendas in mind.

Nonetheless, the Spanish authorities were clearly unprepared to cope with the large volume and fragile medical conditions of many of the Africans, not to mention the political firestorm the case sparked. Most of the involuntary passengers were very young, requiring special care that was largely unavailable. Period testimonies described macabre scenes of dead or dying Africans who had been turned into “cheap human cargo,” and of survivors being trooped into a makeshift shed (mostly likely a *barracón*) like a herd of sheep. Almost from the start the consular agents of England and France relentlessly demanded that Governor Cotoner free the Africans and prosecute the criminals who enslaved and illegally transported them (DE LA ROSA, 1986, p. 47).

Understandably alarmed about the incident’s potentially damaging international ramifications the governor had the ship’s crew arrested. Eventually all thirty-two of the deckhands were sentenced to four years in prison. He also leveled charges of obstruction of justice and bribery against the military commander, the *corregidor* (chief magistrate), and the coastal sentinel assigned to the area of the maritime accident. At first he was told that the *Majesty* was a U.S.-built vessel that initially set sail from Santiago de Cuba to New Orleans only to change course and head to Africa, where it loaded between 1,000 to 2,000 men, women and children. A British investigation maintained that the voyage was launched in the southern Spanish port city of Cadiz. From there the ship allegedly traveled to the Congo River, just south of modern-day Cabinda, and took 1,050 captives, mostly children, on board. Conflicting reports indicated that between 7% and 30% of them did not survive the Middle Passage (MORALES CARRIÓN, 1978, p. 217-220; DE LA ROSA, p. 46-47). Of the estimated 653 to 900 who arrived alive some 330 had been put on shore and sold to nearby plantations before the government seized the ship. Another 75 or 76 were taken covertly to Cuba.

Ultimately, 434 were declared *emancipados/as* (emancipated) by virtue of the 1835 treaty that Spain signed with England to end the African slave trade.

The information which Cotoner originally received that hinted of a joint United States-Cuban venture may ultimately help identify who sponsored the ill-fated expedition. By 1850 the main administrative slave-trading centers on this side of the Atlantic were located in the United States. North American seafarers and their financial backers running the covert commerce out of their chief base in New York had developed the traffic in humans into an efficient, lucrative profession that had long, close ties to the Cuban slavocracy. Although the United States was a signatory to the anti-slave trading accords, the Americans did not allow British squadrons to inspect their ships on the high seas. Their consular representatives in Havana also furnished maritime charters to U.S.-made vessels owned or operated by Spaniards or Cubans, which also shielded them from the British naval patrols. Moreover, the U.S. agreed to support the British suppression effort on the West African coast unenthusiastically. During its first nine years of service American warships cleared all of the accused captains or punished them mildly, and returned all apprehended slavers to their original owners (Moreno Fraginals, 1978, vol. 1, p. 279-280). A mediocre record of interceptions, which averaged 3.6 slavers annually between 1843 and 1858, further substantiates the lackadaisical commitment to impeding the illegal traffic. While the U. S. Navy's vacillated, some 400,000 Africans were illegally transported to the Americas during that same interval (MARIS-WOLF, 2014, p. 58).

Unpacking the Cargo: restoring the Ethnic Roots of the Emancipados/as

So far the discussion has centered on the mindset and material conditions in Puerto Rico that fostered systemic patterns of clandestine unlawful economic activity, which engendered the island's "historical tradition of illegal operations." The deeply-rooted, active participation of planters, *hateros*, governors, intendants, ecclesiastics and military officials in smuggling

operations helped set the ground rules for the eventual institutionalization of illegal slave trading, of which the *Majesty* was a clear example. While the illicit, unrecorded shipment of enslaved Africans to the New World has been widely noted in the literature, less attention has been paid to the anonymous victims. Had the *Majesty* succeeded in selling its human cargo surreptitiously, as it tried to, it probably would have left no official trace of it in the colonial archives. Consequently, investigators then or now would have had fewer details about its involuntarily transported passengers, its crew, its potential financial sponsors, and any other pertinent information.

The historian Gwendolyn Hall reminds us that although Africans and their offspring had a major cultural and economic impact in both the Old and New Worlds, they remain “largely invisible as concrete human beings.” Their “descendants in the Americas are almost invariably referred to as blacks and/or slaves or former slaves or at best as generic Africans” (HALL, 2005, p. xiii). Needless to say, the institution of racial slavery that took root, expanded and became institutionalized in the Americas goes a long way towards explaining the European colonial elite’s concerted, conscious determination to dehumanize enslaved Africans. Such cruel practices as auctioning off the so-called *piezas de Indias*, putting them through a seasoning process, forcibly separating their families, branding their skin with very hot or cold irons and inflicting other emotional and physical punishment were all intended to achieve that twisted result. Sufferers were also expected or compelled to leave behind their African ethnic roots. Hall’s innovative study, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (2005) has done much to mend the severed ties.

