

THE *ESCRIBANO* OF BABEL: *Power, Exile, and Enslavement in the Venezuelan Llanos During the War of Independence (1806–1833)*

ABSTRACT: This article traces the professional life of Rafael Almarza, the last royal *escribano* (notary) of Mérida in the captaincy of Venezuela, and his role in undermining monarchical authority among the enslaved community displaced in the plains region (Los Llanos) during the war of independence in 1814–18. Despite their status as minor officials within the Spanish imperial bureaucracy, notaries, through the records they made, helped to establish legally binding truths underlying everyday actions, making them influential agents of colonial rule in the community they served, particularly among those seeking notarial documents to obtain freedom. During the battles for independence, escribanos like Almarza facilitated the transition of sovereignty and created documents that fomented the independence cause among enslaved individuals during the years of total war. By examining the manumission documents found in the notarial book Almarza kept during exile, the author of this article shows the importance of enslaved people in granting legitimacy to the emerging leadership of José Antonio Páez and the Republican project. At the same time, this study aims to provide a new look at manumission during the early stages of nation-building and the involvement of underrepresented groups in this process.

KEYWORDS: Venezuela, *llanos*, exile, enslavement, notary, manumission

On March 29, 1817, the *escribano* Rafael de Almarza’s signature was the last one in the manumission document for María Josefa Traspuesto and her infant child. In his *protocolo* (notarial book), Almarza made a copy of the letter he handed over to María Josefa. The letter included their origin, owner’s name, and the conditions under which freedom was granted, followed by the signatures of the parties who certified the legal procedure.¹ Almarza and

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1. The *Diccionario de Autoridades* from 1737 offers a concise definition of *protócolo*: “the book where the notary records and maintains entries of deeds that have passed before him, ensuring their accessibility at any given moment.” RAE, *Diccionario de Autoridades*, tomo 5, 1737, www.rae.es. Throughout the text, I also use alternate terms such as “notarial book” or “Almarza’s diary.” Rafael de Almarza, “Declaratoria de libertad de María Josefa Traspuesto e hijo,

María were following a longstanding Spanish notarial convention, but the setting and circumstances in which the document was prepared and signed were extraordinary. Instead of an urban *escribanía* (notarial office), Almarza's signed the document in an improvised operation in a remote military headquarters in El Yagual, on the steaming banks of the river Arauca. The setting was a stark contrast to his native Mérida, the cold Andean city where he had exercised his profession until his allegiance to the insurgent party in the Venezuelan War of Independence caused his expulsion to the Llanos (the plains region).²

For María Josefa, in contrast, the setting where she became free bore some resemblance to her home. An inhabitant of Barinas, a once-prosperous town of tobacco growers 200 miles to the north of Almarza's outpost, María belonged to the household of the late Juan José Briceño, a member of one of the oldest and most influential families in the region. Like Almarza, María abandoned her home on an unknown date and joined the displaced population that fled to the borders of the Venezuelan captaincy seeking refuge from the hunger, violence, and bloodshed generated by the war, which was conducted without quarter by both sides.

But the setting was not the only unusual aspect of this notarial act. Apart from its more obvious purpose, to change of status of an individual from enslaved to free, the document marked a shift in sovereign authority and in the Republican stance on manumission. Above Almarza's signature was the name of the authority who signed and granted freedom to María Josefa Traspuesto and her fatherless child: the guerilla leader, José Antonio Páez. This was unprecedented. For the preceding 300 years, the only authority that could sanction freedom was the king of Spain, through his colonial officials. Up to that point in the conflict, some military leaders had held out the promise of liberating enslaved soldiers after the war, but no one—neither patriot nor royalist—had thus far granted immediate freedom as authorized in the manumission letters notarized by Almarza.

This moment, when the patriots were in retreat, offered the enslaved an opportunity to press for personal as well as national liberty. María Josefa's claim to freedom was not originally her own, but was based on a promise of freedom

March 29, 1817," Protocolo llevado en Barinas . . . para asiento de documentos en asuntos civiles y criminales, contratos, testamentos, etc. . . . Años 1816, 1818, Archivo General de la Nación, Venezuela [hereafter AGNV], Sección Revolución y República, Documentos Varios Barinas y Barcelona, vol. 1, fól. 47 (Inventario: 0202SBT18108).

2. The llanos are savannas that extend across the territories of Colombia and Venezuela. In Colombia, the llanos cover a significant portion of the eastern part of the nation, while in Venezuela, they span a large part of the central and southwestern regions of the country. Sparsely populated, their grasslands harbored a unique and diverse fauna that thrives in wetlands and rivers that inundate and recede during its wet and dry seasons.

offered to her husband, Juan José Rodríguez, and his family, in exchange for Juan's military service, in a document drawn up a year before his death in the Battle of Las Mucuritas on January 28, 1817. The manumissions of María Josefa and her child were not at all the only ones registered in what we still have of Rafael Almarza's 1817 protocolo, the early sections having been destroyed. Between April and October of that year, Almarza recorded 68 certificates that freed about 134 slaves, primarily women and children.³

The escribano and the enslaved people seeking freedom were members of an itinerant republic constituted by a displaced population and dispersed Republican troops, known collectively as *La Emigración*, who moved according to the demands of war and the extreme seasonal weather of the plains. I argue that Almarza's diary allows us to appreciate how monarchical authority was contested from below through the interaction of a Republican guerrilla leader, the displaced enslaved, and the escribano's power as recorder of legal acts. At the crossroads of revolution, this scribe offered his long-standing credibility and valuable legal expertise to create the legal instruments that would help the Republicans to undermine monarchical power. But, most important, in accepting these manumission papers, this community validated the sovereignty claim of the emerging republic by recognizing its authority to grant freedom. By carefully purposing a well-established legal act—the granting of freedom—Republican leadership sought to gain the support of a community that had vigorously defended the cause of the Spanish king from the beginning of the war. Simultaneously, this notarial strategy worked as a useful tool to forestall other, perhaps more radical, collective actions by slaves.

This approach provides a new reading of the freedom certifications granted in this period, which are commonly viewed as nothing more than a strategy to persuade enslaved people to join the Republican cause. However, this interpretation overlooks alternative readings of the manumission papers that reveal a more active role of enslaved individuals in the emergence of Spanish American nations.⁴

3. This item was long inaccessible to researchers due to inadequacies in the classification of historical records in the AGNV. The thin volume, placed in the Revolution and Republic section and carelessly labeled "Various Documents. Barcelona and Barinas (1814–1843)" was recovered by the team of historians and researchers who carried out an inventory of the archive in its old quarters (Carmelitas) in 2008.

4. Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom: Slave Soldiers and the Wars of Independence in Spanish South America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 1–16; Silvia C. Mallo, Ignacio Telesca, and Alex Borucki, *Negros de la Patria: los afrodescendientes en las luchas por la independencia en el Antiguo Virreinato del Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires: Editorial SB, 2010); Heraclio Bonilla, ed., *Indios, negros y mestizos en la independencia* (Bogotá: Planeta and Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2010); John V. Lombardi, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery in Venezuela, 1820–1854* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pub. Corp., 1971); Roger Pita Pico, *El reclutamiento de negros esclavos durante las guerras de independencia de Colombia 1810–1825* (Bogotá: Academia Colombiana de Historia, 2021).

BINDING TRUTHS

Most literature on Spanish American independence studies political transition through the acts and experiences of policymakers such as viceroys, governors, captains general, intendants, judges, and military officials. Thus, work remains to be done on how those changes were experienced by the minor officials who enforced colonial rule and interacted with ordinary individuals on a daily basis. Given scribes' historical power to create legal materiality out of quotidian actions, they were valuable among revolutionary leaders who needed to confer legitimacy on each act that contested monarchical authority.⁵ To illustrate the value of the bureaucratic acts staged in the Venezuelan plains in 1817, the following section assesses scribes' ability to create binding truths in colonial society, and how their craft made them power brokers, especially within the enslaved community.⁶

For a decade before becoming a Republican scribe, Rafael Almarza had belonged to the last generation of royal officials who had enforced Spanish imperial power in the Americas, over centuries. The office of escribano emerged as a distinct one in the thirteenth century, and early modern scribes formalized America's creation as they drew regional boundaries according to the arbitrary acts of Spanish *conquistadores*. From that time forward, they attested all public and private actions of colonial society.⁷ Other minor royal officials who served in the Americas could be appointed by senior local authorities, but escribanos required direct royal authorization to perform their duties, a fact that highlights their value within the monarchical project—escribanos embodied royal authority throughout every corner of the Spanish empire. As creators of written records that symbolized

5. *Escribanos* could play a crucial role in asserting authority within a political party, as demonstrated in the case of Andrés Level de Goda. In 1813, Level de Goda relied on the notarial power of Juan Bautista Othon to endorse his appointment, granted by the Spanish Cortes, as governor of Cumaná. Working alongside Othon, Level de Goda documented disturbing accounts detailing the cruelty committed by royalist troops led by Eusebio Antoñanzas and Antonio Zuazola. These accounts can be located in the Archivo General de Indias [hereafter AGI], Caracas 437A, 1813. See also Andrés Level de Goda, "Antapodosis: nuevas memorias de Andrés Level de Goda," *Boletín de la Academia Nacional de la Historia* 63 and 64 (1933): 500–709. Likewise, the *oidor* José Francisco Heredia enlisted the services of Juan Pablo de Correa to obtain certified copies of the decrees enacted by the royalist *caudillo* José Tomás Boves in Caracas. These copies served as evidence to support his written representation to the metropole, in which he denounced the heinous acts perpetrated by Boves during his 1814 campaign. José Francisco Heredia, *Memorias sobre las revoluciones de Venezuela* (Paris: Garnier Hnos., 1895), 212.

6. Manuel Salmoral, "El derecho de coartación del esclavo en la América española," *Revista de Indias* 59:216 (1999): 357–374; Alejandro de la Fuente, "From Slaves to Citizens? Tannenbaum and the Debates on Slavery, Emancipation, and Race Relations in Latin America," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 77 (Spring 2010): 154–173; José Ramón Jouve Martín, *Esclavos de la ciudad letrada. Esclavitud, escritura y colonialismo en Lima (1650–1700)* (Lima: IEP Ediciones, 2005).

