

Chapter 3

The Promise of Manumission

Appropriations and Responses to the Notion of Emancipation in the Caribbean and South America in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez

In this text,¹ I consider two examples in the history of emancipation and manumission of enslaved, Black populations in the Caribbean and South America in order to theorize a colonial mode of conceiving of freedom at play in the first half of the nineteenth century. This mode is marked by the figure of the promise, enacting a notion of freedom as a constantly deferred, external compensation. Indeed, instead of an immediate decision deeming the practice of enslavement and trade of human beings unacceptable, and an effective liberation of the enslaved Black populations in these different emancipation proclamations, the various histories of manumission in Latin America and the Caribbean show a long series of political and legal attempts to reduce and limit the extent of the slave trade that deferred the process of liberation for decades. Moreover, in many of these territories the practice did not end with the official proclamation of emancipation but was continued by illegal practices and mutations into legal forms of exploitation and oppression that are still operative today.

After outlining this first trajectory, reconstructing the promise of manumission in the historical examples of Martinique (as read by Édouard Glissant) and La Gran Colombia and the Republic of Nueva Granada (contemporary Panamá, Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador), I analyze a second mode of investigation in examples of individual and collective strategies of liberation

coming from the enslaved themselves, as reconstructed by contemporary feminist scholars in South America. These strategies appropriate liberation not as a promise, but as a negotiation and calculation that begins with the enslaved's resistance to their oppressive conditions and that ultimately depends on the external concession by juridical authorities. In the third section of the chapter, I read these practices not as *marronage*, as they are sometimes approached, but as a different mode of turning back to these glimpses of freedom that more effectively challenge the narrative of emancipation and, with it, the promise of manumission in our present.

THE PROMISE OF FREEDOM

Nothing has changed, for the present.

—The 1848 proclamation “To the field slaves”

A good outline of the promise of manumission as colonial model of freedom can be traced in Édouard Glissant's reading² of the proclamation “To the Field Slaves” made by the provisional director of the interior for the French Republic in Martinique, Louis Thomas Husson, on 31 March, 1848.³ In this text, Husson brings *la bonne nouvelle* of freedom to the enslaved people in Martinique who, along with many other French colonies in the Caribbean, were torn by the opposing temporal pulling of the impending declaration of emancipation coming from Paris and the memory of the revolts of February 1831, where nine plantations had been set on fire by the enslaved in an attempt to establish the social conditions of unrest that would force emancipation in the island. To these people, torn by the conflicting temporalities of the it-has-been-done and it-will-come, Husson responds by stressing the present condition that remains, according to him, unchanged:

You have all heard the good news that has just come from France. It is true: it is General Rostolan and myself who brought it. We took the steamer in order to get here very quickly. Freedom will come! Good luck, my children, you deserve it. It is the good masters who requested it for you. . . . But the republic needs time to gather the funds for the purchase and to pass the law of abolition. So, nothing has changed, for the present. You remain slaves until the law is official. Then Governor Rostolan will send me to tell you: “Freedom has come, long live the republic!”⁴

In this model, freedom is a promise to come through a message brought from abroad; a promise that changes nothing in the present and continues the imposition of slavery. Freedom as *deferrality*.⁵ Glissant's analysis highlights the

importance of stressing distance, dilation, and externalization of the question of liberation in the case of Martinique, and how such a conception not only fails at offering a real emancipation for the enslaved on the Island, but also explains the continuity of the absence of freedom for those who were nevertheless covered by an official certification of emancipation.

The historical response to the deferrality exemplified in Husson's communication has been well documented, pointing to the protests and unrest a few weeks after this text was distributed by the authorities on the island. This social unrest constitutes the beginning of a different route to freedom than the one promised by the Republic. As Lorelle Semley (2017) shows, there is a productive tension in the way in which the Martinican people, and historians in particular, address the two sources behind the "effective" emancipation in 1848. There is, on the one hand, a more assimilationist view that focuses on the legislative abolition of April 27, and, on the other, a more militant, nationalistic, and independentist one that emphasizes May 22.⁶

Between May 20 and 22, violent protests by the enslaved led to the killing of around one hundred people (enslaved and settlers). Following a month of unrest in April, the events began in response to the 20 May imprisonment of an enslaved man named Tambouyé Romain, who refused to follow the orders of the plantation owner not to beat the drum to signal the beginning of the work of grinding manioc. His imprisonment, and later release on account of a massive protest by thousands of enslaved and free people of color, and the violent reaction by whites against those who participated in the protest, set in motion the staging of a violent confrontation that, had it fully unfolded, would have taken many more lives on each side. On 22 May, Romain was declared free by the mayor of Saint-Pierre (the former capital of Martinique), but this prompted a retaliation by whites that brought even more people to the town. On 23 May, probably to protect the lives of the white planters, Provisionary Governor Claude Rostolan declared the abolition of slavery in the island, even before the official arrival of the proclamation, signed by the French Emancipation Commission presided over by Victor Schoelcher that had taken place on 27 April.⁷ The people in Martinique celebrate Romain's release as the official date of emancipation, and not the governor's declaration, a day later.⁸

On all of these accounts, Husson's text seems all the more a failure, and thus a strange focus of attention for Glissant's purposes. First, it obviously did not concede freedom to the enslaved; it had no legal power to do so. Second, it did not prevent the uprisings that led to the declaration of emancipation, which was its main objective; even white planters in Martinique complained at that time that the declaration itself is useless, and Husson's role, in particular, does not help in preventing the foreseeable path that emancipation took.⁹ The complaint of the planters comes as well from their opposition to

the Republic, which Husson was representing. Thus, the text is itself useless, and it is praised by no one—neither planters nor the enslaved nor those who were at the forefront of the legal declaration of emancipation in the Republic.¹⁰