As suggested above, the *Majesty* affair was clearly not an isolated event. Between 1824 and 1841 the Anglo-Spanish Court of Mixed Commission in Cuba liberated over 10,000 Africans from forty two slave-trading ships captured by the British navy. The binational tribunal that adjudicated the vessels kept detailed biographical and other vital data of the *emancipados*, allowing researchers to partially reconstruct a profile of the victims found on board (LOVEJOY, 2010; ANDERSON, BORUCKI,

DOMINGUES DA SILVA, ELTIS, LACHANCE, MISEVICH, OJO, 2013). The Spanish authorities of Puerto Rico did not ordinarily compile or keep such records. In fact, they strove to suppress as much of that information as possible. Fortunately, a leather-bound register of the *Majesty's emancipados/as* that was apparently compiled on March 8, 1859 has survived. The well-preserved volume is structured around the following personal details gathered from each of *bozales*:

Table 1: Depósito Provisional de Negros Emancipados
(Provisional Processing Site for the Emancipated Africans)

<i>Nombre de su nación</i>	Name in his/her native land
<i>Ídem del santo que se le ha dado en este depósito</i>	Name of the saint that he/she was given while in custody
<i>Nación a que pertenece</i>	Country of origin to which he/she belongs
<i>Buque en que fue apresado</i>	Ship where he/she was seized
<i>Día que fue entregado a la autoridad española</i>	Day in which he/she was turned over to the Spanish authorities
<i>Punto en que fue entregado</i>	Location where he/she was turned over to the government
<i>Edad aproximada</i>	Approximate age
<i>Estatura en el acto en que se flió</i>	Height when he/she was registered
<i>Color</i>	Color
<i>Ojos</i>	Eyes
<i>Pelo</i>	Hair
<i>Boca</i>	Mouth
<i>Nariz</i>	Nose
<i>Señas particulares</i>	Particular body markings

Source: U.S. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Puerto Rican Collection, Box 7, *Negros Emancipados: Filiaciones*, March 8, 1859

Did the first Spanish-language entry “*Nombre de su nación*” listed on Table 1 seek to document the interviewee’s African ethnic identity or affiliation or his/her African name? Since the preposition “de” means “of” in Spanish, the entry should translate as either “Name of his/her *nación*” or “Name of his/her native land.” I have elected to render it as “Name in his/her native land” for three reasons: first, one could expect the interview to begin with a question about the name of the *emancipado/a*. Second, the register has a separate listing for “*Nación a que pertenece*” (“*Nación* to which he/she belongs”) later on. That third entry likely sought to determine their African provenance. As used there *nación* acts as a catchword for African ethnicity, not for one of the modern political states in Africa (CHILDS, 2006, p. 96). In the Ibero-American plantation belt, *nación* is frequently used for stating or ascertaining a person’s African identity (Mina, Ibo, etc.) or even his/her embarkation point (in this case, the Congo River). Lastly, the ambiguous first

notation is immediately followed by “*Idem del santo que se le ha dado en este depósito*” ([“Name] of the Christian saint that he/she received at this processing site”), which appears to confirm that the first entry references the interviewee’s name rather than his/her ethnic identity.

De la Rosa (p. 56-57) worked with that latter supposition in mind when he compiled a partial list of the captives. He used the inexact but closely related “*nombre nacional*” (“national name”) for the first entry, and “*nombre cristiano*” (“Christian name”) for the second.² Knowing what the *Majesty’s* captives called themselves is a crucial piece of evidence for determining their likely African identity or ethnic origins. However, the information must be used cautiously, as Hall advises:

Naming patterns were fluid on both sides of the Atlantic, and Africans often changed their names. Some Africans adopted the names of others in order to honor them. Enslaved Africans sometimes took the name of a friend or a shipmate or someone they met shortly after landing as a means of identification with this person or out of respect. African names spread among a variety of African ethnicities and regions. Africans of various ethnicities used the same personal names. Names with particular meanings among certain ethnicities can be found among other ethnicities: for example, Samba, Comba, Kofi, and other Akan names representing the day of the week on which the person was born. A few Creole slaves took an African ethnic designation as their name, or part of their name, as a way of identifying with the ethnicity. There is the case of a Creole slave, Joseph Mina, who took the ethnic name of the Mina slaves who reared him. (p. 53)

Other specialists share similar concerns. Writing about two slave children named Zamba and Gomba who were imported to Portugal during the late fifteenth century, historian Antonio de Almeida Mendes questioned if those were indeed their African names: “They might have named themselves, or these names

² A comparison of his list to the one assembled for this study reveals orthographic variations in spelling the various names or ethnonyms, a problem that other researchers have encountered in transcribing among other liberated Africans in Cuba (see, for example, LOVEJOY, 2010)

might have been ones the Portuguese gathered from the African traders or through their interpreters” (DE ALMEIDA MENDES, 2009, p. 31).

Some names and ethnic labels could have functioned as all-encompassing geographical toponyms associated with the places of origin of enslaved Africans prior to being uprooted from their native soil. In some cases, they could be useful ethnic signposts; but in other instances they might be misleading road maps of dubious value in retracing the identity of the enslaved person or ethnic group found in the Americas. The unqualified application of such designations to a particular group of Africans often ignores the process of creolization that for many of them started at the moment of capture. “As enslaved Africans made their way to the coast, a journey that for some involved only weeks but for others often years, they learned new languages and customs, perhaps assumed new identities, from those into which they were born and raised” (ALPERS, 2005, p. 45). The author of a recent study on slave trading on lower Congo expressed misgivings about the validity of the birthplaces appearing on the embarkation lists of two French ships that loaded slaves in Loango in 1857, just two years prior to the *Majesty*: “It is unclear whether the slaves interviewed by French officials understood a question about their birthplace literally or instead, more flexibly, as one about their origins.” Hence “The names slaves provided,” he further explained, “may have alluded to birthplace, residence, or place of enslavement” (VOS, 2012, p. 51).