7. See Jorge Luján Muñoz, *Los escribanos en las Indias Occidentales y en particular del Reino de Guatemala* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México: Instituto de Estudios y Documentos Históricos, 1982); and Nieves Avellán de Tamayo, *Los escribanos de Venezuela* (Barquisimeto, VEN: Armitano, 1994) For escribanos as agents of empire, see Antonio Real Botija, *Hombres de armas, letras y tratos: los escribanos en la expansión imperial en las Islas Filipinas, 1568–1598* (Valencia: Albatros, 2020); and Kathryn Burns, "Notaries, Truth, and Consequences," *American Historical Review* 110:2 (2005): 350–379.

monarchical power to all subjects, regardless of social status, their responsibility was to reinforce the royal presence in the physical absence of the king.

Rafael Almarza was an “*escribano público y de cabildo*” in Mérida, meaning that by royal decree, he could both legalize documents produced by individuals and oversee the documentation generated by the city hall.⁸ To obtain the dual title, he had paid 280 *pesos* to the royal treasury in 1804, an investment that exhausted his finances to the point that he could not afford the journey to Caracas to take his test in front of the Real Audiencia de Caracas, as was required.⁹ Instead, the royal audiencia appointed several lawyers in Mérida to perform in situ tests of his writing skills, knowledge of the document templates, and the adequacy of his educational preparation for recording legal processes.¹⁰ Usually, escribanos learned their craft in the household of an older escribano, as teenage apprentices. Even though we do not have the documentation to sustain that this was Almarza’s path, it is almost certain that he came to the profession in this way. In fact, Almarza subsequently tutored Martín Soto, the future escribano of the *junta de secuestros* (royal confiscation tribunal) in Barinas, which seized properties from wartime migrants and Republican followers during 1813–14.¹¹

Mérida’s regional archives show that Almarza’s imprint legalized various kinds of events in the Andean province. For instance, two years after obtaining his credentials, Almarza assisted the town council in searching for impoverished girls who could be considered virtuous enough to receive money from private funds to cover dowry expenses.¹² He also drafted the terms by which the local

8. On what it meant to hold both posts, see Antonio José González Antías, “El escribano y el documento en el contexto de la Venezuela colonial: importancia y tipología,” *Tiempo y Espacio* 76 (July–December 2022): 318.

9. Justicia Mayor de la ciudad de Mérida, para que cumpla lo determinado por esta real audiencia en vista de la solicitud hecha por Rafael Almarza, con producción de dos Reales Títulos de Escribano Público y de Cabildo de dicha ciudad, despachados a su favor, según se le ordena en el auto inserto, March 6, 1804, AGNV, Reales Provisiones, vol. 24, fols. 70–71.

10. Silvia Espelt-Bombin, “Notaries of Color in Colonial Panamá: Limpieza de Sangre, Legislation, and Imperial Practices in the Administration of the Spanish Empire,” *The Americas* 71:1 (2014): 37–69; Avellán de Tamayo, *Los escribanos de Venezuela*; Kathryn Burns, *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Bianca Premo, *The Enlightenment on Trial: Ordinary Litigants and Colonialism in the Spanish Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Nathan Weaver Olson, “The (un)lettered Frontier: Power and Literacy in the Eastern Andes of Charcas, Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 26: 3 (2017): 335–354.

11. Unlike his teacher, Soto maintained unwavering support for the king’s cause throughout the conflict, as evidenced by different appointments he received from royal authorities. Nevertheless, Soto also demonstrated the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. In 1831, a year after Venezuela’s separation from Colombia, Soto was appointed escribano of Barinas district. See Nombramiento del ciudadano Martín Soto para escribano del cantón Barinas, September 10, 1831, Barinas, AGN, Secretaría de Interior y Justicia, tomo 37, doc. 46, fol. 378; Virgilio Tosta, *Sucedió en Barinas: episodios de historia menuda* (Caracas: Editorial Sucre, 1964), 147–148; and Virgilio Tosta, *Historia de Barinas, 1800–1863* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia), 2:156.

12. Luis Alberto Ramírez Méndez, *Las llaves del paraíso. La obra pía del Dr. Marcelino Rangel: las dotes de las doncellas pobres de Mérida-Venezuela, siglos XVIII-XIX* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Editorial Académica Española, 2015), 211.

church lent money to individuals. Some years later, he recorded the destruction wrought on Mérida by the Maundy Thursday earthquake of 1812 and documented the bureaucratic barriers that prevented the city's reconstruction.¹³ Escribanos such as Almarza possessed a holistic knowledge of the concerns of the inhabitants of the towns under their jurisdiction, whether pious or earthly. Tamar Herzog argues that by writing, collecting, registering, and safeguarding daily life events, escribanos were, in the eyes of their communities, the holders of public faith—a conceptual place that gave them enormous power in an illiterate society with a robust legal culture.¹⁴

Among those who valued the power of written words were enslaved people who sought freedom within the narrow guidelines of the Spanish legal system. Iberian law granted enslaved people legal personhood, allowing those with the knowledge and proper connections to appear before courts as witnesses, plaintiffs, and defendants. As a group that often pursued change through the law, enslaved people crafted discursive strategies that could be used to obtain freedom, often pushing the boundaries of the existing legal framework.¹⁵ Escribanos aided and abetted this process by making and preserving legal documents.¹⁶ During civil disputes, both notaries and *síndicos* (public defenders) were responsible for translating the grievances of the enslaved into compelling documents that followed formal legal templates. Likewise, these two types of officials stayed with those cases when they were appealed to higher courts.¹⁷

Freedom was made material through the notaries' signatures, which provided written evidence that attested changes of civil status and could serve to counter efforts at re-enslavement. As the contemporaneous primary sources show, contestations over freedom occurred regularly throughout the colonial and national periods. Although manumission letters alone did not guarantee

13. Rogelio Altez, *1812: documentos para el estudio de un desastre* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 2009), 136.

14. Tamar Herzog, *Mediación, archivos y ejercicio: los escribanos de Quito, siglo XVII* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996).

15. See Alejandro de la Fuente, "Slaves and the Creation of Legal Rights in Cuba: Coartación and Papel," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 87:4 (2007): 659–692. For a gender perspective, see María Eugenia Chaves, *Honor y libertad: discursos y recursos en la estrategia de libertad de una mujer esclava: Guayaquil a fines del periodo colonial* (Göteborg, Germany: Departamento de Historia, Instituto Iberoamericano de la Universidad de Göteborg, 2001), 86.

16. Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), chapt. 1; Manuel Lucena Salmoral, *Regulación de la esclavitud negra en las colonias de América Española (1503–1886): documentos para su estudio* (Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá, 2005); Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Montevideo: Arca, 1998), introduction.

17. Michael Zeuske, and Orlando García Martínez, "Estado, notarios y esclavos en Cuba," *Nuevo Mundo, Mundos Nuevos* (2008); <https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevomundo.15842>; Carolina González, "El abogado y el procurador de pobres: la representación de esclavos y esclavas a fines de la colonia y principios de la República," *SudHistoria* 5 (July–December 2012), Repositorio Chile, Universidad de Chile, <https://repositorio.uchile.cl/handle/2250/170529>.

lasting freedom, they had a crucial probative value in legal disputes. Also, a scribe's notarial book preserved the history and experience of the event, permitting the replicability of contracts without the need to gather all the parts involved in the original agreement anew.

Escribanos also served as archivists and custodians of the documents they produced and key figures in the development of historical knowledge in the Iberian world. It is important to keep in mind that escribanos were the first to index, organize, and classify historical documentation based on the legal structures and practical needs of their era. These functions were a bulwark in the face of the inherent mobility of the Spanish imperial archive. Individuals and tribunals often borrowed documents from escribanos, and occasionally, these documents were lost in transit. This meant that maintaining the integrity of archives posed a challenge even in their own time.¹⁸

Mérida had significantly fewer enslaved people than the Venezuelan coastal region, but Almarza was nonetheless versed in the legal documentation that reinforced the slave system—sale licenses, valuations, and slave purchases—and this knowledge helped him to produce and promote the documentation the enslaved needed to further pleas for freedom.¹⁹ In 1806, for example, Almarza collected testimonies from several enslaved people who sought their freedom from their owner, Jacinto Muñoz.²⁰ Two years later, our escribano was assisting Juan Domingo de Rojas, a freedman, in his plea to prevent the sale of his wife, the enslaved Paula Muñoz.²¹ Thus, even before the Spanish monarchy started to implode, escribanos played a pivotal role in assisting enslaved persons to exercise their legal personhood by ensuring the materiality of the diverse legal actions they undertook.

18. Espelt-Bombin, *Notaries of Color*, 37–69; Avellán de Tamayo, *Los escribanos de Venezuela*; Burns, *Into the Archive*; Premo, *The Enlightenment*.

19. Edda Samudio, *Las haciendas del Colegio San Francisco Javier de la Compañía de Jesús en Mérida, 1628–1767* (Mérida: Universidad de los Andes, 1985); Miguel Ángel Rodríguez Lorenzo, “La presencia de población esclava de origen africano en la cordillera de los Andes: una búsqueda metodológica,” in *Memoria del Quinto Congreso Venezolano de Historia* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1992); Miguel Ángel Rodríguez Lorenzo, “Sordos combates en la oscuridad. El lento y silencioso proceso de lucha y resistencia de los africanos y sus descendientes contra la esclavitud en la Cordillera de Mérida,” *Anuario GRHGLAL1* (January–December 2007): 65–92; Héctor Publio Pérez Ángel, “La hacienda y el ható en la estructura económica, social y política de los llanos colombo-venezolanos durante el período colonial,” *Procesos Históricos* 11 (2007): 1–20; Sarah Washbrook, “Independence for Those Without Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Mérida, Venezuela, 1810–1854,” *Slavery & Abolition* 39:4 (2018): 708–730.

20. Testimonio de la causa seguida por varios esclavos de Diego Jacinto Muñoz sobre su libertad, Archivo General del Estado Mérida [hereafter AGEM], 1806, Fondo Escribanía, Sección Esclavos y Manumisos, fols. 27–319.