Why then focus on it? As it becomes clear in Glissant’s reading, this seemingly irrelevant text has a contemporary urgency that should not be avoided if we want to understand the development of coloniality in the Caribbean. It is this same relevance that I identify with the model of freedom as deferrality and the promise of manumission at place. For Glissant “it is that herein can be found the thinly veiled declaration of our alienation, the outline of what the Martinican people will have to undergo, the prefiguration of what the colonizer will try to make of us, and what in part (at least for what we call our elite) we have become.”¹¹

The continuity of the conditions of unfreedom is fundamental here. Throughout the short declaration, Husson emphasizes to the enslaved the necessity of continuing to work, even under the same conditions of forced labor, for the sake of maintaining order and waiting for the Republic to organize the transition to a post-slavery scenario. The necessity is double. On the one hand, Husson tries to convince the enslaved that freedom does not equal absence of labor, and that no prosperous land can be based on idleness. Indeed, the main argument offered in public against emancipation had always been that, given their supposed nature, the enslaved were incapable of working without being forced to do so. Husson urges the enslaved to keep working to show others that they are indeed worthy of freedom, to prove wrong those who think that, once freed, they will let Martinique turn to decay. The real enemies are not the good masters, who are campaigning on behalf of the enslaved, but those who, being free, confirm the stereotype of idleness: “Pay no heed, especially, to those free idlers. Do not forget that those who feared that you would be unwilling to work once you were free, used to say: ‘See how the freed slaves have become idle!’ Your enemies are those who are lazy! Have only one thing to say to them: ‘Go to work and let us deserve our freedom.’”¹²

On the other hand, according to Husson’s model, the enslaved need to continue working because the slavery system itself had not been reformed yet; that is, because there is no other mode of production in Martinique, things must remain like they are until the arrival of the official decree and the guidelines of how to proceed.¹³ This is especially important because the only way to guarantee an everlasting freedom was that the Republic would buy freedom from the planters to give it to the enslaved.¹⁴ According to this formulation, the meaning of the arrival of the Republic, which was going to lead to the establishment of the Second Republic that same year, was not a change in the conception of freedom itself, nor the extension of freedom to

populations that had not factually enjoyed it until then, but simply a change in the transaction required in order to win, merit, or deserve freedom. Husson's message is thus loud and clear: "Freedom will come [but] nothing has changed, for the present."¹⁵

A second trait of Husson's donation of freedom, besides its deferred character, is the constant emphasis on a deferral that promises to come from "an Elsewhere" [*un Ailleurs*]. In Glissant's opinion, even the most radical decolonial attempts, such as Césaire's and Fanon's, fall prey to the tendency of addressing and giving meaning to the possibilities of liberation by escaping the local conditions and focus on a solution founded on an elsewhere.¹⁶ In the case of Husson's conception of freedom, the external source coincides with the one that has taken it away in the first place. The good news has just arrived from France to Martinique; in a way, the arrival precedes the text—"You have all heard the good news that has just come from France"¹⁷—although it is Husson himself who has brought it from France. Even though it comes from afar, Husson makes sure to tell the enslaved that he has traveled as quickly as possible, covered the entire trip from Paris to Martinique, in order to shorten this distance and time ("We took the steamer in order to get here very quickly"). Just as the steamer does, so too does the declaration show itself as an attempt to shorten the distance between the white French politicians and the planters drafting the law of abolition, working diligently to make freedom a reality while the enslaved in Martinique wait for freedom to arrive.

The Elsewhere as source should not only be understood in spatial terms (both the good news and the bad news come from France), but also in temporal terms. The reason for the continuation of slavery is indeed located in France, but in this case in the past: it was King Louis-Phillipe who represented the main reason for the continuity of enslavement. Conversely, the promise of manumission pinpoints the spring of liberation in the proceedings that will come, in the deliberations that will take place, in the future gathering of funds that will buy the enslaved's freedom. The Elsewhere constitutes both slavery and freedom, both location and time, both actuality and promise. In the last part of section 14, Glissant emphasizes how little has changed in this regard for the Martinique of the twentieth century: instead of decrees of liberation, Paris sends now the news of leftist or right-wing governments that profoundly determine the conditions on the island; it publishes figures and data to decree official aid and erect official buildings where public matters are discussed and decided in mediation with Paris. "The plantation greathouse and the foreman's cabin are replaced by boards, offices, agencies."¹⁸

CONDITIONAL, MERITED FREEDOMS THE CASE OF LA GRAN COLOMBIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF NUEVA GRANADA

A fruitful field of study is opened by the reiteration of this form of emancipation declaration, the promise of manumission, throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. I have in mind, in particular, the role of the deferral, the call for patience, the external promise of enslavement or freedom, the condemnation of idleness and vagrancy, the mutation of slave labor into an exploitative paid labor by keeping the conditions of misery of the general population, among many other strategies that simply delay the arrival of a positive, active liberation for the millions in the Americas that had been in chains.

I would like to focus this section on a second iteration of the promise of emancipation that I have outlined through Glissant's reading of Husson's text. I believe that the character of deferral in the historical conditions of manumission in La Gran Colombia and the Republic of Nueva Granada, as manifested in the main governmental attempts at "dealing" with the problem of slavery, shows yet another formulation of this same colonial model of freedom, but this time through the lenses of the "liberators" and "founding fathers" of the emerging nations in South America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. While it preserves the deferral character of the promise, one of the most important features of this new version of the model is that it is not performed in the name of an external source, an Elsewhere, but on the basis of an "American" thought and way of being.¹⁹ However, it ultimately enacts a directionality of the promise of manumission (from the liberator to the liberated) that still maintains the source of freedom as outside the enslaved, as gifted to them.

On this version of the model, furthermore, we see a novel interpretation of freedom through the special link between gender, military might, and blood, in which the enslaved body represents that of their family; freedom is first understood as a reward for enslaved men fighting for the independentist cause, a reward extended to all his blood relatives but also denied if he refuses. The model shifts then to a state control of then enslaved womb through what is known *Ley de Ventres* [Womb Law]. In this *criollo* understanding of freedom, the promise of manumission is a compensation for a courageous behavior (ascribed to worthy men), and slavery is the punishment for weakness, cowardice, and passivity (ascribed to women and unworthy men).