Taking into account those and other potential inherent limitations, we next examine some of the names of the *Majesty* captives. Names like Canga, Bemba, Singa and Mata, or variations thereof, are found among 5, 19, 17 and 6 of the captives, respectively. Although a search in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, which contains the records of nearly 35,000 slave trade voyages, did not turn up any of these individuals, the query revealed some potentially useful clues. Most captives with similar names recorded on that online source had been exported principally in the 1830s from the Congo River or its vicinity, and listed Havana as their main intended destination. Moreover, they had a primary and secondary ethnic identity. Thus, the origin of

Singa included Congo Goma and Congo Bomgoma. Among those named Canga one finds Congo Real, Congo Boma, Congo Musicongo, Congo Bomgoma, Congo Untacala, Congo Timga and Congo Mesa. Bembas are found among the Congo Camba, Congo Bomgoma, Congo Tamba and Congo Biri. Several Matas belonged to the Congo Boma and Congo Bullonde ethnic groups. Potential variants of the sample names or ethnic identities mentioned above are also found among *Majesty* captives. For Singa, these include Isinga, Ysinga, Izinga, Insinga, Ynsinga, Ysenga and Misinga. Others that appear to have some linguistic connection with Bemba are Bamba, Bambo, Bembe, Benba, Bumba, Juanabamba, Ibemba, Limbemba, Ybemba and Ybenba.

Of course, the disarticulation and reconfiguration that slave trading and other internal strife subjected much of west central Africa during the second half of the nineteenth century would have deformed the geographical boundaries of some of these ethnic clans or subgroups, further complicating efforts to pinpoint their approximate physical locations. Moreover, as James H. Sweet cautions, slave traders socially constructed and/or appropriated some of these names and ethnic identities for their own sinister ends. They also fabricated some of the ethnic labels (SWEET, 2003, p. 20-22). Perhaps they imposed an existing ethnic signifier on slaves belonging to more desirable groups in order get a better price for the less valuable ones. Market forces largely drove many of these practices. The ethnicities or *naciones* of commodified Africans were a major consideration in the “branding” strategies employed by sellers and buyers (CARRINGTON; NOEL, 2011, p. 235). Since certain African “stock” was preferred over others, slave traders frequently forged the identities or provenance of their human cargo in order to maximize their profit margins (CHINEA, 2008, pp. 261-262; consult also MORENO FRAGINALS’ comments in this regard cited by Hall, p. 23).

At the same time, it must be kept in mind that west central Africans were not affected by or dealt with the dislocation and resettlement brought on by warfare, food shortages, natural calamities and colonialism, among other factors, in quite the same ways. The timing, intensity and impact of these and other

developments, and the roles that particular ethnic factions may have played in them, varied greatly from one group and region to another. Hence, the responses of specific groups caught up in the turmoil were dependent on the options they had available. Some may have opted or were forced to embrace re-socialization and identity re-formation (WARNER-LEWIS, 2003, p. 14). Others would have tried to salvage as much of what they originally had or claimed, including their cultural baggage. The historian Osumaka Likaka noted that while migration, long-distance trade and political transformations contributed to the geographical redistribution of people and to the alteration of their cultural practices, including naming patterns and names, important elements of Congolese culture did not just vanish away. He observed that Western Bantu speakers continue to use the original or variants of the names or ethnonyms appearing on the *emancipado* register, such as: Yenga, Mongo, Sumbu, Finda, Canza, Peso, Gonga (Konga), Tantu, Lungana, Cabongo (Kabongo), Salongo, Dombe (Ndombe), Goma, Pasina, Dinfanga, Goma (Ngoma), Pindi, Loamba, Matumona, Mafuta and Sombo³. Additional ethnolinguistic and microhistorical research, combined with the crowd-sourcing technique being applied to studies of the slave trade, might shed light on the potential ethnic clans, subgroups or communities to which the *Majesty* captives might have belonged (ANDERSON et al, 2013).

Stolen Childhood/Captive Adolescence

When in 1974 the Puerto Rican musician Pete “El Conde” Rodríguez released the popular salsa cut “Babaila,” the topic of the African slave trade and slavery was gaining renewed attention. For instance, three notable studies bearing on slavery and the slave trade, *El proceso abolicionista en Puerto Rico: documentos para su estudio*, Manuel Álvarez Nazario’s *El elemento afronegroide en el español de Puerto Rico* and a reprint of Luis Manuel Díaz Soler’s *Historia de la esclavitud negra en Puerto Rico*, came out that year. The popular hit, which was composed by Tite Curet Alonso, placed the painful memory of one of the saddest chapters of the island’s past in bold relief. “El

³ Personal communications with the author.