21. Sobre la venta de una esclava perteneciente a los Angulos de Caparú nombrada Paula Muñoz y que pretende buscar quien la compre para liberarla por su propio marido Juan Domingo de Rojas, mozo libre, 1808, AGEM, Fondo Escribanía, Sección Esclavos y Manumisos, fols. 373–382.

NOTARIES AND THE CRISIS OF THE SPANISH MONARCHY

Primary sources in imperial archives show that the legal spaces and the role of colonial notaries within them remained unaltered when news that Fernando VII had abdicated the Spanish throne in favor of Napoleon's brother arrived in the Americas, in 1808. As the political discourse heated up over the following years, the escribanos kept up their regular notarial work. At the same time, they participated as silent actors in the significant discussions of the sovereignty and nature of the Spanish empire that exploded in the region.²² The documents they produced and signed attested to the acts of the independent administrative juntas that were created on both sides of the Atlantic to protect the monarchy until the rightful king could be restored to the throne. By the end of 1819, the escribanos in the Venezuelan captaincy had notarized the procedures that transformed city councils into juntas and over the same period transcribed the words of those outraged by these scandalous initiatives of self-governance.²³

Mérida, Almarza's province, initially followed the instructions of authorities in Maracaibo, the provincial capital, which remained aligned with the Spanish regency established in Cádiz and rejected the call for juntas led by Caracas.²⁴ But all of this changed in just months when troops from Caracas surrounded Mérida, and city notables gave in to their demand to create Mérida's junta on September 16, 1810.²⁵ Almarza's initial political stance is unknown. Like other officials, he may have gotten caught up in the shifting circumstances and had to abide by the rule of the new authorities to protect his livelihood. However, the archival evidence suggests that he took an active role in these changes. On

22. The diligent execution of notarial duties was regarded as partisanship, as seen in the case of Rafael Diego Mérida, royal escribano of Caracas. According to the memoirs of José Francisco Heredia, *oidor* of the royal audiencia of Caracas, Mérida faced persecution by Francisco de Miranda in 1811 for his role as the notary in the Gual and España conspiracy case of 1798. See José Francisco Heredia, *Memorias sobre las revoluciones de Venezuela* (Paris: Garnier Hnos., 1895), 87–88.

23. Manuel Chust, 1808, *La eclosión juntera en el mundo hispano* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007).

24. During the monarchical crisis in the peninsula that followed Napoleon's takeover, the province of Venezuela initially supported the Junta Central formed in Spain, which was created in the absence of the king. However, this support ended after a regency replaced the Junta Central. A faction from the Caracas elite acted on April 19, 1810, removing the captain general and establishing a Junta de Gobierno and thereby disregarding the regency's authority. Later, the Caracas junta dispatched emissaries to diverse cities within the captaincy, encouraging them to follow its example. However, cities such as Guayana, Coro, and Maracaibo chose not to align and instead remained faithful to the guidelines of the regency. Initially, Mérida, as part of Maracaibo, refrained from participating in these changes. Nevertheless, Caracas's efforts intersected with long-standing local aspirations of autonomy, prompting Mérida to create its own junta and formalize its separation from Maracaibo. For more on this process, see Cristóbal L. Mendoza, *La Junta de Gobierno de Caracas y sus misiones diplomáticas en 1810*, (Caracas: Tipografía Americana, 1936); and Edda Otilia Samudio Aizpurúa, "La experiencia juntista en Mérida (Venezuela) 1808–1811" *Revista Historia y Memoria* 1 (2010): 35–53.

25. Inés Mercedes Quintero Montiel, *El Marquesado del Toro, 1732–1851: nobleza y sociedad en la provincia de Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 2009); Samudio Aizpurúa, "La experiencia juntista en Mérida."

September 17, at 4:30 pm, Almarza, accompanied by a military drummer and a town crier, proclaimed the recently approved assembly resolutions from the main corners of Mérida.²⁶ Eight days later, the new polity made Rafael de Almarza *escribano de junta* (notary of tribunals and treasury). It is hard to judge the breadth and depth of these appointments and how they might have differed from the colonial posts he had received from the crown six years earlier. From this moment on, Almarza would skillfully navigate a complex political landscape, while keeping his post.

When the Venezuelan juntas, in an accelerated radicalization process, gathered and called for absolute independence from the Spanish crown on July 5, 1811, Almarza sanctioned with his signature the decree that described the procedure all “citizens” from Mérida had to follow to pledge alliance to the sovereignty of the Venezuelan state.²⁷ It is likely that his lower position within the administrative hierarchy enabled him to survive the purge that followed the brief monarchical restoration in July 1812. During that royal interregnum (1812-13), Almarza would use his reputation to assist families of “insurgents” who wanted information about their imprisoned relatives in the capital or the overseas territories. In December 1812, for instance, he drafted a plea on behalf of Josefa Fernández Peña, requesting the release from prison of her husband Juan Antonio Paredes, a white creole and a member of the Republican faction who was imprisoned in Puerto Rico under sedition charges.²⁸ In Mérida, the royal military authorities who received this petition added a marginal note recognizing the notarial attributes of Rafael Almarza, describing him as a “faithful, loyal, and trusted confidant.”²⁹ Given that Almarza and Paredes shared exile and held positions in the revolutionary government established in the Llanos region four years later, the note raises doubts. Was the *escribano* simply providing his services? Or could this note be considered early evidence of his affiliation with the revolutionary party?³⁰ Either way, actions soon to come would indicate his unwillingness to keep crisscrossing the unstable frontiers of loyalty that characterized the first years of the war.

26. “La ciudad de Mérida proclama la revolución del 19 de abril, desconoce las autoridades coloniales y erige una Junta Soberana de Gobierno el 16 de septiembre de 1810,” in *Actas de independencia de Mérida, Trujillo y Táchira en 1810*, Tulio Febres Cordero, ed. (Mérida: Tipografía de El Lápiz, 1910), 9.

27. Decreto, September 16, 1811, Mérida, in *Documentos para la historia de la vida pública del Libertador*, José Félix Blanco and Ramón Azpurúa, eds. (Caracas: Comité Ejecutivo del Bicentenario de Simón Bolívar, 1876), 3:324.

28. “Contra D. Juan Paredes por infidencia,” in *Causas de infidencia: documentos inéditos relativos a la Revolución de la Independencia*, Héctor García Chuecos, ed. (Caracas: Imprenta Nacional, 1952), 2:5–82.

29. “Contra D. Juan Paredes por infidencia,” 7.

30. Months after Josefa Fernández’s petition was sent to the capital, her husband, José Antonio Paredes, managed to escape his confinement in Puerto Rico. During 1813, he reunited with the Republican army operating in the Andes. “José Antonio Paredes,” July 24, 1813, Villa del Rosario, in *Próceres merideños*, Vicente Dávila, ed. (Caracas: Imprenta Bolívar, 1918), 271–273.

Many other royal officials sought refuge in territories under Spanish control to maintain their professional status and their reputation as royalists, but Almarza remained in Mérida and became the *escribano de gobierno* (government notary) when Simón Bolívar reestablished Republican control in May of 1813.³¹ This government took a more radical stand, calling for the extermination of all Spaniards, a strategy that sought to consolidate a national identity—with lethal repercussions. At this point, neutrality was no longer an option, and any attempt to disengage from the conflict would be perceived as treason. Almarza's abundant paper trail, left in provincial archives from this period, shows us a man unafraid to provide his services in trials against royalists or the legalization of “donations” that inhabitants were giving to sustain the Republican campaign that was marching toward Caracas.³²

Although Almarza was helping to dismantle monarchical power document by document, none of these documents attempted to alter the institution of slavery. Ever since the outbreak of the war, the ruling class had reacted with fear to the social unrest that could be triggered by a monarchical crisis. No matter which political party they followed, the landowning class had vivid mental images of the revolution in Saint-Domingue and took measures to avoid its reenactment in Tierra Firme (the Spanish Main).³³ The young Venezuelan republic had pledged to abolish the slave trade, a decision motivated by the aspiration to gain economic concessions from the British rather than a commitment to humanitarian principles.³⁴ However, the illegal inter-Caribbean slave market and the buying and selling of human cargo within

31. The Spanish archives have numerous petitions submitted by royal officials pleading for remuneration for work performed in their former positions or simply requesting reassignment to alternative vacancies within the Spanish empire. One remarkable aspect of this body of documents is its evidence of the diverse range of royal officials in exile, with Puerto Rico as a significant hub. One notable example was Antonio José Caro, who served as a senior official of the royal treasury of Santa Fe de Bogotá and received a monthly salary of 600 pesos until his expulsion in 1811. See AGI, Estado 127, doc. 20. However, there are others, like Luis Rendón, an accounting officer of Nueva Barcelona in the province of Venezuela, who received only 25 pesos per month. AGI, Ultramar 127, doc. 21). For further information regarding these officials, I recommend Sarah C. Chambers, “Expatriados en la Madre Patria: el estado de limbo de los emigrados realistas en el imperio español, 1790–1830,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 32 (2021). On notaries and revolutionary context, see the second chapter in Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

32. One notable contribution was a house offered for sale or rent by María Simón Corredor. María has been portrayed in patriotic narratives as a selfless heroine due to this act, but recent scholarship suggests that many such donations were likely made under coercion, and that María's may not have been an exception. See Hancer González Sierralta, *Documentos para el estudio de Mérida durante la Campaña Admirable (1813). Selección y Estudio Preliminar* (Mérida: Fundación para el Desarrollo Cultural del Estado Mérida, 2013), 38.

33. The revolution in Saint-Domingue held different meanings within colonial society. For the white elite, it represented destruction; the black population saw it as a world of possibilities. On this topic, see Cristina Soriano, *Tides of Revolution: Information, Insurgencies, and the Crisis of Colonial Rule in Venezuela* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), esp. chapt. 4; and Alejandro E. Gómez, “El síndrome de Saint-Domingue. Percepciones y sensibilidades de la revolución haitiana en el Gran Caribe (1791–1814),” *Caravelle* 86 (June 2006): 125–155.

