

## Introduction

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*As If She Were Free* is about the emancipatory acts of African and African-descended women in the Americas from the sixteenth through the early twentieth century. The stories of some two dozen individuals discussed in these chapters constitute a collective biography that narrates the history of emancipation as experienced by women in the western hemisphere. This history began upon the arrival of enslaved people from Africa in the Americas in the early sixteenth century and continued into the twentieth century as their descendants pursued an ongoing quest for liberty. *As If She Were Free* narrates this individual and collective struggle – in which African-descended women spoke and acted in ways that declared that they had a right to determine the course of their lives. This book, a collective biography of women who renounced their commodification and exploitation, articulates a new feminist history of freedom.

*As If She Were Free* offers a new timeline for considering women's claims to emancipation. To be sure, change over time and particularity in historical context and place were always critical factors in shaping access to freedom. Yet, aspects of women's experience remained remarkably constant across the Americas in the early modern and modern periods and have remained stubbornly persistent into the present. Over centuries, politics have excluded African-descended women and denied them control over their bodies. The legacy of this reality is manifest in contemporary struggles over sexism, racism, and reproductive rights. The stories in this book show that in the context of slavery, racial discrimination, and sexual objectification, the personal has always been political. *As If She*

*Were Free* pays tribute to women's ongoing quest to live freely and control their own bodies, a pursuit that continues to the present day.

"As If She Were Free" – the phrase in the book's title – references the individual and collective experience of African-descended women in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> The "if" points to the conditional state of being free. Women always had to overcome legal and economic constraints to be able to emancipate themselves. And, however defined, freedom was never a certainty: it remained contingent on historical context and personal circumstances. The pronoun "she" underlines the idea that this collective biography narrates one story; that is, the history of women as tenacious and persistent agents of emancipation. The noun "free" raises the question of what that word meant to women. The individual stories narrated in the following pages show that women conceived of the state of freedom in a host of ways, but gender (social and cultural constructs) and sex (biology) often made their life experiences similar to one another and distinct from men.

Words matter in the retelling of history. Slavery, emancipation, freedom: all three words have a historical association with men – a gendered valence – that obscures women's experiences. For instance, the verb forms of these critical words – to enslave, to emancipate, to free – are based on Roman laws that buttressed patriarchal relationships. To emancipate or manumit was the act of freeing a child from her or his father's power (*patria potestas*) or the act of releasing someone from slavery (from the state of being chattel property under the law). To emancipate was to set someone free. These definitions insist that freedom was a status that was bestowed; that it was given. As such, to emancipate or manumit originally referred to an act that independent men with power and authority did to dependent others, and it continues to have that meaning.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The women in this collective biography were the foremothers of Saidiya Hartman's early twentieth-century wayward girls, black women who refused the constraints circumscribing their lives. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019). The idea of a collective biography of women has a history rooted in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British and American publishing. See Alison Booth, "Reconstructing a Genre of Publication," *Collective Biographies of Women*, Scholars Lab, University of Virginia <accessed 13 October 2019>, <https://womensbios.lib.virginia.edu/about.html>.

<sup>2</sup> In practice, women owned enslaved people and manumitted them, as several chapters in this book attest. When it came to the ownership of human property and, hence, the ability to free enslaved people, slave-owning women sought equal power to their male counterparts and found support for their claims in juridical and economic institutions. Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the*

*As If She Were Free* recasts the word freedom to insist that women were agents of emancipation. Emancipation was deliverance from slavery; it was liberation from civil or other restraints; and it included efforts to gain economic, personal, political, and social rights.<sup>3</sup> On all of these fronts, women emancipated themselves. When women ran away, they delivered themselves into a state of being free from the control of those who had previously claimed ownership over their bodies. When women filed freedom suits, challenged owners' abusive behavior, left philandering husbands, practiced healing, experienced spiritual rituals of possession, formed illicit trade networks, or participated in revolutionary movements, they gave themselves freedom. But what was freedom?

The words freedom and liberty, nouns that are often conjoined, have problematic meanings because the usual definitions relate to liberation from legal bondage or dependency; both refer to a state of not being