Conde” narrates the story of an African child, Babaila, who had been taken away from his faraway homeland, separated from his parents, shipped against his will to the Antillean region where he was sold at a slave market. In a tragic end, the song tells how he wound up shackled in a plantation, never to be heard from again. The subject of this song is no mere work of fiction. Rather, its lyrics capture scenes of the past and bring them to the attention of the mainstream mass media or members of the academic community who became increasingly aware of the song’s message. Babaila was certainly one of the many African children who were ferried involuntarily across the Atlantic to be enslaved in the New World, and whose stories are not yet fully known.

Early reports about the presence of children among the *Majesty* captives provide another important clue about the demographic composition of the human cargoes during the age of abolition. Díaz Soler’s aforementioned work stressed the role played by the institutional mechanisms used for handling the *emancipados/as*, especially after Cuba’s *Ordenanza de Negros Emancipados* was extended to Puerto Rico on February 12, 1859. The regulations included provisions for dealing with children, but the author does not specify how the rules were applied to the *emancipados/as* prior to a 1864, when another pronouncement issued by the colonial governmental declared them (deceptively as it turned out) *colonos libres* (DÍAZ SOLER, 2000, p. 238-239). Another study, Arturo Morales Carrión’s *Auge y decadencia de la trata negrera* (1978), focused attention on the incident’s diplomatic repercussions. He highlighted the vigorous involvement of the British and French consular representatives who demanded that the local authorities protect the *emancipados/as* and to punish all those who abetted the illegal slave trading expedition. According to the French agent, captives under government care were housed in crowded living conditions that intensified the high mortality of adults and children afflicted by leprosy and dysentery; his British counterpart claimed that the colonial officials allowed planters to steal the healthiest, strongest captives, and only held on to the young, sick ones (MORALES CARRIÓN, 1978, p. 217-227).

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As eyewitnesses to the events, the foreign attachés' comments on the *Majesty* carried significant weight in the reports they filed with their immediate supervisors in the West Indies and Europe. Some are anecdotal observations, snapshots of a larger, unclear picture; other statements are based on their own field investigations. In any case, their views were surely colored by their own national allegiances and prejudices, as well as by their own position on the subject of slave trading and slavery (same examples are captured in García and Cox, 2005). Even so, without their persistent advocacy on behalf of the victims, the case might have been conveniently whitewashed or possibly left out of the official correspondence sent to Spain as had been done with countless others in the immediate past. To date the exact number, age and gender of the captives who were originally embarked from the west coast of Africa have not been definitively established. We lack precise figures on those who perished in transit or in Puerto Rico shortly after arriving, who were stolen before being processed at the detention center, or who may have escaped amidst the confusion. What seems certain, however, is that the Spanish authorities secured a large number of the captives, probably as many as 500, and transferred them to a processing site in Cataño, a coastal community just across the San Juan bay (Morales Carrión, 1978, p. 219). On March 8 metal tags numbered from 1 to 453 were made for the internees, who were expected to wear them over their chests (De la Rosa, p. 52). The next day, a register of the *emancipados/as* was compiled. Table 2, which is based on the register, shows that nearly 80 percent of the 434 who were enumerated in that record was between 7 and 18 years old. Over 90 percent of them were males. The whereabouts of the missing nineteenth internees is unknown.

Table 2: Ages and Gender of the Emancipados/as

Ages	Males	Females	Total	Percentage
7-10	154	1	155	35.7
11-14	73	11	84	19.4
15-18	106	0	106	24.4
19-22	56	0	56	12.9

23-26	7	24	31	7.1
27-30	1	1	2	.05
	397	37	434	100

Source: U.S. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Puerto Rican Collection, Box 7, *Negros Emancipados: Filiaciones*, March 8, 1859

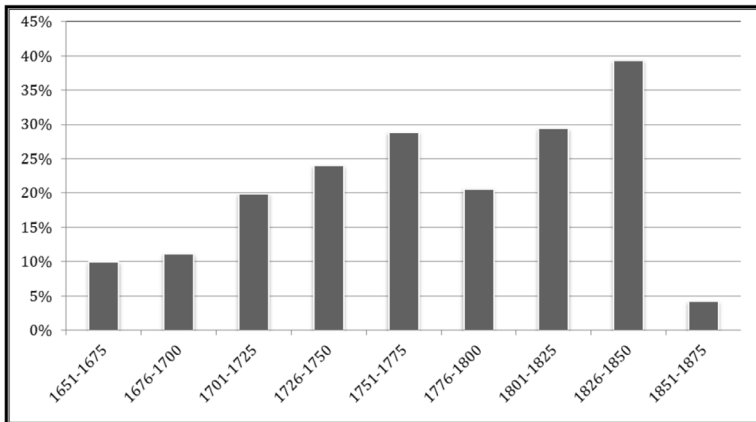
Popular depictions of Caribbean plantations frequently feature sugar estates that were predominantly worked by enslaved adult males. The arduous nature of plantation labor, which was accompanied by a high mortality rate that generated what seemed like an insatiable need for adult males, has helped to perpetuate such images (CAMPBELL; MIERS; MILLER, 2006, p. 163). However, since slave traders could not always keep up with the growing demand for male replacements when pressed to maintain or expand production planters had to emphasize availability over selectivity. The African brokers who helped stock the ships were not always successful in securing enough male captives to complete the cargoes. Consequently, women and children also entered the African slave trade at different times, for various reasons and in shifting proportions. A 1992 study conducted by David Eltis and Stanley Engerman (1992, p. 237-241) found that women comprised 26 percent of transatlantic slave shipments from 1663 to 1864, while boys and girls made up another quarter of the human merchandize. What's more, women and children have been overrepresented among the victims of enslavement worldwide (CAMPBELL, MIERS; MILLER, 2006, p. 163).