34. “Decreto de la Junta Suprema prohibiendo el tráfico de esclavos de 14 de agosto de 1810,” en *Materiales para el estudio de la cuestión agraria en Venezuela (1810–1865)*, (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1979), vol. 1, doc. 2.

the Venezuelan provinces remained active. The only effective route enslaved people had to obtain individual manumission was through the traditional legal procedures, as performed in the colonial years by escribanos and síndicos.³⁵

When the Republican leadership attempted in 1812 to enlist 1,000 enslaved soldiers with the promise of freedom after ten years of service, the measure was widely criticized by property owners fearful of the impact on the existing social order.³⁶ The Venezuelan nation was established as a slaveholding republic, and when Bolívar restored the republic for a second time in 1813, that foundation held firm. In fact, communities with a predominantly enslaved population were subjected to harsh surveillance measures.³⁷ Meanwhile, the royalist leadership weaponized the fear of an enslaved revolt by supporting the royalist uprisings of 1812, when the Republican project was falling apart. Although royalists cautiously celebrated displays of loyalty on the part of slaves, they did not grant manumission as a reward.³⁸

Although neither side was ready to abolish slavery, the disruption of war and the circulation of general discourse about freedom and loyalty created opportunities for enslaved people to participate. Popular royalist leaders were the first to incorporate the enslaved into the conflict, with José Tomás Boves the most

35. In this regard, see Washbrook, "Independence for Those Without Freedom," 708–730.

36. Francisco de Miranda made this proposal as a desperate measure to prevent the collapse of the First Republic (1810–12), but it was not implemented. Francisco de Miranda, *Archivo del General Miranda (Campaña de Venezuela, Prisión y muerte del General Miranda: 1811–1816)*, in the collection *Documentos oficiales de 1811 a 1812 y correspondencia de 1812 a 1816* (Venezuela, Editorial Sur-América, 1950), tomo 24, 35. In addition to concerns about potential disorder, there was also apprehension regarding the impact these measures would have on the young republic's agriculture, since it involved the departure of enslaved individuals from their duties. *Archivo del General Miranda*, 55.

37. To be considered a good citizen according to the 1811 provincial constitution of Mérida, a person must be a "good son, good father, good friend, good husband, good master [*buen amo*], good servant." Constitución de la Provincia de Mérida, in *Las constituciones provinciales* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia: 1959), 285.

38. The archbishop of Caracas, Narciso Coll y Prat (1734–1822), addressed the support of the enslaved for the king's cause at this stage of the conflict. In the account he sent to the king in 1812, he discussed both the extent of this support and the potentially negative consequences. Years later, Pablo Morillo accused the archbishop of dangerous friendship with the *castas*. Narciso Coll y Prat, *Memoriales sobre la independencia de Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1960). This support for the king's cause is also documented in the accounts of other royal officials. See José Francisco Heredia, *Memorias del Regente Heredia (de las reales audiencias de Caracas y México) divididas en cuarto épocas: Monteverde, Bolívar, Boves, Morillo* (Madrid: Editorial América, 1916); and Pedro de Urquinaona y Pardo, *Relación documentada del origen y progresos del trastorno de las provincias de Venezuela* (Madrid: La Imprenta Nueva, 1820). The *Gaceta de Caracas* reported in its February 22, 1812, edition on the support the enslaved population rendered to the loyalist cause once the promise of freedom was made. However, the leaders of the rebellion lost control of the movement, resulting in several enslaved people having to flee their homes. Additionally, on August 4, 1812, five enslavers from La Guaira accused Julian Poncho, royalist chief of the Curiepe Division, of offering freedom to enslaved men in Naiguata in exchange for their military services, even after the Republican government had been defeated. See Hacendados to Domingo de Monteverde, August 4, 1812, La Guaira, AGN, Colonia, Gobernación y Capitanía General, Correspondencia, vol. 220, doc. 75, fols. 100–101. Feliciano Montenegro y Colón, a royalist official and historian, attributed the enslaved uprising in the valleys of Curiepe, Capaya, and Barlovento to the royalist supporters Isidoro Quintero, Manuel Elzaburu and Gaspar González. See Feliciano Montenegro y Colón, *Historia de Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia), 226–228.

prominent among them. A charismatic leader, Boves raised his successful army in 1813-14 from the enslaved and free colored population of the colony, especially in the Llanos, a controversial measure that further fueled the discourse of total war.³⁹ Manumission was an incentive in this mobilization, yet the procedures one would have to follow and the terms and conditions for attaining free status remained undefined.⁴⁰

In spite of such vagueness in regard to their futures, enslaved people were a crucial factor on the frontlines in the royalist military success in 1813-14. By the time the popular counterrevolution of 1814 dismantled the Second Republic, it had also become clear to the insurgent leadership that the subject of enslavement could no longer be excluded from the discussions surrounding independence.⁴¹ The reassessment would take place within a community of war exiles surviving on the frontiers of Spanish-controlled Venezuela, and Almarza's power in record-making would be instrumental to new strategies of engaging with enslaved supporters.

THE FORMATION OF AN ITINERANT REPUBLIC IN THE LLANOS

In the months before the counterrevolution suffocated the second Republican government of Mérida in September of 1814, the volume of Almarza's notarial work did not diminish. In May, he drafted a petition from Barinas residents requesting military support from General Gregor Macgregor to expel the royalist force occupying their city.⁴² By September 6, Almarza was helping Fr. Francisco Antonio Uzcátegui to sell some properties; the priest hoped to reinvest the proceeds in the schools he had helped establish a decade before.⁴³ Then, when royal troops seized Mérida 13 days later, Almarza fled, along with other committed Republicans, leaving behind his wife and children.⁴⁴

39. About the *llanero* origin of Boves troops, see the accounts of royalist officers at the time, for example, José Francisco Heredia, *Memorias del Regente Heredia*, 203, and Narciso Coll y Prat, *Memoriales*, 304–305.

40. José Francisco Heredia, *Memorias del Regente Heredia*, 72, 245.

41. Germán Carrera Damas, *Boves: aspectos socioeconómicos de la Guerra de Independencia* (Caracas: Ediciones de la Biblioteca Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1972); Edgardo Mondolfi, *José Tomás Boves: (1782–1814)* (Caracas: Editora El Nacional, 2005).

42. María Villafañe, "Un episodio en la independencia de Barinas," *Procesos Históricos*, 18 (2010), 129, <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/200/20016326014.pdf>, accessed November 27, 2023.

43. See "El canónigo se desprende de todos sus bienes en beneficio de las escuelas fundadas por él," Dávila, *Próceres Merideños*, 265–267; and Mariano Uzcátegui Urdaneta, *Ensayo biográfico sobre el canónigo Uzcátegui* (Mérida: Universidad de Los Andes, 1963), 56–65.

44. El comandante de Mérida solicitando al gobernado de Maracaibo remedie la falta de escribano en esta ciudad por fallecimiento del último escribano don Rafael de Almarza, AGM, Fondo Escribanías, Sección Empleados de la Colonia, 1819, vol. 1, doc. 14, fols. 218–224.

Pushed by either the forces of war or revolutionary conviction (or both), Almarza joined the displaced population and defeated insurgents on their pilgrimage to the region at the foot of the Andes.⁴⁵ Crossed by a fertile river system and marked by two seasons, each lasting half the year (rainy from May to December; dry from December to April), the plains region is under water during the rainy season, forcing its inhabitants to move each year in search of uplands. As the floodwaters retreat, extensive areas of grasslands suitable for grazing cattle and the cultivation of crops such as tobacco and indigo emerge. At the fringes of the Spanish Empire, this zone constituted a thriving economic corridor that connected the viceroyalty of New Granada, the Venezuelan captaincy, and the Caribbean, but in the war period, its remoteness and low population density served as the perfect landscape for concealing dispersed troops and unfaithful subjects like Almarza.⁴⁶

Revolutionary leaders met at La Trinidad de Arichuna in 1816 to assemble a governing body that could reignite their cause and provide it with a functional structure to secure survival. Different visions of governance emerged in clashes among the displaced leaders, with the principles of guerrilla warfare winning out.⁴⁷ This meant regrouping small armed bands to raid the better-equipped enemy under a leadership familiar with the landscape and the dynamics of the seasonality of war, and the logistical

45. The Republican exiles in the Llanos could be categorized based on their places of origin or departure. The first group were those who came from Venezuela, including José Antonio Páez, José Antonio Paredes, Juan Nepomuceno Briceño, and Rafael Almarza. A second group consisted of the so-called “relics” of the Colombian insurgency, who were pursued by Pablo Morillo: Manuel Manrique, Miguel Valdés, Juan Briceño, Miguel Guerrero, Rafael Urdaneta, Francisco de Paula Santander, Manuel Roergas de Serviez, Francisco Javier Yáñez, and José Félix Blanco. From the memoirs and testimonies left by some of these men, we know the tortuous path they traveled from Bogotá to the plains and the attempts they made to reorganize an army from among the inhabitants of the towns they transited during their retreat. For them, Los Llanos was the last place to regroup and face the enemy. See Francisco de Paula Santander, *Apuntamientos para las memorias sobre Colombia y la Nueva Granada por el General Santander* (Bogotá: Reimpresos por Lorenzo M. Lleras, 1838); José Félix Blanco, *Bosquejo histórico de la Revolución de Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1960); Rafael Urdaneta, “Apuntamientos del General Urdaneta,” in *Memorias del General O’Leary*, vol. 4 (Caracas: Imprenta de la Gaceta Oficial, 1880); José Antonio Páez, *Autobiografía del General Páez*, vol. 1 (Caracas: Librería y Editorial del Maestro, 1939); and Francisco Javier Yanes, *Relación documentada de los principales sucesos ocurridos en Venezuela: desde que se declaró estado independiente hasta el año de 1821*, vol. 1 (Caracas: Editorial Elite, 1943).

46. Rather than a place where fugitives from the law coexisted with nomad tribes and maroon communities, the Llanos was a frontier society largely integrated into the captaincy, as Clément Thibaud asserts in his work about the myths surrounding this community. See Thibaud, “De la ficción al mito: los llaneros de la independencia de Venezuela,” *Tiempos de América* 10 (2003): 109–119. A survey from 1786 shows that most of the population was of mixed race (14,436), closely followed in numbers by the white population (13,800). In third place were natives living in Christian missions (9,805), followed by free native peoples (2,559), and a modest number of enslaved (2,132). Archivo General de Simancas, Spain, Estado Población y Agricultura Barinas, leg. 7172, doc. 31.