*American South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Yesenia Barragan, "Gendering Mastery: Female Slaveholders in the Colombian Pacific Lowlands," *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2017); Christine Walker, "Pursuing Her Profits: Women in Jamaica, Atlantic Slavery and a Globalising Market, 1700–60," *Gender & History* 26, no. 3 (2014); Frank T. Proctor, III, "Gender and the Manumission of Slaves in New Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 86, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Some works on the history of African-descended women in the Americas include: Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018); Aurora Vergara Figueroa and Carmen L. Cosme Puntiel, eds., *Demando mi libertad. Mujeres negras y sus estrategias de Resistencia en la Nueva Granada, Venezuela y Cuba 1700–1800* (Cali: Universidad ICESI, 2018); Camillia Cowling, Maria Helena P. T. Machado, Diana Paton, and Emily West, "Mothering Slaves: Comparative Perspectives on Motherhood, Childlessness, and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies," *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 2 (2017); Michelle A. McKinley, *Fractional Freedoms: Slavery, Intimacy, and Legal Mobilization in Colonial Lima, 1600–1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Giovana Xavier, Juliana Barreto Farias, and Flávio dos Santos Gomes, *Mulheres negras no Brasil escravista e do pós-emancipação* (São Paulo: Selo Negro Edições, 2012); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Calder Miller, *Women and Slavery: The Modern Atlantic*, 2 vols. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); María Elisa Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Mujeres de origen africano en la capital novohispana, siglos XVII y XVIII* (México: INAH, 2006); Pamela Scully and Diana Paton, eds., *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); David B. Gaspar and Darlene C. Hine, eds., *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, revised ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); David B. Gaspar and Darlene C. Hine, eds., *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

chattel property. Based on this understanding, to be free or to be in a state of liberty has also been historically gendered male. Freedom has been generally equated with men having power and legal control over themselves and their family members in the tradition of the *paterfamilias*. Liberty, in this sense, is demonstrated in the ability to exercise political capacity, that is, in the modern sense of being accorded the full privileges and obligations of citizenship.

The stories that follow, by contrast, offer a new history of freedom. They show that African-descended women often sought to experience freedom in alternative ways. Some showed that aspects of the power and authority generally associated with freedom could be experienced – however briefly – while living in a state of legal bondage or under the constraints of racism. The laws of men excluded women from male freedom, so women articulated and embodied freedoms beyond conventional legal and political constraints that empowered them in alternative ways. To run away was a similar self-emancipatory act, as was to file a successful freedom suit, to campaign for the abolition of slavery, or to assert oneself as an intellectual and write black people into history.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to emancipation and freedom, slavery has a singular definition. The race-based, hereditary chattel slavery that developed and thrived in the Americas cannot be conflated with other forms of exploitation or confused with other forms of bondage or servitude. This slavery, often called New World Slavery, was inextricably bound up with European processes of colonization and imperialism in the Americas, as well as the rise of capitalism. This slavery was constructed out of the flesh of over twelve million Africans who were forcibly relocated via the Atlantic slave trade to the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup> It was sustained

<sup>4</sup> We are inspired by recent work that expands the parameters of what constituted black women's activism and considers black women's activism across national boundaries. See Keisha N. Blain, Tiffany M. Gill, and Michael O. West, eds., *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage, eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> This forced migration constitutes the fourth major movement in the long history of the African diaspora. Colin A. Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 1–2 (2000). The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database documents the ongoing quantitative recovery of this history; the estimates data

through legal and political systems that commodified their descendants over centuries. And it birthed new forms of racism and exploitation that matured after its official eradication.<sup>6</sup>

Racialized slavery shaped women's bodily relationship to freedom. Slavery in the Americas was initially confined to Native Americans and forcibly-imported Africans and Asians.<sup>7</sup> However, beginning in the late seventeenth century, slavery in European-dominated regions shifted into a legal status almost exclusively accorded to Africans and their descendants.<sup>8</sup> Just as blackness became linked to slavery, freedom conversely became a privilege of whiteness under the law and by social association. The following stories bring to life how women claimed freedom in those areas of the Americas first colonized by Europeans invested in the Atlantic slave trade.

Of course, to be a free African-descended woman in a slave society was a very different experience than being black in a post-abolition society. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, most of the former European colonies in the Americas began to emerge as independent nation-states with republican governance or constitutional monarchies. Except for Haiti, the transition in government did not necessarily bring about the abolition of slavery, as can be seen in Brazil and the United States. The parallel emergence of formal anti-slavery organization and activism in some nations held up the institution as incompatible with constitutional ideals – a tension that followed after the abolition of slavery. Those

set ([www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates](http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates)) suggests that 12,521,337 people arrived in the Americas from 1501–1866 (search October 4, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> We might here note that, while the specific practice of racism varies according to context and culture, the violence of antiblackness has remarkable range. In this way, as Christina Sharpe argues, we continue to live “in the wake” of slavery. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> On Asian slaves and racialization in Mexico, see Tatiana Seijas, *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> The justifications for enslaving individual members of these groups – other than that their mothers were enslaved – were that they were pagan, captive enemies taken in a “just war,” or had already been sold as slaves. In theory, laws proscribed the enslavement of Indigenous people in Spanish America after the mid-sixteenth century, but this prohibition was easily dodged and openly ignored. Similarly, in British America, Indians were regularly enslaved, even in jurisdictions that banned the practice. Sue T. Peabody, “Slavery, Freedom and the Law in the Atlantic World, 1420–1807,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, edited by David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