Regardless of how traffickers defined them, pre-adults occupied a significant share of the humans cargo aboard the New world-bound slave ships that crossed the Atlantic. Graph 1, which was computed from the information culled from the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (<http://slavevoyages.org/>), depicts the average percentage of enslaved children transported to the Caribbean for the period 1651-1875. They made up less than 10 percent of slave shipments prior to the eighteenth century. From that point onward their proportion increased steadily, reaching just below 30 percent during the interval 1751-1775. After a noticeable decline during the revolutionary years 1776-1800, the proportion of children went up again, peaking at nearly 40 percent between 1826 and 1850. Clearly, children

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comprised a major part of the human cargoes shipped to this region. For reasons that are unclear, less than 5 percent of children, on average, were disembarked during the years 1851-1875, a figure that is nowhere close to the 55 percent among the *emancipados/as* from the *Majesty* who were at or below the age of 14. Paradoxically, children made up close to 40 percent of Congolese exports for the period 1851-1865 (VOS, p. 48). Since Brazil had abolished the traffic in 1850 and Cuba was the largest recipient of American-bound African imports around that time, the huge disparity could be indicative of the enormous success of clandestine voyages in the Hispanic Caribbean during the age of abolition.

Graph 1: Average Percentage of Enslaved Children Transported to the Caribbean, 1651-1875



Source: <http://slavevoyages.org/>. Accessed March 24, 2016.

A search for the African background that might shed light on how nonadults were forced into the trans-Atlantic slave trade reveals a broad range of circumstances behind their enslavement. In a provocative work published in 1977, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff called attention to the complex “rights-in-persons” transactions sanctioned by customs and/or laws that regulated African kinship, marriages and corporate relationships. When viewed from this angle, exercising control or ownership of another person was a culturally or legally sanctioned means for

dealing with orphanhood, debts, crimes and a variety of issues impacting households, villages, towns or larger polities. In some cases, such arrangements as bridewealth and pawnship generated conditions conducive to slavery, or to systems akin to it (MIERS AND KOPYTOFF, 1977, p. 7-14; for a recent analysis of the relations between pawnship and the slave trade, see LOVEJOY, 2014). Victims of kidnapping and raids motivated by greed or by ethnic strife amongst rival factions were frequently objectified before being given away as gifts, exchanged, sold or enslaved (PÉREZ VEGA, p. 30). Miers and Kopytoff sum up the multiple ways by which certain individuals or groups lost or were stripped of their freedom and how their changed (or subordinate) status was generally received in parts of Africa:

The acquisition of people, then, was a process ranging from voluntary or peaceful personal transactions between neighboring groups to bilateral compulsory transfers and, with increasing degrees of coercion and organization, to the large-scale entrepreneurship of raiding and war. What is striking in all this is the overwhelming impression that here was a supplier's market. Strangers seeking patrons were welcomed; orphans or abandoned children were wanted; captives, unless dangerous or unmanageable, were eagerly sought. Kidnappers found a ready market for their victims. (p.14)

Children and younger persons who stood at the bottom and middle levels, respectively, of the ruling stratified social order or who possessed no significant or recognized power figured prominently in these transfers. When famines and droughts threatened household resources beyond the bare minimum needed to survive, pawning or selling of children sometimes followed. Women who were less crucial to production or where they greatly outnumbered men became more susceptible to being sold, with or without their children. Orphaned and abandoned children suffered the same destiny (AUDRA DIPTIE, 2006, p. 184-191). European merchants tapped this pool, bartering their cheap wares, luxury goods and weapons for African war captives, tributaries, retainers, servants, clients, debtors, and slaves proper.

The laws of supply and demand that governed the trans-Atlantic slave trade largely dictated the proportions of men, women and children transacted in this fashion. Although European slave traders that serviced the Caribbean plantations preferred adult males, they soon realized that children cost less, occupied less space and were easier to control than matured men and women. Following the British abolition of the slave trade, the threat of interception slowed down or cut off supplies of bonded labor, putting pressure on slavers to complete as many Africa-to-the-Americas runs as possible in the safest, quickest way. The longer the embarkation process took to wrap up, the greater the risk of detection, detention and losses because of potential escapes, mutinies and the spread of diseases. One way that slavers who faced loading delays caused by the shortage of adults was to complete the balance of the cargo with children (LOVEJOY, 2006, p. 198). Otherwise, as the historian Benjamin Lawrance has pointed, “Slave children appear to have been highly prized, specifically targeted [for enslavement and sale overseas], and exceptionally valuable investments, at particular moments in time and in discrete geographical and economic contexts” (LAWRANCE, 2014, p. 29).