The main outline of this deferral in some emerging nations in the northern region of South America could be presented in the following "moments" from 1816 to 1851, although it is not exhausted in this "chronology." Each of these would represent a delay in itself, the arrival of the good news as a promise

of a future freedom, always for the sake of someone or something else: the slave-owners, independence, the Nation, et cetera.²⁰

Moment 1: To Die for Their Own Freedom: Bolívar's Manumission Proclamation

Simón Bolívar's return to South America after his exile in Jamaica was partially supported, monetarily and militarily, by Alexandre Pétion. The only stated condition for this support on the part of the Haitian president was that Bolívar abolish slavery in the newly constituted nations.²¹ Bolívar kept this promise, but interpreted it through the lens of the colonial conception of freedom I have described so far. In June 1816, he decreed

the absolute freedom of slaves that have suffered under the Spanish yoke in the three precedent centuries. Considering that the Republic needs the services of all her sons, we have to impose to the new citizens the following conditions:

Article 1: All robust men, from the age of fourteen to the age of sixty, will present themselves to their districts' parish, to enlist under the Venezuelan flag, twenty-four hours after the publication of the present decree. . . .

Article 3: The new citizen who refuses to take up arms to fulfill the sacred duty of defending his freedom will be subject to servitude; not only him, but also his children under the age of fourteen, his wife, and his elderly parents.²²

The conception of freedom involved in this declaration is thus self-contradictory, in that it proclaims an absolute freedom that nevertheless has conditions, rewards, and punishments. It is also nothing but a promise, because it can only arrive after/if the campaign for independence is won, and evidently only if the enslaved survives the war. More importantly, however, this declaration does not respond to a philosophical defense of freedom as an essential condition of all human beings. As I have shown elsewhere,²³ Bolívar's reasons to decree this conditioned manumission of some enslaved people have more to do with the appeasing of slave owners' worries about the economic impacts of emancipation. As he personally wrote to Francisco de Paula Santander in 1820, the declaration of freedom for the enslaved amounts only to stating that "all slaves useful for the armed service will be destined to the army. Rather than freedom [*libertad*], what this declaration means is a leave [*leva*] of the duties of slaves."²⁴

The promise of manumission, as we see emerging from the communications to Santander, has in reality the triple objective of enlisting strong men for the army, thereby preventing them from joining the royalist cause, avoiding looming insurrection and revolutions as had happened already in

Haiti,²⁵ and, through their sacrifice in battle, diminishing the enslaved numbers that, according to Bolívar, were dangerous as they were.²⁶

Moment 2: Leyes de vientres

In the majority of South American countries, instead of an actual abolition of slavery, what took place was the limitation of some practices related to it. First, the abolition of the Slave Trade but not of slavery, then the proclamation of Womb Laws, and then the deeming illegal of non-paid labor.²⁷ The Womb Laws freed the children born to enslaved women, but demanded them to work for the masters of their mothers; the children were usually remunerated for their work (sometimes with money, usually with clothes and food). Their emancipation would be effective only when they turned eighteen years old, when in theory they would be able to see for themselves and become citizens.²⁸

These laws had two main objectives. First, the leaders of the struggle for independence and the first leaders of the newly constituted nations feared that a population that had been colonized in such a brutal way, maintained as less than human and denied any form of citizenship and equality, was not ready to participate in society; they had to be “trained” in freedom, born free but bounded to work. To this fear we can add the objective of combating an even stronger fear of the political and military reprisals of the slave-owners, who had the wealth and numbers to resist the manumission and even act against the independence efforts or the unity of the new nation’s territory. Although these *criollos* supported the independence, they would not allow the new nations to alienate their property rights, their freedom of enterprise, their wealth. The Womb Laws were thus a compromise on both *criollo* sides, and a promise to the enslaved, encouraging them to remain bounded to an already crumbling system.

In the case of what today is Colombia, there were two attempts at passing *Leyes de Libertad de Vientres*. The first one was on April 20, 1814, in Antioquia, and then repealed in 1816. In this particular formulation, presented by legislators Juan del Corral and Felix de Restrepo, even though the newborns were considered free, the masters had to pay for their education and manutention, and in order to compensate for these expenses they remained bound to working for them until they reached sixteen years of age.²⁹

Félix de Restrepo presented again a free womb law to the Congress of La Gran Colombia in Cúcuta on July 21, 1821, after the royalist reconquest that had repealed the 1814 law had been defeated.³⁰ This new version extended the period of servitude to eighteen years and regulated the commerce of enslaved people within the national borders, although it prohibited the international commerce.³¹ As was also the case in Uruguay, Venezuela, and Perú, when

the time came to guarantee and to honor the promise to the free-born and their parents, eighteen years after their birth, the political situation was still chaotic. There was an intense counterattack by the slave-owners to maintain the system; the registration of the newborn, for example, fundamental to the possibility of declaring their citizenship eighteen years later, was seldom carried out. In 1842, the effective application of the laws was then delayed seven years more, until the “free-born” reached the age of twenty-five. Ultimately, as the work of Yesenia Barragán (2021) shows in detail, the Free Womb Laws led to a “free womb trade,” that is, the legal commerce of the children who were going to be covered by the manumission order when they turned sixteen, eighteen, or twenty-five.