nation-states that did abolish slavery tended to do so in stages, through gradual emancipation or “free womb” laws.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, after abolition, new political, economic, and cultural forces emerged to shore up racism across the Americas. Poverty and containment, state-sponsored violence, and new carceral technologies ensured that people of African descent remained, at best, second-class citizens.<sup>10</sup> In the midst of these campaigns, nations created myths about the history of slavery and crafted new narratives about the place of people of African descent. Some countries sponsored official “whitening” programs designed to “blend” the African-descended into other populations. Others characterized themselves as “racial democracies.” Others embraced a proslavery version of history that insisted that slavery had always been a benign and benevolent civilizing enterprise for people of African descent who, ultimately, were better off in slavery than they were in freedom. Despite their distinctive regional and national variations, these mythologies served to support political agendas that oppressed people of African descent throughout the Americas.<sup>11</sup>

While the timeline of abolition is useful, it does not capture the history of women as agents of emancipation in the Americas. The timeline is anchored to traditional ideas of citizenship – citizenship equals freedom – that are associated with patriarchal privilege and the experiences of men. *As If She Were Free* proposes a different timeline based on women’s experiences and definitions of emancipation and freedom. For the women in this collective biography, the typical ruptures on the timeline of slavery in the Americas – colonization and imperialism, the rise of capitalism, the era of republican revolutions, second slavery, and state-sanctioned abolition and emancipation – do not fully capture their understandings of freedom or their history

<sup>9</sup> For this history, see Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777–1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Hebe Clementi, *La abolición de la esclavitud en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Pléyade, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> Hartman refers to these realities as “the afterlife of slavery.” Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007). See also Magdalena Candiotti, “Abolición gradual y libertades vigiladas en el Río de la Plata. La política de control de libertos de 1813,” *Corpus* 6 (2016), <http://journals.openedition.org/corpusarchivos/1567>; Sharpe, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For the politics of racial mythology and the memory of slavery in the US, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). For a comparative study of the politics of the memorialization of the Atlantic slave trade, see Ana Lucia Araujo, *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

## PERIODS BETWEEN THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

In many of these countries, African descended women were prevented, by law or practice, from voting for decades after women's suffrage.

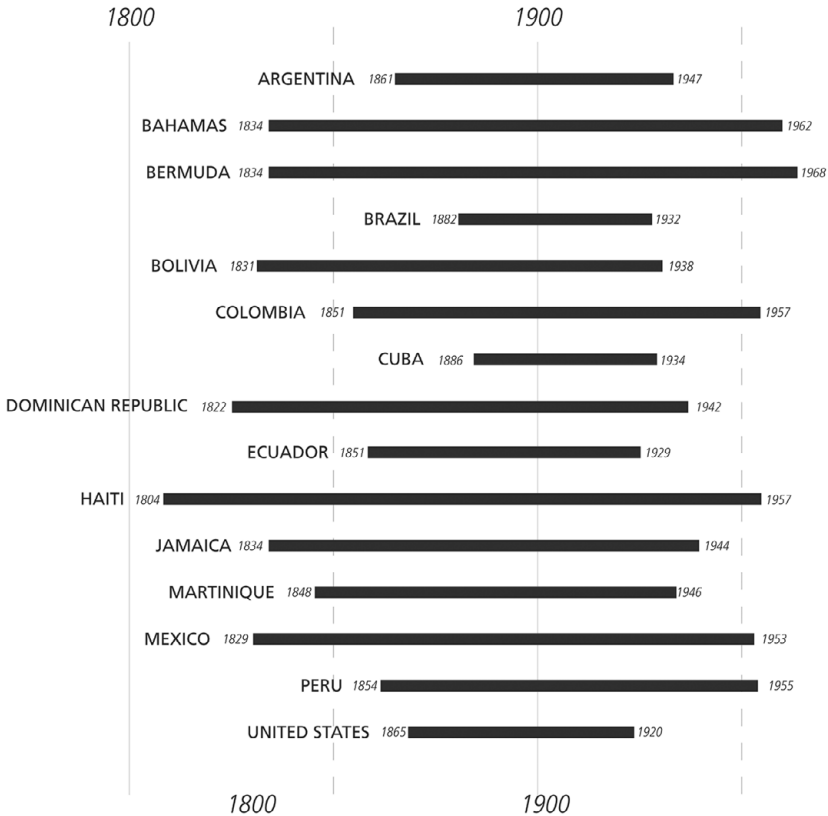


FIGURE I.1 Legal freedom versus citizenship

This timeline illustrates why African-descended women had to protect and speak up for their communities in a range of ways. For women, citizenship remained constrained by patriarchal definitions of political capacity well into the twentieth century. Across the hemisphere, women's quest for freedom necessitated an ongoing and multifaceted campaign, even after the abolition of slavery.