The volume, gender ratio and age distribution of African children who were carried off by slave traders varied substantially across the African ports of departure. A study done in the early 1990s revealed that the number of enslaved children trafficked to the Americas from the middle of the seventeenth century to the 1860s grew in all African feeder zones. There were significant regional variations, of which the most striking occurred in Upper Guinea, where the ratio of children rose from 5 percent in 1663-1700 to 40 percent in 1810-1867. By comparison, the upsurge in the Bantulands, especially in west central Africa, went up from 22 percent in 1663-1700 to 50 percent in the final half century of the transatlantic slave trade. A later estimate based on the 27,000 voyages archived in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database as of 2006 corroborated the general pattern outlined above. The ratio of exported children oscillated widely across many of the same regions, more so from 1651 to 1750. On average, children comprised about 25 percent of all shipments between 1726 and

1800. The equivalent figure jumped to 42 percent during the first half of the nineteenth century. In that latter interval, west central Africa led the way with children making up 47 percent of all New World-bound shipments. A breakdown by selected branches of the trade servicing specific American markets between 1636 and 1867 likewise reported important geographic and temporal disparities. It also showed that children comprised 41 percent of shipments to Cuba and Brazil from 1811 to 1867 (LOVEJOY, P, p. 197-203).

The Congo River, from where the *Majesty* was rumored to have set out with its involuntary passengers, was the main focus of slave trading around 1850. That general area accounted for over 60% of all African slave-trading activity during that time. These exports included a significant number of male children. In fact, the proportion of exported children soared from 16.9% in 1791-1810 to 51.1% in 1830-1850. The sharpest increase occurred after 1830 following the introduction of faster vessels requiring fewer deckhands. This navigational improvement not only reduced transportation expenses; it also coincided with an increasing demand for young Africans in the Cuban and Brazilian market, which had been shaken by mounting fears of the impending cessation of the slave trade. As could be expected, the vast majority of the slaves were children who, as Vos explained, “cost less, were easier to control, and provided a longer-term investment than adults.” Since women were more valued than men in this part of west central Africa, males were over-represented in the number of enslaved Africans exported during this period. From the perspective of slave traders and planters, children “could be more easily trained to plantation life and better withstood the changes in climate, nutrition, and habitat” (VOS, p. 45-49; citations belong to pp. 48-49). They could be more easily manipulated, intimidated, deceived and abused physically, emotionally and sexually (PÉREZ VEGA, p. 33). Shipments to Cuba dominated human trafficking in this region. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, nearly all slaves imported to the Caribbean between 1841 and 1870 were destined to the Cuban market. The database underreports the number of *bozales* who ended up in Puerto Rico

during the first half of the nineteenth century since, as previously stated, a majority of them were being transshipped from the non-Hispanic Caribbean.

Slave traders categorized children according to age and gender. In the early modern Hispanic world enslaved male infants to age six were commonly called *mulequines* or *mulequillos*; those between 6 and 14 years of age were known as *muleques* or *mulecos*; teens from 14 to 18 years of age were labeled *mulecones*. The female equivalents for the first two were *mulecas* and *muleconas* (ÁLVAREZ NAZARIO, 1974, p. 337). The age range probably fluctuated over time and place, and slave traders often misrepresented the ages of some of the children in order to avoid the higher embarkation taxes they would have been required to pay for adult slaves (Lovejoy, P., p. 198-199). In ascertaining who was or was not a child slave traders relied on arbitrary criteria, especially sexual maturity and height. One of the most common gauging techniques is associated with the Englishman merchant Thomas Leyland, who determined that captives exceeding 4 feet 4 inches in height were to be considered adults. All those below that size were to be classified as children. By converting Leyland's measurement into inches, the historian Henry Lovejoy established 52 inches as a baseline, so that captives at that height or taller would be adults; conversely, those below 52 inches would be children. Lovejoy saw the LM (Leyland's Measurement) index as a useful tool for approximating who was or was not an adult, even when information on ages is available. However, multiple variables, including sociocultural factors that shaped the life course of different west central African groups, growth aberrations and the highly subjective ways slave traders determined age also make it a controversial instrument (LOVEJOY, 2010, p. 117-119).

When applied to the *Majesty's emancipados/as*, just about 35.6 percent of them measured 51 inches or below. An equal percentage of that 51" and under cohort was also 13 years old or younger, which is the same age cutoff used by Henry Lovejoy. By this computation, one-third of the *emancipados/as* fell in the child category. The rest were considered adults on the basis of height. If those who bankrolled the *Majesty* voyage regarded

adulthood/childhood in this manner, it is likely that they would have tried to market males above 13 years of age as idealized adults able to perform a variety of tasks on the sugar estates. If this was indeed the case, the young captives' teenage experience was largely shaped by the rigors of plantation labor. Their enslaved childhood and adolescence years lacked the nuanced age- or culturally-appropriate experiences that would have been available to their free African peers. They probably grew up too fast, and were exposed to many of the recreational activities and coping mechanisms of their adult peers, which would have included everything from alcohol consumption to running away (PÉREZ VEGA, p. 34). Writing about slavery in the Puerto Rican *haciendas* during the nineteenth century, the historian Díaz Soler confirmed the exploitation of child labor: "There is evidence that six-year old [enslaved] children were employed in weeding and working the land with their hands, tending animals and assisting with various agricultural and industrial tasks. Some masters even utilized child slaves in pulling hoe when they had barely reached the age of ten" (DÍAZ SOLER, p. 157). Those between the ages of 6 and 14 were also put to work maintaining ditches, gathering firewood, collecting discarded cane, picking coffee beans, and manually cleaning, straightening and smoothing out tobacco leaves. In the domestic field, they helped out with cooking, washing clothes and doing errands (PÉREZ VEGA, p. 35).