47. For an extensive discussion of irregular warfare in this context, see Clément Thibaud *Repúblicas en armas: los ejércitos bolivarianos en la Guerra de Independencia en Colombia y Venezuela* (Bogotá: Academia Colombiana de Historia, 2021), particularly the chapter titled “Sobrevivir: hacia la guerra irregular.” See also Héctor Bencomo Barrios, *Páez y el arte militar* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 2006); and Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), chapt. 7.

assistance of a mobilized population.⁴⁸ In the eyes of the gathered soldiers and mobilized population, the man who best fit the leading role was José Antonio Páez, a skillful *llanero* (plainsman) with the charisma capable of unifying the diverse assembly into a single entity.⁴⁹ Bestowed with “unlimited faculties” by “popular acclaim,” Páez was given the rank of major general in the Republican army. The memoir of José Félix Blanco (1782–1872), an army chaplain who was exiled to the plains during Páez’s rise to power, sheds light on the influences that led to the election of this type of government:

The Arichuna military mutiny was the result not only of individual efforts, but [also of] a collective sentiment shared by soldiers and exiles, including respected clergy present there. It was driven by a sincere conviction that, given our extraordinary circumstances, what we needed was not a civil or political government, but a bold and brave military leader. We didn’t require governance as much as we needed someone to fight fiercely to defend our lives. The war in the Llanos demanded a leader well-accustomed to its harsh realities. It was essential to have a general who had an intimate understanding of the terrain, its elements, and its people to utilize them most effectively and achieve the glorious objective of victory. It was deemed crucial that only a man capable of swiftly maneuvering on land and effortlessly crossing rivers . . . should take on such a task. This was necessary to launch surprise assaults and cunning attacks against our formidable adversaries, who held dominion over the land. Above all, the ideal leader had to unite the will, opinion, and support of the armed *llaneros* who fervently fought for national independence, while simultaneously striking fear into the hearts of the common enemy with his formidable spear. None of these qualities were found in the newly elected rulers, [but] were found in Commander José Antonio Páez, who had already proven his bravery and cunning in the Llanos.

Acting as governor and captain general of the province was Juan Antonio Paredes, the same man Almarza had assisted in seeking release from imprisonment in Puerto Rico back in 1812.⁵⁰

48. The dimensions of the general migration can be estimated from the survey conducted by engineers of the Spanish Expeditionary Army. They reported that “almost all inhabitants of Mérida are with the Republicans, and the few who remain are in rural areas. The city is almost depopulated due to the terrible earthquake.” “Itinerario de longitud desde la ciudad de Barinas a Cúcuta, por Mérida,” in *Relaciones topográficas de Venezuela, 1815–1819*, Francisco de Solano, ed. (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigación Científica, 1991), 292. Almarza’s road into exile likely led him first to the borderlands of New Granada, a route followed by many leaders from this region in 1814. However, their stay in New Granada may well have been brief. The arrival in mid 1815 of Pablo Morillo and his expeditionary army, comprising 12,000 soldiers from Spain, compelled the Republican forces to seek refuge in the plains.

49. José Félix Blanco, *Bosquejo histórico de la Revolución de Venezuela*, 235–236.

50. According to Páez, his military prowess in a series of actions in Palmarito, La Mata de la Miel, Mantecal, and Achaguas demonstrated his suitability for the role of general. These experiences gained him popular acclaim. José Antonio Páez, *José Antonio Páez a sus compatriotas* (Caracas, Imprenta de Valentín Espinal, 1837), 4. Meanwhile, José Félix Blanco described his takeover as a mutiny “of an insubordinate and brutal soldiery, of a military office without discipline or morality, and of guerrilla leadership who cared only for their spears and their horses, who despised those who in their

In the government structure of this itinerant republic, Almarza emerged as the *escribano público y de gobierno*, the same post(s) he had held in Mérida before fleeing. Assuming the post also marked 14 years in his career as *escribano*, of which the last six had been invested in undermining the legitimacy of the same king who had granted him the authority to create binding documents back in 1804.

This improvised government came to rule the lives of roughly 8,000 people—men, women, and children of all ages—mobilized or displaced by the war.⁵¹ Information about the origins and makeup of this population is scattered throughout the few surviving primary sources produced at the time, such as correspondence and reports produced by the royalist troops deployed in the area, and in the subsequent memoirs of Republican leaders.⁵² Alexander Alexander, an English mercenary serving in the Republican army, was caught up by this mobilization's linguistic and racial diversity, calling it a “dispersion of Babel.”⁵³ Based on the geographic information in the freedom documents produced by Almarza, most emigrants came from cities and small villages such as Barinas, San Fernando, El Tocuyo, Cunaviche, Achaguas, Rincón Hondo, La Luz, and Nutrias. All of these places are located hundreds of miles from El Yagual where Páez settled his military headquarters. Those miles extended by the difficulty of transit during the rainy season, when known trails disappear under water.

Mobilizing these exiles for military service and support posed a significant challenge for the new leadership, given the extreme weather conditions and the difficult

llanero language they called *men of feathers*—those who did not know how to do what they do (lance, swim, lasso, etc.).” Blanco also notes that these individuals formed a junta that elected Páez as its leader. Those who disagreed with his leadership were compelled to comply to safeguard their lives. José Félix Blanco, *Bosquejo histórico de la Revolución de Venezuela*, 234–235. For the meaning of acclamation as a supporting principle of *caudillo* leadership, see David A. Bell, *Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

51. It seems that these quantities fluctuated. José Antonio Páez to Simón Bolívar, February 26, 1819, *Archivo del General José Antonio Páez, 1818–1820*, vol. 1.

52. Pedro Cunill Grau offers a comprehensive examination of the human geography of this settlement through the accounts and correspondence of those who served in the Republican army. See Cunill Grau, *Geografía del poblamiento venezolano en el siglo XIX* (Caracas: Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 1987), 1:770–815.

53. Alexander Alexander, an English mercenary who volunteered to fight in the insurgent army, described one of the many mobilizations of the guerrilla town in the following terms: “The distressing scene baffles all description, mules, and asses plodding along, with pigs, poultry, and children tied onto cows . . . [all] on the same animal; mules and horses with two and three people on their backs, the women always in front with one or two men behind; women dressed in men's attire, with their sturdy limbs and swarthy features, wearing a man's straw hat, shirt, and trousers, pants cut off at the knees. The inhabitants of all ages, sexes, and colors thus rolled on before us in mass, the negro and Indian soldiers' wives riding and walking amongst the men. The confusion and varieties of language among them reminds me of Babel's dispersion.” Alexander Alexander, *The Life of Alexander Alexander*, 2 vols., John Howell, ed. (Edinburgh: Blackwood/Cadell, 1830), 95. For more on this author, see Matthew Brown, “The Life of Alexander Alexander and the Spanish Atlantic, 1799–1822,” in *Bridging the Early Modern Atlantic World: People, Products, and Practices on the Move*, Caroline A. Williams, ed. (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 203–222.

geography of the Llanos. However, the new leadership demonstrated its ability to derive advantages from even an adverse situation. According to the guerrilla scheme, those mobilized but unsuited for battle would provide services in the supply chain or primary aid for those wounded in battle. For example, they would be responsible for maintaining the breeding paddocks of the horses used in the Apure and Guiana campaigns and for tending the improvised pens that produced the cattle traded in the Caribbean to finance the war.⁵⁴ Following the logic of colonial labor, those primarily destined to perform these types of tasks were enslaved people, but enforcing their subjection was no longer a viable strategy since the slave system had been disrupted by the war and by “de facto” freedoms.⁵⁵ Aware of this new reality, the insurgent leadership had to make an offer a freedom that would bind men of military age to the army attacking Spanish forces, but it also had to make freedom provisions for those enslaved people who, for reasons of gender and age, were not directly useful in armed struggles but were instrumental in sustaining them.

FREEDOM IN THE REPUBLIC OF BABEL

Following the example of royalist leaders such as José Tomás Boves, who had formed successful armies in the Llanos a few years earlier, Páez, in one of his first mandates as leader of this republic, offered freedom to those men who enlisted in his army. He followed up the mandate with an offer to liberate those enslaved people unfit for military service who had agreed to join him in his project; these were largely women, children, and older people. Unfortunately, there is no written record of Páez’s proclamations, probably because they were issued only orally. All we know about them is from the references made in the freedom letters that Rafael Almarza would later register in his diary.⁵⁶

The source documents, by their headings, reveal that Páez’s offer was made in the middle of the rainy season, “after breaking camp in Trinidad de Arichuna.”

54. Most of the correspondence between Simón Bolívar and José Antonio Páez in 1818–19 focuses on calculating the best ways to organize the migrated men and improve cattle rearing. Bolívar’s increasing requests to Páez for horses to use in battle and cattle to trade in the Antilles created tensions between the two leaders. See *Archivo del General José Antonio Páez, 1818–1820*, vol. 1. Richard Vowell, another English volunteer in the Republican army, provided a detailed account of the daily life at this camp for the year 1818. Richard Longeville Vowell, *Campaigns and Cruises, in Venezuela and New Grenada, and in the Pacific Ocean, 1817 to 1830*, bound together with *Tales of Venezuela*, vol. 3 (London: n.p., 1831),

55. Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom*.

56. José Antonio Páez’s autobiography of 1869 offers a brief reference to the enslaved population in the camp: “Among the properties that the inhabitants of Apure placed at my disposal came their slaves, whom I declared free when I liberated the territory; a provision that was confirmed later by the congresses of Guayana and Cúcuta in their laws of manumission.” José Antonio Páez, *Autobiografía del General Páez*, vol 1., 130.