Source: Timeline made by Alex Killough.

as agents of emancipation. From European contact to post-abolition, African-descended women in the Americas found avenues to freedom in colonial and then national/imperial contexts. But the full privileges of citizenship remained elusive for African-descended women into the twentieth century, as Figure I.1 strikingly demonstrates.

The following stories offer meditations on a women's history of emancipation and freedom. Women measured freedom in degrees, claimed it in stages, and experienced it multidimensional ways. For some women, freedom meant legal protection from slavery, while, for others, something akin to freedom was experienced in the context of a family, a community, or a political association. Freedom could be understood to mean rights to personal autonomy in one context, or equality in another. *As If She Were Free* addresses these more granular meanings of freedom to elucidate ideas of freedom and women's relationship to freedom in the Americas.

Finally, *As If She Were Free* tells one story: it is about women as freedom seekers. The chapters offer a collective portrait. These women took different routes toward emancipation and freedom, but they all did so in hierarchical, highly racialized societies where the very engine for the perpetuity of slavery as an institution rested in the wombs of women. Their lives, rooted in a collective experience, form part of the gendered history of slavery and emancipation in the Americas. The lens of life history allows for a comparative examination of the many ways that women conceptualized freedom and their various strategies for emancipation.<sup>12</sup> Each chapter features the life history of an individual woman from across the African diaspora in the Americas who was born during slavery or immediately after the abolition of slavery.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of time,

<sup>12</sup> Scholars have made great strides in piecing together the biographies of women who managed to claim and maintain their freedom, with its multivalent, ambiguous, and changing meanings, in the shadow of slavery. Some examples include: W. Caleb McDaniel, *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: 37 Ink/Atria, 2017); Lisa A. Lindsay and John W. Sweet, eds., *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Sandra Lauderdale Graham, *Caetana Says No: Women's Stories from a Brazilian Slave Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2004); Jean F. Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004); Júnia Ferreira Furtado, *Chica da Silva e o contratador dos diamantes: o outro lado do mito* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003); María Eugenia Chaves, *María Chiquinquirá Díaz: una esclava del siglo XVIII. Acerca de las identidades de amo y esclavo en el puerto colonial de Guayaquil* (Guayaquil: Archivo Histórico del Guayas, 1998); Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Reconstructing the lives and worldviews of enslaved and freed women is challenging and it requires a willingness to interrogate the content and organization of historical archives, which are often shaped by the point of view of slave owners, traders, and abolitionists.



they shared a history of emancipation. Their story is a *longue durée* history of female activism.

#### FREEDOM IN BODY, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

The book's organization reflects that African-descended women sought out liberty and experienced freedom from the moment they arrived on the shores of the Americas until well after state-sanctioned abolition. The four parts of the book reflect both the continuity of claiming freedom across centuries, as well as the ways in which doing so varied over time and place. The chapters in Part I examine how women claimed freedom during the rise of New World Slavery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> Part II focuses on women's routes to emancipation as slavery expanded and became entrenched across the eighteenth-century Americas. Part III examines how women envisioned emancipation in the context of Second Slavery and against the backdrop of organized abolition movements in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> Part IV considers how, after slavery's end, women continued to enact emancipation through their political, intellectual, and community work. This final part also considers the modern memory of women as agents of emancipation.

Chronology, however, tells only part of the story of women claiming freedom. The chapters in *As If She Were Free* are interconnected by their focus on the gendered nature of freedom. Ideal gender roles, as articulated by religious and political authorities, circumscribed women's freedom by insisting on women's subservience to and dependence on men – their fathers, husbands, and owners in the case of enslaved women. Freedom for male property owners included the right to control women's bodies

Piecing together the experiences of African-descended women with archival fragments requires care, alternative methodologies – including black feminist epistemologies – and a readiness to read sources in ways that foreground and consider their individual perspectives. Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008); Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002).

<sup>14</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492–1800* (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Dale Tomich, "The 'Second Slavery': Bonded Labor and the Transformation of the Nineteenth-Century World Economy," in *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

and that of their children, and it also meant excluding women from the full privileges of citizenship as democratic republics emerged in the eighteenth century. The metaphor that justified male power was that men protected women; the assumption undergirding this metaphor was that women were incapable of protecting themselves. The stories in *As If She Were Free* demonstrate that African-descended women expanded and complicated this male definition of freedom by protecting themselves, their children and families, and their communities. In doing so, women reconfigured what it meant to abide by a social contract (to be a subject or a citizen) and drew strength from an ever-widening conception of community.