The *Emancipado/a* Status: An "apprenticeship...more painful than hopeless bondage"⁴

De la Rosa observed that, "the legal category of the *emancipados* grew out of the illegal slave trade" (p. 55, my italicization). Referencing the work of the mid-nineteenth century Spanish jurist José M. Zamora y Coronado, the historian Inés Roldán de Montaud (2011, p. 160) noted that the expression itself entered the Spanish dictionary around 1817 when Ferdinand VII signed the first of a number of accords with England that banned Spanish subjects from trafficking slaves on the African

⁴ Quoted citation from "Cuba, Past and Present," *Colburn's United Service Magazine, and Naval and Military Journal*, Part II. London: Hurst and Blackett Publishers, 1855, p. 73.

coast. By the terms of Article 7, the signatories agreed to detain and inspect ships engaged in the illicit business and, if found guilty of violating the ban, to confiscate both the vessels and their cargoes. The government in whose territory the case was adjudicated was required to take the enslaved Africans found on board the impounded ships under its patronage, and to issue them a certificate of emancipation, employ them as servants or free workers, and to guarantee their freedom. However, as Arthur C. Corwin (1967, p. 40) pointed out, “Spain would rue the day she had signed such an agreement with Britain, and would try, but in vain, to free herself from the obligations of Article 7.”

Bearing that etymology in mind, it is no surprise that in official circles in the Hispanic Caribbean the social category of *emancipado* acquired several inter-related connotations, including “liberated” and “rescued.” Ironically, freedom from serfdom or from subjection is not the one meaning that best fits the condition under which the Africans were held in Cuba and Puerto Rico. The system devised by the Spanish authorities did not result in the immediate release of the *emancipados*. They were handed over to trusted *vecinos* who owned land and were able to post a 500 peso bond per each one, and to public establishments, municipalities and religious organizations for periods of apprenticeship lasting up to five years for adult men and up to seven for women and children. Those who legally exercised guardianship over the *emancipados* were expected to provide them food, shoes, clothing and medicines, to instruct them in the Catholic faith, and to teach them a trade from which they could derive gainful employment. They were also obligated to cover the burial expenses of wards that died while under their care, to report the births of children to ensure that their freedom was properly recorded, and to present their charges to government representatives twice per year so that they could keep an eye on their progress. *Emancipados* could be not abused, sold into slavery, taken away from the estates to which they had been assigned, or falsely reported as having died or ran away (AIMES, 1967, p. 222-225).

Aimes also described how the government’s best efforts could not prevent violations of the aforementioned stipulations,

and as a result many *emancipados* were not baptized, were transferred or sold, or were treated as slaves. However, by far the biggest problem resided in integrating the *emancipados*, who now formed a new group among the nonwhite ranks, within the existing social, political and economic order. For example, some slaves and *libres de color* in Cuba resented the privileged position of the *negros ingleses* (English blacks), as they referred to the *emancipados*. The Spanish authorities found themselves overwhelmed by their growing numbers, a situation that was exacerbated by the insistence of British commissioners to check on their conditions. Ultimately, an agreement was reached with England to relocate some of them to the eastern Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Grenada (AIMES, p. 226-236). In essence, the *emancipados* in Cuba became a “foreign body in the midst of a slave society” (ROLDÁN DE MONTAUD, 2011, p. 160). The island’s plantocratic elite saw the 26,000 who were seized from *negreros* between 1824 and 1866 as a potential source of labor, but also sought to keep them “in their place and subordinated” (ROLDÁN DE MONTAUD, p. 160). While the *emancipado* status suggested that the liberated Africans were juridically free, the treatment they received indicated that their lot was no different than that accorded to slaves. In some cases, *emancipados* who were illegally taken to Cuba’s interior regions, where the watchful eye or protective influence of British monitors was least effective, were denied the few legal avenues available to slaves, such as *coartación* (self-purchase) and access to the *síndicos* or public defenders (ROLDÁN DE MONTAUD, p. 169).

Previous authors who have examined the *Majesty* case generally concur that the *emancipados/as* did not enjoy the free condition which their position implied. Instead, as Teresita Martínez Vergne (1991, p. 209) noted, they were conferred a permanent worker status. Like liberated Africans in Brazil, they were neither slave nor free (CONRAD, 1973). The slave trade and slavery were at the center of Spain’s strategy for carving out a Second Empire, now based largely on the colonial returns derived from the Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico in the aftermath of the independence of its former mainland American colonies (SCHMIDT-NOWARA, 1999). But the Iberian

metropolis bit more than it could chew. The slave trade immersed Spain in a protracted diplomatic war with England that was fought on Europe, Africa and the Americas, one that in the long run compromised its imperial control in the Spanish Antilles. In this state of affairs, the *emancipados* became problematic in Spain's domestic, colonial and international fronts. As in Cuba, Spain could do little more than enact regulations for the liberated Africans in Puerto Rico in order to comply with British demands. Keeping tabs on what happened to them once they had been set free and consigned to "trusted" colonial subjects, many of who included planters in need of additional labor, was another matter altogether.