In this manifestation of the promise of manumission, then, we see the development of an idea of freedom that rests upon its source as external: the life of the enslaved, in particular of the children, is still on the hands of the master as a promise to be fulfilled decades later, delayed again and again as the negotiations with the owners continue. Moreover, these laws, as shown by Castriella Esther Hernández Reyes (2019), constitute the ultimate form of control and domination of black women’s bodies and sexuality. Hernández Reyes shows the details of the debate in Congress in 1821 that would lead to the declaration of Freedom of Wombs, and how they are crossed by the necessity to regulate a body that is seen as essentially lascivious, sinful, a menace to the Christian marriage of the white masters, and in need of correction. Through the enforcing of blood ties, the promise of manumission that transpires in these laws commodifies the children of the enslaved women, the product of their sinful nature, as the motor of the modernization of the emerging nation by ensuring their continuous non-paid labor and allegiance.³²

Moment 3: Final Declaration of Manumission Delayed Once More.

The “final,” total emancipation took place in Nueva Granada on May 21, 1851, with the Ley de Manumisión. Along with a one-sentence declaration of the enslaved’s equality in terms of rights and duties to those of any other citizen, it stipulates in a very detailed way how the owners will be monetarily compensated, how the appraisal of each enslaved will take place, whether the voucher given to the former owner will incur in interest rates, and the way in which the fund of manumission will be created and administrated.

One of the most interesting aspects of this law is the fact that it stipulated that the emancipation would come into effect only eight months later, that is, January 1, 1852. As I have shown in the case of Martinique, the final, most comprehensive and absolute declaration of the end of slavery at every level in the nation was still stipulated as a promise; it was still to be carried out in

the future. At this particular moment, the echoes of Husson's text reach South America in an uncanny way: the Republic needed time to organize *juntas de manumisión*, gather and administer the funds for the purchase of freedom, and allow for the official registration to be planned. Freedom had already been established, declared, and accepted, but it had not arrived yet; the monetary condition for freedom had to be met first.³³

MARRONAGE, ANOTHER APPROACH TO THE QUESTION OF LIBERATION

What does the deferral of the promise of manumission mean in political terms? How are we to conceive of emancipation and freedom in South America and the Caribbean when the interests of the enslaved were never considered above the interests of slave-owners, civil wars, and political figures of the time? In this section I would like to briefly outline another route of contemporary scholarship, one that focuses on the individual and collective strategies of liberation coming from the enslaved themselves, and not from an external promise. Taking the enslaved as the active initiators of their own freedom, these approaches offer a look at resistance to slavery as a complex, multilayered, and sometimes contradictory set of strategies. This is the focus, for example, of a recent collection of approaches to the question of liberation, *Demando mi libertad: Mujeres negras y sus estrategias de resistencia en la Nueva Granada, Venezuela y Cuba, 1700–1800* (edited by Aurora Vergara Figueroa and Carmen Luz Cosme Puntiel) (2019). The book presents narrations of enslaved women in the period between the 1700s and the 1800s, who came forward and independently presented demands to obtain their freedom to the legal authorities of the Nueva Granada, Cuba and Venezuela. These investigations are presented as a form of “decolonial historiography,” following what the editors of the volume call an “Afro-diasporic feminism,” which is an emerging mode of approaching the field of afro diasporic historiography from the 2000s on.³⁴ According to the editors of the volume, afro diasporic feminism is to be understood “as a complex, contradictory, wide, and heterogeneous perspective of thought, action, and life, emerging from the realities of afro-descendent women in different moments of history and geographic spaces.”³⁵

Following these narrations, we are able to see a very different picture to the one I have outlined so far. They show a series of strategies and tactics that situate the experience of Black women at the forefront of this fight, something that the historiography of marronage almost never does. It also shows, on the part of the enslaved, a deep understanding of the logic of oppression at play, a knowledge of the law, the codes, and how to exploit some of its loopholes;

a knowledge that they were not supposed to have, a figure of resistance that they are not supposed to embody. Furthermore, it allows us to begin understanding a different relation to the location and temporality of liberation, and a way to challenge, resist, and perhaps transform the character of deferral with which the history of emancipation has been constructed.

In this brief outline, I would like to focus on one example of this conception of freedom as marronage, a form of *cimarronaje legal temporal* (temporary legal marronage), to reflect first on the possibilities and limitations of freedom as marronage and, second, to dislocate the question of freedom away from the reductive binary of internal (agency) and external (judicial) impetus allowed by the law; when outlined by the latter, freedom remains caught in the logic of the promise. Evelyne Laurent-Perrault (2019) analyzes the judicial records of a young, enslaved woman named María Juana Paula Diepa, who appeared before a civil authority in 1801 to request to be sold together with her newborn son, to a new owner and a different family. This request was possible under the *Real Amparo*, a legal resource offering,

especially to the enslaved, the right to be removed from the residences of their owners while the investigations [due to mistreatment by the masters, especially of a sexual nature] were carried out. They were usually “deposited” in a neutral elite household, although they could also be deposited in a hospital, a convent, and even prison. The objective of the *Real Amparo* was to prevent their owners from harassing, threatening and punishing them.³⁶

Diepa’s appearance before the court was probably due to an illness that she and her son had and that the masters would refuse to treat. She had tried to convince them, and then had attempted unsuccessfully to escape. In her own words, as recorded in the surviving legal document, that through this legal resource she did not aspire to

change my servile situation, nor that my master is harmed in the value of my freedom: I wish to be transferred to another owner, and such a sad consolation has never been denied in the court of your highness to servants who, like me, do not agree to please their masters and suffer the weight of their terror, their rage, and disapproval: I aspire to be given a sales paper, but since I am ill it is only fair that I be previously diagnosed by a doctor of the trust of the court, and then be evaluated by whoever corresponds.³⁷

The masters appeared before the court and accepted Diepa’s petition: she was required to look for a new owner within the next eight days. However, through legal means, exploiting juridical loopholes, and insisting that a new transaction had to occur only after medical treatment for her and her son, Diepa was able to remain in a neutral house for more than eight months with

her son. During this time, both of them recovered from their illnesses and the infant was nursed by her mother, who was not subjected to hard labor because she was covered by the *Real Amparo*. After this period, and after several failed purchases that extended her stay away from her masters, the judge closed the case and ordered that she return to them under the conditions of no retaliation for her request, and no strong labor due to her recovery from the previous illness.