While the chapters of *As If She Were Free* are arranged chronologically, they share thematic links. Three of the most prominent of these are based on key aspects of women's expressions of freedom – care for and defense of self, family, and community. This framework highlights individual women's experiences in order to expand traditional conceptions of freedom beyond labor, property, and the privileges and obligations of male subjects and citizens, terms that have, until only recently, dominated scholarly discussions about the history of emancipation.<sup>16</sup> These stories show that, in addition to seeking aspects of freedom associated with subjecthood and citizenship – which they did – women continually endeavored to gain and maintain bodily autonomy, they attempted to protect their families, and they pushed back against the coercion and containment of their communities.

Women's quest for bodily autonomy, personal safety, and some measure of independence in the context of racialized slavery and antiblackness

<sup>16</sup> Scholarship on the abolition and aftermath of slavery in the United States has begun to explore the new forms of coercion that arose in slavery's wake – phenomena that were all experienced in gendered ways. See Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Talitha L. LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). For Argentina, see Florencia Guzmán, "¡Madres negras tenían que ser! Maternidad, emancipación y trabajo en tiempos de cambios y transformaciones (Buenos Aires, 1800–1830)," *Tempo* 24, no. 3 (2018).

was not an ancillary concern in their lives. They prioritized freedom by seeking pleasure, accruing capital and influence, and giving themselves a measure of personal comfort. Caring for themselves was a radical, feminist act in the context of patriarchal domination.<sup>17</sup>

With the vast majority of enslaved women unable to free themselves from slavery entirely, women used a variety of means to claim some measure of personhood and leverage their autonomy within slavery.<sup>18</sup> Marion held court over a trading business that extended beyond the small-town of Natchitoches in the mid-eighteenth-century French colony of Louisiana. Despite her status as the chattel property of someone else, her skills as a chef, patron, and ringleader of a criminal enterprise made her a force to be reckoned with in the military Fort St. Jean Baptiste and the surrounding environs. Her network encompassed both free and enslaved people who procured or produced a variety of goods for her – fabric, liquor, soap – these she resold or traded in the French and nearby Spanish settlements. She regularly treated her accomplices to feasts in the woods, surely a welcome respite from their typical labor. Eating well was freeing.

Women understood that capital could purchase bodily comfort and social mobility. In circumstances where enslaved people were property, accruing wealth as an African-descended woman was a major achievement and a claim to freedom. Margarita de Sossa's freedom journey was defiant and entrepreneurial. In her early twenties, still enslaved in Portugal, she took possession of her body; after refusing to endure her owner's sexual demands, he sold her, and she was transported to Mexico. There, she purchased her freedom with money earned as a healer and then conducted an enviable business as an innkeeper on her own in Puebla in the late 1500s. Margarita de Sossa's work as a healer and as a provider of food and shelter speaks to her concern for the well-being of her neighbors and the freeing quality of good health. Paula de Eguiluz, who lived as a free person in seventeenth-century Cartagena, was a healer as well;

<sup>17</sup> Black feminist theorist Audre Lorde articulates this most famously in Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Aline Helg, *Slave No More: Self-Liberation before Abolitionism in the Americas*, translated by Lara Verhnaud (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Fuentes, 2016; McKinley, 2016; Ana Lucia Araujo, "Black Purgatory: Enslaved Women's Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Rio Grande Do Sul, Brazil," *Slavery & Abolition* 36, no. 4 (2015); Camp, 2004; Glymph, 2008; Tamara J. Walker, *Exquisite Slaves: Race, Clothing, and Status in Colonial Lima* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); White, 1999.

divination, spells, and potions helped her paying customers, and the income she earned facilitated a lifestyle that included self-expression through fancy dress and adornment. Margarita de Sossa and Paula de Eguiluz gave comfort to members of their community and in doing so gained allies who protected them when accusations of witchcraft threatened to derail their hard-earned freedoms.

That same economic savviness continued to hold true for free black women in the nineteenth century, when women's business acumen enabled them to defy legal systems that continued to disenfranchise African-descended people. Centuries after Margarita de Sossa and Paula de Eguiluz established financial independence, Mary Ellen Pleasant made herself spectacularly rich by investing in the hospitality business and real estate in Gold Rush San Francisco. Living in comfort in California was certainly an enviable life for a black woman in a country that continued to hold four million people in bondage, but Pleasant wanted freedom not for herself alone. She placed her entrepreneurship in the service of the abolitionist movement, using her wealth to fund John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry to spark a revolution to eradicate slavery. And she continued to place her personal reputation and financial success in the service of civil rights after the abolition of slavery in the wake of the US Civil War. For Pleasant, as it had been for generations of women of African descent, the personal continued to be profoundly political.<sup>19</sup>

The emancipatory acts of Mary Ellen Pleasant, Marion, Margarita de Sossa, and Paula de Eguiluz made them "bodies out of place" in their societies – independent women in communities and nations where blackness was supposed to be equated with slavery.<sup>20</sup> This equation was gendered from its inception. From the early sixteenth century, when traders first began buying, selling, and transporting Africans to the Americas as part of the Atlantic slave trade, Europeans began characterizing African women's bodies as somewhat different, even deviant, from those of European and Indigenous women.<sup>21</sup> European men sexualized African

<sup>19</sup> Excluded from traditional forms of power and perpetually at risk, people of African descent had to conceptualize and practice politics in alternative ways. For the United States, see Erica L. Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Shirley Tate, "Michelle Obama's Arms: Race, Respectability, and Class Privilege," *Comparative American Studies* 10, no. 2–3 (2012).