According to military surveys, it took place in September or October of 1816, immediately after Páez assumed government control.⁵⁷ The first manumission paper in Almarza's diary is dated March 29, 1817, meaning that only six months separated the spoken offer from the first entry in the surviving written register.⁵⁸

It is hard to know whether Páez intended his offer to be substantiated immediately, or if the manumission letters were issued later to increase the appeal of the offer. The chances are that the notarized letters were necessary to avoid the disappointing reception with which the enslaved had met similar offers made by other Republican leaders during this time. Encouraged by Haitian president Alexander Pétion, Simón Bolívar offered freedom to those enslaved peoples who joined his army during his campaigns in Carúpano and Ocumare de la Costa in 1816. However, Bolívar later expressed his frustration to the governor of Les Cayes, Ignace Despontreaux Marion, as his offerings were met with a cold reception on both occasions. Bolívar attributed this response to the tyrannical Spanish rule that had left the enslaved population ignorant to the point where they hesitated to embrace their freedom. According to the *Liberator*, this fear led some individuals to continue serving the king's cause, while others chose to escape on British vessels.⁵⁹ The cold reception may have stemmed from strong royalist tendencies among the enslaved population or the lack of clarity regarding the specific procedures for obtaining freedom, or some combination of these. It is important to point out that most of the surviving manumission letters issued by the Republican party on the Caribbean coast were made decades after military service concluded, when veterans had to face the perils of re-enslavement.⁶⁰

57. Claims to freedom based on these offerings as a legal argument continued for many years, even decades after the military service ended. In these legal processes, formerly enslaved soldiers had to certify their conduct and battle wounds and provide specific details of the corps they served, which required reports from doctors and military officials. Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom*.

58. Almarza's notarial book starts at folio 46 and concludes with folio 117v. The sequence of these folios is uninterrupted, with no pages missing. However, the fate of the first 45 folios is unknown. In other words, we may never know the nature of the agreements and contracts Almarza certified for the itinerant republic during the time before he handed over the manumission letters. The more modern binding of the current protocol leads us to think that this separation may have been the decision of an archivist at an unknown date.

59. Simón Bolívar to General Francis Marion, June 27, 1816, Carúpano, in Porfirio Mamami, "Correspondencia entre Bolívar y las autoridades de Haití," *Guaraguao* 18:44 (2013): 140–141. In this situation, the offers captured the attention of the wrong audience, as was the case with the insurgent leader Santiago Mariño's offer of freedom in 1816, made in the eastern provinces of Venezuela. Instead of incentivizing the local enslaved population, it attracted those living in the British colony of Trinidad. Mariño was forced to sign a treaty with Trinidad governor Ralph Woodford, in which he promised to return any enslaved individuals who arrived at his camp. UK National Archives, CO 295, 40, fols. 3–10.

60. Ana Joanna Vergara Sierra, "Las armas a cambio de la libertad: los esclavos en la Guerra de Independencia de Venezuela (1812–1835)," *Relaciones: Estudios de Historia y Sociedad* 32:127 (2011): 47–85.

Meanwhile, manumission remained a contentious issue in the royalist camp, not alleviated by the arrival of Pablo Morillo's expedition to Venezuela in 1815. On one hand, the priority of the pacification project was to restore colonial order, and a crucial step toward accomplishing this goal was the return of enslaved people to agricultural and domestic labor.⁶¹ On the other hand, the royalist leadership had to acknowledge the presence of enslaved people who had served in the king's army, despite the complaints of enslavers.⁶² Following the king's instructions, Morillo was willing to grant freedom to some especially loyal soldiers, but he excluded those who had been involved in the massacres that fueled the racial war of the previous year.⁶³ Regardless, enslaved soldiers had to fulfill extensive requirements, including securing testimonies from their commanding generals, reporting the battles they had participated in, undergoing medical evaluation to verify battle wounds, and demonstrating absolute loyalty to Fernando VII.⁶⁴ Upon satisfactory completion of these proofs, a letter of freedom was issued, but the former slave had to remain in the military service.⁶⁵

By contrast, Almarza's notarial power provided a more expeditious process for enslaved persons to obtain freedom letters, one with fewer demands. This was a clear departure from earlier offers that would award patriotism with freedom—those offers had lacked documentation and seemed to postpone freedom to an uncertain future. Formal written assurances that the promises would be fulfilled were valuable—charisma was not a sufficient source of authority, mainly when it came from a rising power engaged in a continuous struggle for its own existence, as was the case with Páez's leadership.

Ever since the 1814 debacle, the Republican project had faced the challenge of validating its claim to sovereignty. Part of this process consisted of building trust by demonstrating the capacity to deliver effective governance. The Republican leadership would need to prove its competence in addressing the demands of the enslaved community, which had been resistant to their project

61. See Stephen K. Stoa, *Pablo Morillo and Venezuela, 1815–1820* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974).

62. When he arrived in Venezuela years later, Pablo Morillo explored the possibility of creating troops with enslaved soldiers to prevent them from joining the Republican army, but he abandoned this plan in the face of fierce resistance from landowners and colonial authorities, who feared a slave revolt. Morillo al ministro de la Guerra dando parte de los motivos que le han impulsado a suspender la formación del Batallón de Morenos esclavos, de que había dado cuenta, y solicita resolución de S. M. sobre la materia, Real Academia de la Historia Madrid, January 25, 1818, sig. 9/7657, leg. 14, fols. 188–194v.

63. Instrucciones dadas á Morillo para su expedición á Costafirme, Ministerio Universal de Indias, muy reservado, November 18, 1814, in Antonio Rodríguez Villa, *El teniente general don Pablo Morillo . . . : documentos justificativos: años 1816 á 1818 inclusivos de la expedición á Costa firme* (Madrid: Fortanet, 1908), 444.

64. The case of Joaquín Vivas, a native of Guinea, is noteworthy. He underwent a medical examination to confirm the gunshot injury he had sustained in one of his legs. Archivo de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, Sección Civiles-Eslavos, tomo 1830, LPV, fol. 36.

65. Ana Joanna Vergara Sierra, "Las armas a cambio de la libertad," 47–85.

up to that moment. Backed by the long-standing credibility of the escribano, the freedom papers provided tangible evidence of the emerging entity's ability to act with such authority. But most important, though their requests for compliance with the freedom offers, enslaved people came to identify the Republican faction as a viable source of authority.

At the same time, this case-by-case approach channeled the potential volatility of a collective demand for abolition into a more controlled and gradual pursuit of individual freedom. By adapting older forms of notarial production to a new and rapidly shifting context, the emerging Republican power attempted to maintain social control and at the same time forge lasting collaborations with the populace and legitimate its own sovereignty.⁶⁶

PROTOCOLIZING PROMISES

A vivid reflection of a transitioning society, the freedom papers drafted by Almarza are a hybrid between Hispanic imperial procedures and the political language of the revolution. Both proclamations and manumission letters are phrased in first-person form; the proclamation is written in the voice of José Antonio Páez: (“I made,” “I comply,” “I offer”). In the first line, Páez laid out the reasoning behind his offer, calling it “an indispensable measure to establish the system we have adopted” (*una providencia indispensable para establecer el sistema que hemos adoptado*).⁶⁷ This was a pertinent assertion, since almost seven years into the conflict, even though the values of freedom were invoked on a daily basis, Republican discourse only rarely referred to the enslaved and their loss of freedom. The explanatory statement is followed in the text by the beneficiary's details and an outline of the specific terms under which he or she was granted their freedom. The closing sentence of the manumission letter invited the beneficiary to present the letter to the provincial governor to obtain “the competent or accredited instrument.” The letter was then signed by Páez and his secretary, and then Governor Juan Antonio Paredes attested to its reception by adding his own signature. The proceeding concludes with Almarza stating that a copy of the document has been given to the concerned parties and that a copy would be kept guarded (*resguardado*) in the notarial book.

66. In this regard, Alejandro de la Fuente's assertion proves helpful, especially in the context considered here, in which order and peace themselves were mobilizing forces: “Just as the Spanish legal system helped to tie indigenous people to the system that also oppressed them by occasionally protecting their rights, intervention in the case of slaves would have to likewise encourage reliance on colonial institutions while discouraging the other forms of resistance, thus contributing to social stability and peace.” Alejandro de la Fuente, “Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited.” *Law and History Review* 22:2 (2004): 349.

67. José Antonio Páez, “Making a claim for compliance with the offer I made to the enslaved people of Venezuela” (*reclamando el cumplimiento . . . [de] la oferta que hice a los esclavos de Venezuela*). Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fols. 46–64.

Due to the scarcity of paper in the camp, some manumissions were written on pages that were less than full sheets (*en este papel cortado por no haber otro*).⁶⁸ Like other escribanos in colonial times who regularly faced supply shortages, Almarza would note this characteristic in the text of the manumission letter, thereby mitigating potential concerns regarding authenticity that might arise from a fragment of the expected legal instrument.

At least 68 enslaved people presented themselves to Almarza with manumission requests between March and October of 1817, in spite of the dangers in doing so. Since it was a rebel group that had issued these manumission papers, they could be considered evidence of sedition once outside the camp and their bearers could potentially incur severe penalties. The records of trials against the enslaved for treason show us that even minor offenses like spreading false rumors could result in lashes and even death.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, there were single mothers, grandmothers, nursing mothers, and young and older men who were willing to take the risk for themselves and for their relatives who were not old enough to consent to a pact with the revolutionary leader of a republic that other authorities considered non-existent. Such was the case of soldier José Teodoro Sino, who joined the emigration with his wife María Sejas and their two children José Julián and Felipe Santiago, all former property of Pedro Alcántara Camacho.⁷⁰ Some presented themselves on their own after “absenting themselves from the enemy”; among them was Ascensión Briceño, formerly enslaved by Manuel Bareciartu, a staunch royalist who served as bailiff for the government in Barinas and active cabildo member during the royalist interregnum of 1812.⁷¹ Ascensión’s presence in the camp was framed in terms of military allegiance: rather than a runaway, she was identified as a “deserter who fled her home to seek shelter within the Republican troops.”⁷² Some made the arduous journey to the remote camp with toddlers, among them Antonia Aguilar, who came from Rincón Hondo, several miles from El Yagual,

68. Declaratoria de libertad de María del Carmen Tomé, May 7, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 84.

69. Even a brief glance at the documentation of similar criminal proceedings against enslaved people or *pardos* (individuals with mixed-race ancestry) during this period gives us an idea of the perils these people faced. In La Guaira, around the same time that José Antonio Páez was offering manumission to the enslaved population of the Llanos, Juana Ramona de León, a free person of color, was sentenced to death by hanging after making subversive comments against the king. For her case see: Ramón María Bobadilla al capitán general le comunica que en la mañana de la fecha ejecutó la sentencia de horca de Juana Ramona de León, impuesta por el Consejo de Guerra, March 26, 1816, La Guaira, AGN, La Colonia, Gobernación y Capitanía General, vol. 268, doc. 46, fol. 51. There is also the case of Julián Caraballo, a 40-year-old enslaved man who provided food and refuge to a group of insurgents, was decapitated in April 1816; his head was displayed beside the road that connects the towns of Maracay and Valencia as exemplary punishment. For more on this particular case and others, see *Memorias de la insurgencia* (Caracas: Archivo General de la Nación, 2011), vols. 1 and 2.