Laurent-Perrault's detailed analysis show that what took place during these months amounts to a calculated strategy on the part of this enslaved woman to create space for her and her son that was neither freedom, nor slavery individually, but their aporetic entanglement.³⁸ A tenuous, fleeting, temporary glimpse of freedom, perhaps:

Faced with the difficulty of achieving freedom or escaping, Diepa knew how to use the law to create an interstice between slavery and freedom that allowed her to take a breath and attain a certain level of autonomy within the framework of the law and protected by the authorities. Her achievement was the result of a process of learning and planning, what appears to have been a pilot test and the putting into action of a *temporary legal marronage*.³⁹

Is this interstice the manifestation of a different conception of freedom to the one I have outlined as promise and deferral? Even though the analysis of attempts such as Diepa's at the beginning of the eighteenth century emphasize the agency of the enslaved in looking to take their freedom in their own hands, the majority of the cases analyzed by the afro-feminist scholarship included in these studies constitute, in many ways, failed attempts at achieving a full manifestation of freedom. They are, indeed, still dependent on the logic of a promise, deferral, and external concession granted by the laws of the masters and those who were engaged in negotiation with them. The case of the *Real Amparo* is very telling in this regard: as a judicial measure, it required from the enslaved a skillful proficiency over workings, that is, a knowledge of how to extract a glimpse of freedom from these codes. When it is "successful," this extraction offers freedom as a consequence of mistreatment, illness, or of the sinning against God by the masters; never freedom on its own sake, never freedom for all.

The *Real Amparo*, as well as many other measures enacted to "protect" the enslaved from "excessive" mistreatment by their masters and create this interstice of temporary legal marronage, ultimately fall into what Rinaldo Walcott (2021) has called "the long emancipation." Emancipation is for Walcott only a compromise by the system to offer the image of improved conditions and inclusion for the enslaved, while maintaining control over their lives.⁴⁰ Both

legal and illegal marronage succumb to the temporary character of their toleration by authorities, that is, to the external granting of a way out:

Fugitivity and marronage only come to us as the outcome of an encirclement of unfreedom. . . . Flight is not freedom and neither is subterfuge. Marronage is a temporal self-emancipation that must collude with its other—captivity. Making the claim that I am making is not to undo what maroon communities have meant historically; rather, I want to draw our attention to the limits of recuperating such strategies for our now. . . . Marronage and fugitivity as strategies and furthermore form of “freedom” remain limited and incomplete modes of a thwarted radical imaginary and political transformation in our time.⁴¹

For Walcott, emancipation, manumission, and every single legal measure to “liberate” the enslaved, such as the ones I have analyzed in this chapter, constitute, rather, a manifestation of *unfreedom*. We still live in the era of emancipation and thus, freedom is yet to come. Not simply because the present is the absence of it, but because, for Walcott, Black life itself inhabits the structure of futurity: “Freedom as imminent condition—Derridean language on democracy as that which is ‘to come’ might point us toward this—is both belated and always just ahead of us. Black freedom has been denied despite juridical emancipation, and that denial produces the conditions of a future-oriented Black expressivity—a Black freedom to come.”⁴²

In this, inhabiting a similar space to the interstices theorized by Laurent-Perrault in reading Diepa’s legal marronage, Walcott locates Black expressivity as glimpses of Black freedom “between that which is prohibited and that which is gestured to.”⁴³ His temporal emphasis, however, is not in the past but in the future; while the archival explorations of the afro feminist scholars compiled in *Demando mi libertad* theorize an actual, consummated form of freedom, even if tenuous, Walcott finds only unfreedom or freedom not yet achieved: freedom to come.

In this way, Walcott’s criticisms of marronage, and legal marronage in particular, challenge the externality of the logic of freedom as promise that I have previously theorized. However, the reading of glimpses as signaling a freedom yet to come, I contend, still enact a form of promise and deferentiality that I have criticized. As glimpses, these promises of freedom are not external anymore, nor for the sake of something else, but still constitute a promise: one that Black people make to themselves, for the future.

A PROPHETIC VISION OF THE PAST

In what remains of this chapter, I would like to go back to Glissant to outline with him an alternative way of conceiving of freedom, based on an alternative temporality that actively refuses the logic of the promise and that allows for a return to the past and the experiences I have analyzed in this chapter, beyond crevices and interstices within the dichotomies of slavery/freedom, prohibited/gestured.

Glissant's reflection on a new way of doing history emerges out of the particular conditions of the Antilles, the genocide of the indigenous populations, the forceful transportation and enslavement of millions of Africans, and the mesh of identities and traditions with which European colonialism populated the region. These conditions encumber the Caribbean peoples today with a paradoxical history that is, at the same time, too ethereal (almost inexistent) and too burdensome: "The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is however there (here) wounding us."⁴⁴ As a consequence of these conditions, any linear, causal attempt at grasping or reconstructing such history from the present fails: the past is never available for a factual and linear exploration, neither in ages, eras, nor periods, and the future cannot be seen as a consequence of the past.

The demand for an exploration of history, however, is a fundamental condition for any process of decolonization in the Caribbean. In the absence of a complete link, the act of intervening history from the present creates a form of connection that does not presuppose historical or factual continuity. The image chosen by Glissant as a way to perform this exploration of history is called a *prophetic vision of the past*: "This exploration is therefore related neither to a schematic chronology nor to a nostalgic lament. It leads to the entanglement of a painful sense of time and to its projection fully forward into our future, without the help of those plateaus in time from which the West has benefitted, without the help of that collective density that is the primary value of an ancestral cultural heartland. That is what I call a prophetic vision of the past."⁴⁵

The images of the past, in a system of chaotic memory such as the one described, demand a constant reinterpretation that Glissant evokes as a projection into the future. This projection is not a prediction, a forecast, or an attempt at a factual statement; it is, rather, a prophesy, a hope, perhaps, a longing for. No system, not even coloniality, can be constructed as a closed system in which the effects of every action of oppression can be predicted.⁴⁶ Therefore, it is equally impossible to foresee the practices of resistance, rebellion, and revolution that the system itself opens; the only way of grasping the past manifestation of freedom is by imagining it poetically. Seen

in this way, as unavoidable and irreducible, these practices challenge the logic of deferrality and emancipation by refusing to be taken as consummated or tolerated, as absolute freedom or as compromise by the system.