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). For European and white North American men's attraction to and simultaneous perceptions of deviance about African-

women and characterized them as uniquely suited to reproductive and productive labor. The economic, political, and ideological logic of chattel slavery insisted that this reproductive and productive labor rightfully belonged not to the women themselves (or their own families), but, rather, to those who claimed to own their bodies.

Given these dynamics, the racialization of slavery and progressive antiblackness had implications for how enslaved women understood their bodies in relationship to their racial identities. These developments shaped how women understood and sought out freedom. Where having African ancestry made you more vulnerable to violence and enslavement, women made hard choices about the identities they claimed, which included distancing themselves from association with African ancestry.

In seventeenth-century Virginia, Elizabeth Key understood her clear advantage in associating her identity with whiteness; she claimed her freedom in court as a status that derived from her English father, rather than her mother – an enslaved woman of African descent. Key’s success in claiming freedom led the Virginia legislators to swiftly enact a new law that specified that the condition of the child followed that of the mother (known as *partus sequitur ventrem* or progeny follows the womb); and other British colonies quickly followed suit. In effect, Key’s attempt to emancipate herself from slavery and its concomitant forms of oppression resulted in larger changes to the racial status quo. In eighteenth-century Oaxaca, Juana Ramírez similarly distanced herself from African descent; she used uncertainty over her identity as African or Indigenous to avoid an Inquisition trial. As these cases demonstrate, women were not simply passive recipients of European ideas about race, they were also participants in these larger processes in race-making in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>22</sup>

In some regions, women used their Indigenous ancestry to gain their freedom. In the 1730s, Sarah Chauquum claimed legal freedom on the grounds that she was descended from an Indigenous mother who lived in a British colony (Rhode Island) that outlawed Indian slavery. For women with maternal Indigenous ancestry, claiming this ancestry was not only an avenue to possible freedom, but also an important way for them to reassert their Indigenous identity and networks. Similarly, in eighteenth-century

descended women, see Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Ann Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

Virginia, Hannah Coleman defined freedom as claiming her maternal descent from an Indigenous woman named Judith who had been enslaved as a war captive in early eighteenth-century Florida. By asserting her connection to Judith – an identity that was firmly laid down in family lore – Hannah freed her family and reasserted her identity as a member of an Apalachee community. Elizabeth Key, Juana Ramírez, Sarah Chauquim, and Hannah Coleman understood the law, and all were well aware that asserting their connection to their European or Indigenous heritage would distance themselves from slavery. In addition, women's stories and oral traditions kept alive the memory of family genealogies and ancestry.<sup>23</sup> Those histories were rooted in their bodies.

It was comparatively rare for women to seek freedom only for themselves. By far, women acted as if they were free by protecting their families. Law and custom usually considered protection of the family to be under the purview of male heads of households. But women did what they could, even without that status. This conception of freedom had to do with ensuring that kin were safe from deprivations and violence, and that children had food and shelter. It also included persistent efforts to free themselves and their future progeny from legal bondage. Women's efforts to protect their families emerge in the records of judicial proceedings from across the centuries. Whether in probate, criminal, ecclesiastical, or civil cases, or in appeals to administrators in military outposts, women consistently appear as agents in judicial spaces making claims alongside or on behalf of their children and families.

Family ties remained essential to every complicated calculation that women made as they sought to move nearer to freedom. For women like Reytory Angola, the quest for freedom was a series of steps taken by her and her family. Taken from the west coast of Africa and brought to the early seventeenth-century Dutch outpost of New Netherland, Reytory Angola and her husband consistently appealed to authorities as they negotiated the limits of their captivity. Marriage, motherhood, land ownership, and church membership all served as preludes to her final act of positioning her adopted son to acquire his freedom.

María Hipólita Lozano, who ran away from cruel and violent owners in eighteenth-century Lima, made similarly difficult calculations about how to protect herself and family. Working with her father, who was a free man of African descent and filed a lawsuit on her behalf, Lozano

<sup>23</sup> Loren Schwenger, "Freedom Suits, African American Women, and the Genealogy of Slavery," *William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2014).

sought to arrange a change in owner, something that she was allowed to do under Spanish law, as a way of lessening the violence of enslavement and securing her relative well-being. This may seem a small victory, but clearly Lozano believed that her efforts in changing owners, rather than escaping slavery altogether, would protect her body and that of her son.