70. Declaratoria de libertad de José Teodoro Sino, su mujer María Sejas y sus dos hijos nombrados José Julián y Felipe Santiago, April 30, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 80.

71. Tosta, *Historia de Barinas*, 49–50, 80–83.

72. Declaratoria de libertad de Ascensión Briceño, March 31, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 48.

bringing her small children, José Carlos and Isabel.⁷³ Multigenerational families also presented themselves: Juana Bárbara Moreno came from Achaguas with her daughter Antonina del Carmen and her grandchild José Mujica.⁷⁴ Another grandmother, Antonia Álvarez, made sure that the notary transcribed in her manumission letter the names of her four children (José Martín, José Secundino, María Paula, and Marcelina) and three grandchildren (Pedro Pablo, Francisco Genaro, and Ana Paula) as heirs of her recently gained freedom. By this act, she was putting onto paper the hope of ending the legacy of bondage she would otherwise involuntarily pass on to her offspring, who had all served in bondage to Feliciano Delgado, a resident of Achaguas.⁷⁵

These collective manumissions are a distinctive feature in the freedom letters of enslaved women in the camp, some of whom incorporated even second-degree relatives. María Eulalia Blanco's freedom letter included not only her five children (María de los Ángeles, Juan Julián, Caledonio, Aniceto, and José) but also her niece Juana Antonia, residing in Achaguas.⁷⁶ There were even instances where enslaved women successfully requested the inclusion of absent relatives. María Petrona Ruiz "implored the protection of the tribunal" (*implora la protección del tribunal*) after her owner denied her a manumission paper after she had purchased her freedom for 200 pesos.⁷⁷ Once in the camp, she sought the manumission document her owner had unjustly refused to provide for her and her two absent children, José Luciano de Jesús and Juana Josefa, who were in San Fernando under the protection of Paulina Machado. Whether the element of collective manumission was introduced by the enslaved in the camp or promoted by the insurgent leadership is unknown. But considering the legal resourcefulness shown by enslaved people during the colonial period in crafting effective discursive strategies to secure freedom, it seems more likely that they were the driving force behind this innovative strategy.

In normal circumstances, group manumissions were a rarity, sometimes occurring when owners developed an emotional attachment with their enslaved, such as parenting. Usually, when enslaved families tried to purchase the freedom of their entire unit, each member had to go through a costly process full of pushbacks

73. Declaratoria de libertad de Antonia Aguilar y sus dos hijos párvulos nombrados José Carlos e Isabel, July 15, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 106.

74. Declaratoria de libertad de Juana Bárbara Moreno, su hija Antonina del Carmen y la de su hijo nombrado José Mujica, June 19, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 93.

75. Declaratoria de libertad de Antonia Álvarez, June 26, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 96. For more information on how enslavement was inherited through the maternal line and its correlation with the Free Womb laws (*vientres libres*) after independence was achieved, see Evelyne Laurent-Perrault, "Brígida Natera. Pionera de las leyes de vientre libre," *Tiempo y Espacio* 76 (July-December 2022): 353–385.

76. Declaratoria de libertad de María Eulalia Blanco, July 16, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 107.

77. Declaratoria de libertad de María Petrona Ruiz, May 16, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 86.

before reaching a satisfactory outcome. By extending the benefit of freedom to absent relatives, the Republican government in the Llanos was introducing a significant incentive capable of inflicting major damage to the slave system if implemented in the long term. But at this moment, these freedom papers bound enslaved people to the timeline of the Republican project and to its success: the future worth of those papers depended on their effective participation in the conflict and on the expectation that the Republican leaders would become the enforcers of the content of the manumission agreements.

Almarza's notary book reveals that many of the enslaved he registered arrived in the camp without owners, presumably as runaways. However, an important number of them came with their owners, who were also forcibly displaced by the war; some were property of the Republican leadership itself. In these cases, the authorities implemented an old formula of conditional freedom to reconcile the contradictory principles of freedom and property upheld by the revolution. Conditional freedom was a customary practice in colonial times: freedom was granted dependent on the enslaved fulfilling certain requirements or performing specific tasks. This practice was a common feature in wills, where owners carefully indicated how an enslaved person could obtain freedom.⁷⁸ Some enslavers granted full manumission upon their demise as a reward for years of good service; others postponed freedom until after the completion of specific services to their relatives, or in accord with the age or civil status of the enslaved.

During the war, forced migration to the Llanos had particular effects on the lives of some enslaved. Simón Carrillo, a man enslaved to Juana Carrillo from Trujillo, arrived at the camp alongside his owner's brother, and his manumission letter stipulated that he would be granted freedom on the condition that he support his owner's brother throughout the difficulties of forced migration (*con la condición de que durante la presente emigración y sus trabajos no desampare al hermano de aquella*).⁷⁹ This was also the situation of Bartolome Cuevas, property of Andrés Callejo from Barinas, who lay on his deathbed in the camp. Despite Bartolomé being a capable young man suitable to bear arms in the insurgent army, the authorities exempted him from military service because he could not leave his agonizing master unattended "until the end of his days."⁸⁰ In this case, it is important to note that the property right was placed above the urgencies of war and to note also how enslaved peoples carried the burden of exile for themselves and their owners. One can only speculate on the feelings an enslaved person

78. Ana Joanna Vergara Sierra, *Camino a la Libertad*, 126–131.

79. Declaratoria de libertad de Simón Carrillo, April 27, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 71.

80. Declaratoria de libertad de Andrés Callejo, April 7, 1817, Protocolo llevado en Barinas, fol. 62.

might have regarding a clause that conditioned their freedom to the uncertain timeline of forced migration. But, at the same time, this conditional status provided a convenient excuse for evading conscription, especially for those physically capable men arriving in the camp.

Determining whether the authorities followed a specific order in handing over the manumission letters is challenging. Was the order based on individual merit, or on a first-come, first-served basis? The first group to be emancipated were female relatives of enslaved soldiers, like the widow María Josefa Traspuesto, whose husband had died in battle, and Petronila Briceño, whose older son Lorenzo had voluntarily joined the army. Although the first 40 chapters are missing from Almarza's notarial book, the intact sections raise questions regarding the decreasing pace at which manumission letters were issued and whether it is possible to discern a strategy behind that decrease. For instance, there were never more than five letters issued on any one day, with two the average, and as the months go by, the rate of issuance decreases markedly. Among the elements to consider: we not know if Almarza was providing other services beyond amanuensis that took up his time, or if the unstable conditions in the camp affected the pace of issuance. It is probable also that the number of enslaved people began to decrease due to the resumption of hostilities, with many choosing to run away to seek safety elsewhere. Regardless of the reasons for the slowdown, it is notable that Páez's departure to raid royalist troops in April 1817 did not disrupt the granting of manumission papers in its entirety.

THE FINAL DAYS OF BABEL

In 1817, multiple units of the royal army launched a series of operations intending to dismantle Páez's guerrilla stronghold. Determined to face the enemy, Páez organized his cavalry forces and led them out of the camp in April 1817. Before his departure, the insurgent leader entrusted Governor Juan Antonio Paredes with the responsibility of continuing the process of manumission he had initiated in 1816.

Adding another layer of legal procedure, the manumission letters from that moment on include a clause in which Páez "subrogates" to Paredes his "supreme authority" to grant freedom. Acquainted with the task of notarizing documents for absent authorities, Almarza complied diligently from mid April until October. On October 6, 1817, he signed the last manumission letter in the notarial book, severing the bonds of servitude between María Antonia

Betancourt and the enslaved José Trinidad Betancourt. Around this time, Páez relocated the camp to the Araguayuna dunes to evade the enemy siege.⁸¹

In 1818, not long after signing that last letter, Almarza set aside his duties as escribano and joined the defense against the royalist troops, who had resumed their campaign in the plains at the beginning of that year. However, Almarza and the other 700 guerrillas on horseback were ultimately defeated by a well-organized Spanish infantry and cavalry unit. The report that royal colonel Sebastián de la Calzada sent to Pablo Morillo in May of 1818 stated that Almarza's body was among those accounted for on the battlefield near Barinas.⁸² In just two lines, Calzada recounted Almarza's life: the royal escribano of Mérida, among the first rebels of this city and secretary of the Republican government.⁸³

The confirmation of Almarza's death came in response to a plea from royalist authorities in Mérida to the governor of Maracaibo, in which they urged him to appoint a new city escribano. The position had remained vacant following Almarza's departure in 1814, causing administrative havoc in the city. Witnesses and ad hoc notaries were employed to compensate for Almarza's absence.⁸⁴ We can only speculate on the impact his demise might have had on the Republican project formed in the Llanos, but as it had in Mérida, it likely created chaos within the mobile republic, which had lost a valuable record-maker. It is also possible that his death might have served as a convenient excuse to halt the manumission process, especially as the conflict shifted away from guerrilla tactics—in which the support services of the formerly enslaved were crucial—and toward a more conventional form of combat. It is worth noting that during this time the political discourse of gradual rather than immediate manumission of enslaved people was gaining momentum among the Republican leadership.⁸⁵

81. The mobilization of this "colony" to Arauca's desert made the front page of the *Gaceta de Caracas* two months later. *Gaceta de Caracas*, December 17, 1817.