Freedom, under this Glissantian conception of history, should not be understood as a promise, or as externally granted, but as the irreducibility and non-closure of a complex system such as coloniality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Americas. It means to take legal and illegal marronage not as the model of liberation, but as an index of the impossibility of conceiving of a total, closed system of oppression. Each of the examples that I have analyzed in this chapter point to the unpredictability of responses to slavery and its iterations, but also to the unstable character of the system itself. Using this imagined past, a vision, as a mode of entering what Walcott calls the glimpses of freedom, means to take them not as “to come,” as he suggests, but as always already having been.

For Walcott, “thinking with marronage open[s] up new ways to notice the multiple forms of different unfreedoms in the face of an illusive freedom.”⁴⁷ But it is also, as I contend all my examples show, a way of thinking with the differentiated responses to these unfreedoms that constitute freedom itself. Thinking with marronage, when it is not posited as the past achievement and standard of freedom, allows us to prophesize the past and intervene in the present. This is also how I suggest we read *Demando mi libertad*. By refusing to take these legal demands by enslaved women as *the model* of freedom, we open a new way of going beyond the internal/external debate on the source, which limits these attempts as legal marronage. The archival and imaginative (poetic) interventions in the histories of these women, attempting a creative reconstruction of their struggle to nurse their babies, escape sexual abuse by their masters, and walk freely through the streets of their cities, show that present freedom is already happening in these demands—not as a promise, not as deferred, but also not as absolute and unmovable.

NOTES

1. I am thankful for the suggestions and corrections of the editors of this volume, which helped me refine my argument and broaden the dialogue I am proposing.

2. Glissant’s analysis of this text is offered in “L’Amorce” (In the Beginning), section 14 of *Caribbean Discourse* (hereafter DA). According to Glissant, “this proclamation ought to have been studied in Martinican schools, criticized by political parties, analyzed by cultural authorities. This text from the ‘past’ is disturbingly contemporary. We can only tear ourselves away from derision by staring directly into it.” (DA 37/86) (When quoting from DA, I use the pagination of the English translation first, and then the French edition. I indicate when the translation has been modified.)

3. For a historical reading of this text, see Paul Butel, *Histoire des Antilles françaises: XVIIe–XXe siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2002). He dates Husson’s text to April 5, instead of March 30 (380).

4. DA 31/78.

5. I theorize this conception of freedom with the neologism *deferrality* to stress that it is not only a matter of freedom being delayed, but that its character itself is one of continuous and endless deferral. This position is close to what Rinaldo Walcott has called “the long emancipation,” a formulation I discuss at the end of the second section of this chapter. See Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

6. It should be noticed that Glissant would not embrace any of these dates as the National Holiday. Even though the decision to celebrate May 22 takes sides on the old question of who is the agent of liberation, Victor Schoelcher or the Martinican enslaved who revolted, the date itself, what it represents in Martinican history, is for Glissant merely the passing from a “slavery capitalism to a form of capitalism in which the worker is no longer chattel but receives a salary” (DA 251/797). This, then, is not a national system of production, just as Martinique has not yet become a nation. Thus, “the twenty-second of May is a day of celebration for our people. The ‘national holiday’ for Martinique is yet to come: that will be the day when the reality of the nation will have been established” (DA 252/798). In the third section of this chapter, I will address this “yet to come” not as deferrality, but as another way of looking back at the past.

7. To avoid a similar fate, authorities in Guadeloupe would mimic this extemporaneous declaration of emancipation four days after Martinique.

8. See Lorelle Semley, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France’s Atlantic Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 141–51, and Butel, *Histoire des Antilles Françaises*, 380–84.

9. See, for example, the diary of Pierre Dessalles, a Martinican sugar planter that witnessed (and recorded) some of the events that led to emancipation in 1848. Pierre Dessalles, *Sugar and Slavery, Family and Race: The Letters and Diary of Pierre Dessalles, Planter in Martinique, 1808–1856*, ed. Elborg Forster, and Robert Forster (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 207f.

10. In Dessalles’s entry of June 4 we read: “M. Husson, we hear, has been removed from his post because of his proclamation to the negroes; this document displeased Schoelcher, who had declared that the negroes were civilized enough to be given their freedom.” Dessalles, 218.

11. DA 27/73.

12. DA 33/80.

13. “You must prove that you understand that freedom is not the right to wander aimlessly, but the right to work for oneself. In France, all free men work harder than you who are slaves, and they are far less happy than you, for over there, life is more difficult than here. My friends, be docile to the orders of your masters in order to demonstrate that you know that not everyone is capable of being in charge” (DA 31f/79; translation modified).

14. “All the masters who were in Paris gathered together and instructed these gentlemen to ask for your freedom from the Government, which agreed. Louis-Philippe is no longer King! He was the one who prevented your freedom, because he wanted each one of you to buy it back himself, and the republic, on the contrary, will buy it back for all of you at the same time” (DA 31/78).

15. DA 31/78.

16. This criticism does not necessarily have to do with Césaire’s advocacy for departmentalization in 1946. For Glissant, even the search for independence and nationhood (as was Fanon’s commitment to Algeria at the end of his life) can exhibit a search for a freedom coming from elsewhere. For a reading of Glissant’s critical approach to Césaire and Fanon, and the conceptualization of “the Elsewhere,” see Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez, “To ‘Stay Where You Are’ as a Decolonial Gesture: Glissant’s Philosophy of Antillean Space in the Context of Césaire and Fanon,” in *Memory, Migration and (De)Colonisation in the Caribbean and Beyond*, 133–51 (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, 2020).