For those who had attained the legal status of free or freedwomen, true freedom meant the ability to ensure that they and their children would be able to thrive in their community. In late seventeenth-century Lima, Juana de Godinez sued for the right to remain in a convent and arrange for the futures of her young sons outside of slavery. Remaining in the convent as a free woman (she had been manumitted) did not much change the conditions under which Juana labored, but it did put her in a position to negotiate for the protection and education of her sons. In eighteenth-century Minas Gerais, Brazil, Anna Maria Lopes de Brito wrote a will that defined freedom as the ability to support her children financially as they grew and matured after her death. She also viewed freedom as achieving a good death, stating her wishes regarding the care of her body after death and looking forward to her reunion with her spiritual family. The details of her will offer insight into her life as a free black woman and articulate her hopes for her descendants and her soul.

Women's bodily relationship to the laws of slavery shaped their emancipatory actions; emancipation for them meant freedom for any children they might later bear. The principle known as "progeny follows the womb" or *partus sequitur ventrem* was a fundamental feature of slave law in all European colonies in the Americas.<sup>24</sup> It established that absolute, heritable, racial slavery was lodged in women's bodies. The economic logic of partus placed women's bodies in harm's way, incentivizing the exploitation of their reproductivity to produce slaves.<sup>25</sup> Partus also endangered the bonds between mother and child, as owners and traders of enslaved people had no respect for family bonds. Enslaved women

<sup>24</sup> The dictum was based on Roman laws. Theodor Mommsen, Paul Krueger, and Alan Watson, eds., *The Digest of Justinian*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 16. See also Keith R. Bradley, "Roman Slavery and Roman Law," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 15, no. 3 (1988). A useful exploration of the Roman basis of *partus* and its function in Brazilian debates over abolition is Martha S. Santos, "'Slave Mothers', Partus Sequitur Ventrem, and the Naturalization of Slave Reproduction in Nineteenth-Century Brazil," *Tempo* 22, no. 41 (2016), <https://dx.doi.org/10.20509/tem-1980-542x2016v224106>.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, "Partus sequitur ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 22, no. 1 (2018).

were well-aware of this precarity, which is why they went to court to free their bodies and ensure that their progeny would be born free.

The long reach of partus was clearly in the forefront of women's minds as they worked tirelessly to deflect and combat slavery's hold on their children. Women knew that maternal descent was the lynchpin for claiming freedom.<sup>26</sup> This knowledge is especially evident in the case of Juana María Álvarez. Born in eighteenth-century New Grenada (now Colombia) to an emancipated mother, Juana María Álvarez had always considered herself to be a free woman. Yet she found her freedom, and, therefore, the free status of her daughter, to be in jeopardy when she was re-enslaved and sold away from her family. In a case that lasted four years, she sued her abusive slave owner in an effort to confirm her free legal status as a woman descended from a free mother. Women sought to claim freedom from bondage because they knew that freeing their wombs meant freeing their descendants. Most, like Juana María Álvarez, were not successful.<sup>27</sup>

By 1861, only Brazil, Cuba, and the United States remained committed to chattel slavery. Here, despite judicial principles "in favor of freedom," law, custom, and the profitability of slavery continued to make emancipation difficult for the enslaved to achieve. For example, Gabriela seemed to have a good legal claim to her freedom in Brazil in 1863. Gabriela had been conditionally emancipated by her owner, Candida, a slave-owning woman trapped in a troubled marriage who sought to maintain control over her own property – including her slaves. Gabriela, however, had to file suit when she faced re-enslavement and sale by Candida's husband Armand. In a nation with a robust domestic slave trade and an entrenched patriarchy, Gabriela's freedom now rested on whether or not the courts upheld slaveholding women's rights to manumit their property as they saw fit, or sided with the patriarchal authority of their husbands. Gabriela's status as well as that of her future progeny remained inextricably bound up with the family dynamics of her owners and their continued investment in the institution of slavery.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Free black women faced similar obstacles in trying to keep their children from the control of slave owners and forced labor in British North America, see Terri L. Snyder, "Marriage on the Margins: Free Wives, Enslaved Husbands, and the Law in Early Virginia," *Law and History Review* 30, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>28</sup> Cases like Gabriela's illustrate that manumission was never straightforward. Litigants needed written proof of manumission. Without official documentation, individuals who had been manumitted and even those who were born free could be resold or kidnapped