82. According to family lore, Almarza was executed by firing squad in 1812 while attempting to flee to Barinas. This information was provided to Vicente Dávila for his book *Próceres merideños* by Ramón Almarza, a great-grandson of Almarza. Based on Almarza's notarial book, and Calzada's report of his passing, it is evident that this narrative is inaccurate. See Vicente Dávila, *Próceres merideños*, 147–148.

83. Morillo al ministro de Guerra, comunicándole el parte del Coronel Calzada referente a una acción dada por este contra Gómez cerca de Barinas, July 16, 1818, in Rodríguez Villa, *El teniente general don Pablo Morillo, primer conde de Cartagena*, 3:585.

84. AGM, Fondo Escribanías, Sección Empleados de la Colonia, vol. 1, fols. 218–224. The forced migration of escribanos was also a significant concern in Caracas. In August 1814, the city council (*ayuntamiento*) made a formal request to Antonio Fernández León, the political chief of the province, asking him to appoint capable individuals for notarial duties to alleviate the bureaucratic burden caused by the shortage of escribanos. Acta de cabildo de Caracas, August 16, 1814, in *Actas del Cabildo de Caracas (monárquicas) 1810, 1812–1814*, vol. 3 (Caracas: Tipografía Vargas, 1976), 439–443.

85. In his address to the Congress of Angostura on February 15, 1819, Simón Bolívar advocated for the abolition of slavery, but the legislature opted instead for a gradual process of manumission. Following Colombia's secession in

During 1818-19, following Almarza's death in battle, the itinerant republic struggled to survive, as revealed by the correspondence exchanged among Republican leaders and the accounts provided by royalist reports.⁸⁶ During this time, Páez frequently relocated the guerrilla settlement to more and more remote areas within the Apure region to prevent the seizure of the cattle and horses tended by the exiles. However, these frequent relocations and the constant threat posed by royalist forces ended in the dismantling of the mobile camp. By 1819, Pablo Morillo could celebrate the restoration of royal authority in the region, which resulted in the return of most exiles to their homes.⁸⁷ The celebration was short-lived, as the Republican forces had increased their resources and advanced their strategies to move beyond guerrilla-style survival tactics. Gradually, they achieved success by adopting more traditional tactics and formal methods of warfare. Within a few years, no major royalist force remained in the former captaincy of Venezuela.⁸⁸

The fate and whereabouts of the 134 manumitted people registered in Almarza's notarial book are unknown. How long did they stay in the camp? How many of them survived the war? How many successfully defended their freed status if they managed to survive? Did people like Antonia Álvarez, the enslaved grandmother, return to her family and make the collective freedom Almarza drafted for her effective? Perhaps a deep inquiry into local archives in Venezuela and Colombia could help us find traces of the journeys of some of these people.

It is nonetheless possible to get an idea of the challenges they would have faced once peace was declared in 1821. Consider the experience of enslaved soldier Domingo Gutiérrez, who joined the Republican Army operating in the plains in 1818, the year Almarza died. After the war, Gutiérrez, his wife Petrona Cardozo, and two daughters regarded themselves as free residents of Achaguas, a small town located a few miles north of the camp where Rafael Almarza had

1830, the remaining states continued with a gradual approach to abolition. See Aline Helg, *Liberty & Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770–1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Yesenia Barragan, *Freedom's Captives: Slavery and Gradual Emancipation on the Colombian Black Pacific* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Roger Pita Pico, *El reclutamiento de negros esclavos durante las guerras de Independencia de Colombia 1810–1825* (Bogotá: Academia Colombiana de Historia, 2021).

86. The correspondence between José Antonio Páez and Simón Bolívar during December 1818 and the first months of 1819 provides a detailed account of these complications. See José Antonio Páez to Simón Bolívar, December 19, 1818, Cuartel General de San Juan de Payara, or José Antonio Páez to Francisco de Paula Santander, February 13, 1819, Cuartel General en la Sabana de la Concepción, Támeza, *Archivo del General José Antonio Páez*, 1:55–78. Morillo also referred to this event in his memoirs. Pablo Morillo, *Memorias de Pablo Morillo, Conde de Cartagena, marqués de La Puerta. Relacionadas con los principales sucesos de las campañas en América de 1815 a 1821* (Bogotá: Fundación para la Investigación y la Cultura, 2010), 126–129.

87. Morillo al ministro de la guerra, dándole parte de las operaciones del ejército en los llanos de Apure hasta la época de las inundaciones, May 12, 1819, Calabozo, in Rodríguez Villa, *El teniente general don Pablo Morillo, primer conde de Cartagena*, vol. 4, 21.

88. Thibaud, *Repúblicas en armas*, chaps. 6–8.

drafted manumission letters for them and others like them some years earlier. In 1825, their former owner, Juana Letras, found the family, claimed them as property, and demanded their immediate return. Like many other freed people who had faced the perils of re-enslavement in previous centuries, Domingo sought legal support from the local *síndico* to contest Juana Letras's claim in the local court, especially necessary since neither he nor his wife Petrona possessed a manumission document to support their status as free individuals. The town mayor quickly certified Domingo's freedom based on his service in the Republican army, but ordered that Petrona Cardozo and her eldest daughter, Andrea Gutiérrez, should be reinstated as property and handed over to Ramón Pagola, Juana Letras's representative in the city.

According to the mayor, he could not find a legal ruling that granted general freedom to women who joined the Republican army in those years, although he did accept that freedom would be granted to men who actively defended the Republican cause, with a weapon in hand. In his view, women did not actively participate in the war.⁸⁹ Hence, Petrona and Andrea were runaways. Petrona and Andrea immediately sought refuge in the home of Colonel Facundo Mirabal, who offered to pay Ramón Pagola for their freedom. The offer was accepted with the condition that both women remain in Pagola's power until the transaction was over. Andrea, who had carried a knife for self-defense since the beginning of this ordeal, tried to kill herself (*intentando darse de puñaladas*) because she preferred death to returning to enslavement.⁹⁰

Similar scenes played out for years in higher Colombian courts, where the values of property and freedom clashed in a republic that was failing to honor the promises delivered in times of need. Each interested party appealed to different laws and rulings to make their case. Petrona and Andrea invoked Páez's 1816 general call for freedom in the Llanos and the other offers made by Simón Bolívar that "granted freedom to slaves in the provinces of Guiana, Apure, and Barinas" and those who had escaped the territories occupied by the enemies and sought refuge in the arms of freedom.⁹¹ Owners successfully exploited the immateriality of such early offerings, which came with no supporting documents, and based their property rights in post-war laws that granted only gradual abolition and were filled with loopholes that gave enslavers more leverage to contest individual manumission claims.

89. The Venezuelan archives contain many examples of this view of women in war. For scholarly work on this topic, see Chapter 7, "The Personal War of Slave Women," in Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom*.

90. Petrona Cardozo y su hija Andrea reclaman su libertad a cuyo goce entraron por virtud de los decretos del Libertador, AGNV, Secretaría de Interior y Justicia, 1833, vol. 66, doc. 1, fol. 203.

91. Petrona Cardozo, AGNV, Secretaría de Interior y Justicia, 1833, vol. 66, doc. 1, fol. 203.

As in these cases and many others, being a woman became an obstacle to proving freedom gained in the context of war. Female-gendered occupations like the ones performed by the enslaved women of the camp, such as nursing and nurturing, were easily dismissed by those in power as activities undeserving of reward, much less freedom. There is no patriotic act that recognizes doing things women do regularly.⁹² The fate of many of the women in Almarza's notary book might have followed this pattern. The only advantage they had was the piece of paper Almarza had drafted and the signature of Páez, who became the first Venezuelan president after the division of Colombia in 1830. But even those documents could easily have been lost in the convulsions of war. Because Almarza's *protocolo* arrived in Caracas on an unknown date and was buried uncatalogued in the national archives, the records of manumission in its pages would have been inaccessible to those who needed a copy of the legal act years later. One can hope that these men and women eventually came to be counted among the free colored population of Barinas and Apure, regions that ended enslavement decades before the national proclamation of 1854.⁹³

CONCLUSION

The professional journey of Rafael Almarza provides an excellent example of how monarchical sovereignty in Spanish America was eroded through the acts of low-ranking authorities such as *escribanos* during the War of Independence. Their labor and their skill in adapting colonial legal practices were essential in facilitating the transition toward early republicanism. As a holder of public faith, Almarza played a pivotal role in promoting the pact between enslaved people and a faction aspiring to establish its legitimacy as governing authority.

Venezuelan historiography identifies Páez's emergence in the political arena as a major factor in the significant shift in popular support from the royalist to the Republican cause.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, we know little that is concrete about the strategies employed by this *llanero* leader to achieve this transformation. However, the issuance of freedom letters to enslaved people seeking refuge in Páez's camp can be considered one of those strategies, employed to gain the

92. Enslaved women contested this notion in court to prove the value of their actions in the early years of the republic. See Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom*; and Catherine Davies, *South American Independence: Gender, Politics, Text* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006).

93. John Lombardi argues that by 1837 enslavement did not exist in the plains. Lombardi, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery in Venezuela, 1820–1854* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1971).

94. Clément Thibaud, *Repúblicas en armas*, 266–272.

support of former adversaries. Typically, enslavement during the War of Independence is examined through a Bolivarianist and Caribbean perspective that emphasizes the importance of Simón Bolívar's 1816 proclamation in the eastern provinces in 1816 as the model followed by the rest of the Republican army, but a look at the enslaved exile/refugee community in the Llanos provides a different perspective on that enslavement. As we have seen here, the proclamations of Bolívar and Páez differed across spaces, and the terms were set according to the military needs of the leader making the freedom offer.

At a broader level, Almarza's notarial book has allowed us to see the mobile nature of Spanish American legal courts and archives in practice. Between 1816 and 1818, this traveling republic settled in different points of the Llanos according to the seasonality of the region and the war; however, it managed to maintain a functioning government despite the hardships. This is due to the nature of the Spanish law, which was built on a textual space rather than a physical one.

The freedom documents kept by Rafael Almarza provide a look at otherwise invisible experiences. A close reading gives us some knowledge of the men and women who endured bondage, exile, and war. Although the individual manumission letters did not in themselves lead to complete abolition, Almarza's legal knowledge and power made real the transactions and claims between the charismatic leader and the enslaved population that would ultimately help erode the slave system.

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