17. DA 31/78.

18. DA 37/86.

19. See, for example, Simón Bolívar, “Reply of a South American to a Gentleman of This Island” [“Jamaica Letter”], in *Selected Writings of Bolívar*, Harold Bierck, ed. (New York: Colonial Press, 1951), 1:103–22.

20. Jorge Andres Tovar Mora and Hermes Tovar Pinzon, *El oscuro camino de la libertad: Los esclavos en Colombia, 1821–1851* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Economía), speaks of a “gradualism” (2–4). As I will show, as part of the same model they would correspond, rather, to developments of the idea of freedom as promise, and not to expansions of the reach of freedom.

21. See Nuria Sales de Bohigas, *Sobre Esclavos, Reclutas y Mercaderes de Quintos* (Barcelona, Spain, 1974), 85–102.

22. Simón Bolívar, “A los habitantes de Río Caribe, Carúpano y Cariaco,” in *Escritos Anticolonialistas*, Gustavo Pereira ed. (Caracas, Venezuela: Fundación Editorial el Perro y la Rana), 115f (my translation).

23. See Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez, “Two Versions of the Mestizo Model: Toward a Theory of Anti-Blackness in Latin American Thought,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2023): 319–32.

24. See Simón Bolívar, *Obras Completas*, vol. 1 (Madrid, Spain: Mavenco de Ediciones, 1984), 423f.

25. See Marixa Lasso, “Haití como símbolo republicano popular en el Caribe colombiano: Provincia de Cartagena (1811–1828)” *Historia Caribe*, 3, no. 8 (2003): 5–18; and Dolcey Romero Jaramillo, *El fantasma de la Revolución haitiana: Esclavitud y libertad en Cartagena de Indias, 1812–1815* (Barranquilla, Columbia: Universidad del Atlántico, 2003).

26. See for example Bolívar’s words to Santander, on April 20, 1820: “In fact, the law of Congress is wise in all its parts. What can be a more adequate or more legitimate means to obtain freedom than to fight for it? Is it fair that only free men die to emancipate slaves? Is it not useful for them to acquire their rights on the battlefield

and reduce their dangerous number by a necessary and legitimate means?" (Bolívar, *Obras Completas*, 424; my translation).

27. See George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004): 55–57; and Yesenia Barragan, "Commerce in Children: Slavery, Gradual Emancipation, and the Free Womb Trade in Colombia," *The Americas* 78, no. 2 (2021): 229–57.

28. See Andrews, 64.

29. See Gaceta Ministerial de Antioquia, 2 de octubre de 1814. Archivo José Manuel Restrepo Vélez Fondo I, vol. 7, (2018): 430–31; and Castriela Hernandez Reyes, "Aproximaciones al Sistema de Sexo/Género en la Nueva Granada en los Siglos XVIII y XIX." in Aurora Vergara Figueroa and Carmen Luz Cosme Puntiel, eds., *Demando mi libertad: Mujeres negras y sus estrategias de resistencia en la Nueva Granada, Venezuela y Cuba, 1700–1800* (Cali, Colombia: Universidad Icesi, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales, 2019). Chaves Maldonado refers to the particular conception of freedom involved in the Womb Laws as an oxymoron, close to the self-contradictory nature of Bolívar's manumission decree in 1816. Maria Eugenia Chaves Maldonado, "El oxímoron de la libertad: La esclavitud de los vientres libres y la crítica a la esclavización africana en tres discursos revolucionarios," *Fronteras de la Historia* 19, no. 1 (2014): 174–200.

30. Chaves, 179–82.

31. See Chaves and Espinal Palacio 2020: 87.

32. Hernández Reyes 2019: 60f.

33. See Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

34. Aurora Vergara Figueroa and Carmen Luz Cosme Puntiel, eds., *Demando mi libertad: Mujeres negras y sus estrategias de resistencia en la Nueva Granada, Venezuela y Cuba, 1700–1800* (Cali, Colombia: Universidad Icesi, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales, 2019), 174.

35. Vergara Figueroa and Cosme Puntiel, 22 (my translation).

36. Evelyne Laurent Perrault, "Esclavizadas, cimarronaje y la ley en Venezuela, 1760-1809." In *Demando Mi Libertad. Mujeres negras y sus estrategias de resistencia en la Nueva Granada, Venezuela y Cuba* (Cali, Colombia: Universidad Icesi, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales, 2019) (my translation).

37. Archivo de la Academia Nacional de la Historia (Caracas, Venezuela), Folio 13 and Folio 13 verso, quoted by Laurent-Perrault 2019: 88 (my translation).

38. Diepa's time under the *Real Amparo* could thus be read as a legal iteration of what Harriet Jacobs calls a "loophole of retreat" in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). In chapter 21, Jacobs describes a garret above a small shed in her grandmother's house, manufactured for her concealment from her enslaver, where she spends seven years of her life. Jacobs is aided by her family during this time, and finds in this tiny physical space an opening for surviving, one that she prefers to slavery: "It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one."

(174) One day, Jacobs finds a tool to make small holes in the wood and be able to look and listen to her children, through the interstices allowed by this loophole of retreat.

39. Laurent-Perrault 2019: 90.

40. See Walcott *The Long Emancipation*, 1–2, 44.

41. Walcott, 107. Glissant himself criticizes marronage as the model of freedom in *Poetics of Relation* trans. Betsy Wing (1990; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997). For a reading of this criticism, its possibilities and limitations, see John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

42. Walcott, *The Long Emancipation*, 5.

43. Walcott, 5. See, for example, this formulation: “Black life exists in crevices of the long emancipation, and it is in those spaces that funk erupts, giving us the glimpse of freedoms yet to come.” (90)

44. Glissant 1981 [1981]: 63; translation modified. I have analyzed this paradoxical condition of Caribbean history in Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez, “Transversality as Disruption and Connection: On the Possibilities and Limits of Using the Framework of Trauma in Glissant’s Philosophy of Caribbean History,” *Philosophical Readings* 11, no. 3 (2019).