De la Rosa (p. 46; 55) indicated that given the history of contraband in Cuba and Puerto Rico such an outcome was to be expected. For him, the voyage was neither the first nor the last of a well-established, flourishing human trafficking business that reached a high plateau in the 1850-1860 decade. In 1859 alone, he observed, over 30,000 Africans were illegally introduced in Cuba. Planters in Puerto Rico who had been complaining of a perennial shortage of slave labor, "lazy" *agregados*, unreliable *jornaleros* and unavailable European *braceros* jumped at the opportunity of integrating the *emancipados/as* into their plantations. They hoped to make up for the loss of 5,500 slaves who perished during a cholera epidemic that hit the island in 1855-1857. Five planters in the towns of Arecibo and Hatillo requested 170 *emancipados/as*, and additional requests poured in from San Juan, Río Piedras, Carolina, Cangrejos, Canóvanas, Patillas, Arroyo, Río Grande, Manatí, Mayagüez and Ponce (DE LA ROSA, p. 50-51; MARTÍNEZ VERGNE, p. 204).

According to Martínez Vergne the distribution of *emancipados/as* was carried through a labor consignment system handled by *Casa de Beneficencia*, a multi-service state charitable organization that doubled as a correctional facility. In that dual capacity, the agency promoted the moral and socioeconomic regeneration of its wards, including orphans, abused women, prostitutes, vagrants and slaves. The goal of placing the liberated Africans in job assignments on the *haciendas*, she pointed out, "was unquestionably to provide planters with labour" (p. 204).

Moreover, she argued, the *emancipados/as* were allocated to the local *hacendados* and to other parties with close personal connections to the governor of the island (p. 205).

Just over half of the consignees were children who would have been subjected to the same oppressive conditions imposed on adult peers. Although some of the contracts listed them as waged workers, it appears that the Spanish government in Puerto Rico kept some or all of the earnings that had been paid in advance (BURSET FLORES, p. 93). This unjust treatment reinforced existing social and racial hierarchies that kept slaves and *libres de color* in a subordinate position within colonial society. At first the final “emancipation” of the liberated Africans that became effective in 1864 did not substantially change their low socioeconomic standing. They had simply transitioned from forced apprenticeship in 1859 to a new *colono* (settler) status that required them to sign contracts with employers. In the past, the *emancipados/as* had been able, at least in principle, to resist attempts to reduce them to slaves by declining work assignments and requesting to be reassigned to other consigners. In some cases, they resorted to running away (DE LA ROSA, p. 53-54). But the emancipation decree made them “liable to physical punishment for insubordination, resistance to work, verbal abuse, flight, drunkenness, breaking rules, bad habits, and malicious acts that might harm others.” It also required them to obtain the consent of their employers to get married. Landowners also had the ability to hire them out to third parties (MARTÍNEZ VERGNE, pp. 210-213). By this time only 159 of the original 434 *emancipados/as* were still alive. Fortunately, it would appear that the central administration in Spain revoked or did not approve the *colono* agreement effective January 12, 1865 (BURSET FLORES, p. 96-97).

Conclusion

The brief survey of the history of slavery sketched out above points to the importance that servitude played in the evolution of Spanish colonial Puerto Rico. What began with the tributary and other obligations imposed on Taínos by the systems of

repartimientos and *encomiendas* continued with the enslavement of Africans who were brought coercively starting in the sixteenth century. From the *hato* era to the age of the plantation complex that re-emerged from the second half of the eighteenth century onward, slavery became a major vehicle for the acquisition and exploitation of labor on the island. By the nineteenth century it became institutionalized, especially in those coastal regions most closely associated with the rise of commercial sugar production, such as Ponce, Mayagüez and Guayama.

Until recently, however, comparatively little was known about the human faces of the victims of slavery—whether Africans of their nonwhite descendants. With some exceptions, despite the path-breaking works on the subject published in the past four decades there has been, and continues to be, a veil of silence around the issue of blackness in Puerto Rico (GONZÁLEZ, 1998). The *Majesty* case is a vivid reminder of how tyrannical the slave trade and slavery was, especially for the innocent children who were spirited out of Africa to become chattel property overseas. It provides students of the African Diaspora an opportunity to peer under the veil of silence and come to terms with one of the most tragic chapters in the history of the human trafficking business in which *negreros* and slaveowners in Puerto Rico partook actively, often enthusiastically, in their avaricious quest for self-aggrandizement. Finally, the case affords an opportunity to go beyond the forced migrants-turned *emancipados*-turned *colonos libres* by tracing their likely ethnic roots in west central Africa, the potential causes behind their enslavement and their ultimate fate in Puerto Rico.

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