45. Glissant 1999 [1981]: 64; translation modified. This is, in my opinion, the most important formulation of an Antillean temporality in Glissant’s works, although the notion of a prophetic vision of the past remains immensely undertheorized by Glissant himself and scholars of his work. Glissant briefly iterates the formulation in the prologue to *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play*, trans J. Michael Dash and Edouard Glissant (Boulder, CO: Three Continents Press, 2005), before the *Caribbean Discourse* formulation, and in *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (1996; Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 86. For some of the only studies of this notion, see Víctor Figueroa, *Prophetic Visions of the Past: Pan-Caribbean Representations of the Haitian Revolution* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016) and Sarah J. Townsend, “The Spectral Stage of Édouard Glissant’s Monsieur Toussaint” *Modern Drama* 61, no. 4 (2018), 503.

46. See Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, 86, where he reinterprets the prophetic vision in the context of chaos theory, to suggest that to take chaos seriously implies the imagination of links where there is no traceable connection: “The past must not only be recomposed objectively (or even subjectively) by the historian, it must also be prophetically dreamed by the people, the communities, and cultures whose past has precisely been hidden” (my translation).

47. Walcott, *The Long Emancipation*, 108.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andrews, George Reid. *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Barragan, Yesenia. “Commerce in Children: Slavery, Gradual Emancipation, and the Free Womb Trade in Colombia.” *The Americas* 78, no. 2 (2021): 229–57.

Bolívar, Simón. *Obras completas*. Volume 1. Madrid, España: Maveco de Ediciones, 1984.

———. *Simón Bolívar: Escritos anticolonialistas*. Edited by Gustavo Pereira. Caracas: Fundación Editorial el Perro y la Rana, 2015.

Butel, Paul. *Histoire des Antilles françaises: XVIIe–XXe siècle*. Paris: Perrin, 2002.

Chaves, Maldonado, and Maria Eugenia Espinal Palacio. “El oxímoron de la libertad.

La esclavitud de los vientos libres y la crítica a la esclavización africana en tres discursos revolucionarios.” *Fronteras de la Historia* 19, no. 1 (2014): 174–200.

———. “Esclavos, libertades y república: Tesis sobre la polisemia de la libertad en la primera república antioqueña.” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y El Caribe* 22, no. 1 (2011).

Dessalles, Pierre. *Sugar and Slavery, Family and Race: The Letters and Diary of Pierre Dessalles, Planter in Martinique, 1808–1856*. Edited by Elborg Forster, and Robert Forster. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Drabinski, John E. *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Figueroa, Víctor. *Prophetic Visions of the Past: Pan-Caribbean Representations of the Haitian Revolution*. Columbia: Ohio State University Press, 2016.

Gaceta Ministerial de Antioquia. 2 de octubre de 1814. Archivo José Manuel Restrepo Vélez Fondo I, vol. 7, (2018).

Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. 3rd Printing edition. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999.

———. *Introduction à une poétique du divers*. Paris: Gallimard, 2011.

———. *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play*. Translated by J. Michael Dash. Boulder, CO: Three Continents Press, 2005.

———. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Gualdrón Ramírez, Miguel. “Transversality as Disruption and Connection: On the Possibilities and Limits of Using the Framework of Trauma in Glissant’s Philosophy of Caribbean History” *Philosophical Readings* 11, no. 3 (2019).

———. “To ‘Stay Where You Are’ as a Decolonial Gesture: Glissant’s Philosophy of Caribbean History in the Context of Césaire and Fanon.” In *Memory, Migration and (De)Colonisation in the Caribbean and Beyond*, edited by J. D. Webb, R. Westmaas, M. del Pilar Kaladeen, and W. Tantam, 133–51. London: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, 2020.

———. “Two Versions of the Mestizo Model: Toward a Theory of Anti-Blackness in Latin American Thought,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2023): 319–32.

Hernandez Reyes, Castriela. “Aproximaciones al Sistema de Sexo/Género en la Nueva Granada en los Siglos XVIII y XIX.” in Aurora Vergara Figueroa and Carmen Luz Cosme Puntiel, eds., *Demando mi libertad: Mujeres negras y sus estrategias de resistencia en la Nueva Granada, Venezuela y Cuba, 1700–1800* (Cali, Colombia: Universidad Icesi, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales, 2019).

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

- Lasso, Marixa. "Haití como símbolo republicano popular en el Caribe colombiano: Provincia de Cartagena (1811–1828)" *Historia Caribe*, 3, no. 8 (2003): 5–18.
- Romero Jaramillo, Dolcey. *El fantasma de la revolución haitiana: esclavitud y libertad en Cartagena de Indias, 1812–1815*. Barranquilla, Columbia: Universidad del Atlántico, 2003.
- Sales de Bohigas, Nuria. *Sobre Esclavos, Reclutas y Mercaderes de Quintos* (Barcelona, Spain, 1974).
- Semley, Lorelle. *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Tovar Mora, Jorge Andres, and Hermes Tovar Pinzón. *El oscuro camino de la libertad: Los esclavos en Colombia, 1821–1851*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Economía, 2009.
- Townsend, Sarah J. "The Spectral Stage of Édouard Glissant's Monsieur Toussaint." *Modern Drama* 61, no. 4 (2018): 501–25.
- Vergara Figueroa, Aurora, and Carmen Luz Cosme Puntiel. *Demando mi libertad: mujeres negras y sus estrategias de resistencia en la Nueva Granada, Venezuela y Cuba, 1700–1800*. Cali, Colombia: Universidad Icesi, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales, 2019.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021.
- Zambrana, Rocío. *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021.

Copyright © 2024. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.