Despite these overwhelming obstacles, women continued to file freedom claims with the aim of protecting their present and future families whenever they had the opportunity and the means to do so. Sometimes, the implications of their efforts extended beyond their family circle. Minerva, who was forced by her owners to cross international borders, attempted to claim legal freedom by exploiting jurisdictional differences and using her forced border crossings to her advantage. In 1831 her owners moved from Louisiana in the United States to the Mexican province of T ejas, but, two years later, the widow returned to Louisiana with Minerva and other human capital. Secure in the knowledge that Mexico had abolished slavery and banned the international slave trade, Minerva hired two lawyers to submit a petition on her behalf to the Court of the Western District of Louisiana, claiming her freedom on the grounds that she had been illegally imported – first, to Mexico, and then to the United States. Whether they were successful or not, claims like Minerva’s ultimately shored up a collective abolitionist movement. The abolitionist movement was not a top down phenomenon run by white people; African-descended people originated and sustained it on both sides of the border, and the Americas in general.<sup>29</sup>

The construction and reconstruction of communities remained crucial to African-descended women over the long history of slavery and abolition in the Americas. Women captured and sold from different African communities established a kinship with their shipmates as they were transported across the Atlantic.<sup>30</sup> Women constructed and rebuilt their

into slavery. On the centrality of documentation to making and reconstructing stories of claiming freedom in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. H ebrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 5–6.

<sup>29</sup> For the United States, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For Mexico, see Jaime Olveda Legaspi, “La abolici n de la esclavitud en Mexico, 1810–1917,” *Signos Historicos* 29 (2013); Juan Manuel de la Serna, ed., *De la libertad y la abolici n: africanos y afrodescendientes en Iberoam erica* (M exico: CONACULTA, 2010). See also Camillia Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom: Women of Color, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Sowande’ M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007).

communities after every sale forcibly moved them from one location to another. Women's commitment to the safety and well-being of their people was an expression of freedom.

Women put time and energy into maintaining networks that sustained themselves and their communities. Hanna Manena McKenney created such networks in the Bahamas in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century after she was forced to leave Bermuda when she and her husband purchased her freedom. In contrast to Spanish or Portuguese America, where no such law existed, in most British colonies the law required manumitted slaves to leave the jurisdiction or face re-enslavement. Hanna Manena McKenney built a new life as part of a community of free families in the Bahamas who supported her as she worked to have her children rejoin the family in freedom.

Women defined community in a range of ways depending upon their context and circumstances. From the earliest years of New World Slavery and throughout the hemisphere, intergenerational communities of women and girls shared knowledge about beauty rituals and healing practices.<sup>31</sup> Paula de Eguiluz spent much of her life as a slave; once freed, she fought against the church for decades for the freedom to practice her African-influenced beliefs and her profession as a healer and a practitioner of love magic. Charismatic, beautiful, and authoritative, Paula de Eguiluz was nothing less than a leader among a community of African, Indigenous, and European women all held in thrall by her skill and personality.

As new nations moved toward abolition over the course of the long nineteenth century, women continued to rely on community networks, expanding the meaning of community in the process. For example, serving in the troops to protect the nation is usually understood as the purview of men. Indeed, it is one of the key ways that men demonstrate their political capacity – their willingness to fulfill one of their principle obligations of citizenship. Yet, women also took up arms to defend the national community. Harriet Tubman is perhaps the most well known in the United States for her work as a spy in the Union Army during the American Civil War. Less well known until recently is María Remedios del Valle, a free black woman from Buenos Aires. After following her

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Maribel Arrelucea Barrantes, "Pendiendo de un hilo: religiosidad, hechicería y curanderismo en las esclavas de Lima a fines de la Colonia," *Desde el Sur* 1, no. 1 (2009); Joan C. Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007); Camp, 2004; Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

husband and sons to the front lines during Argentina's wars for independence from Spain beginning in 1810, María Remedios del Valle became part of a community of soldiers. By fighting with the revolutionary army María Remedios del Valle fought for the freedom of her nation. In recognition of her distinguished military service, she received a pension and later became known as the "Mother of the Nation."

As María Remedios del Valle's story suggests, women did not only belong to communities of women alone. Communities of men, women, and children offered sustenance and support to those in need in slavery and in freedom. Bessy Chambers in Jamaica spoke up in court against plantation foremen whose aggression threatened the lives of pregnant women. She utilized social networks to support her claim of abuse: nearly two dozen witnesses accompanied her to court to complain about a miscarriage caused by the hard and unlawful labor that her overseer forced her to perform. Her actions served the community because they were not just on her account: they were part of black antislavery efforts that took place on an ad hoc basis in the courts across the Americas. Some women involved in these actions sought outright freedom for themselves. Others, like Chambers, took advantage of abolitionist reforms that had opened up the courts to enslaved people, provided them with pathways to justice, and allowed them to call into question the morality of white authorities. Whether women were freeing themselves or, like Chambers, questioning white authorities, they were engaging in antislavery work.

Communities and networks such as Chambers' were essential for those who planned insurrections or plotted to escape; communities served as networks to hatch plots and settle on means to resist the violence of the institution of slavery. Petra Carabalí joined with others in her community to wage an insurgency against Cuban planters in 1833 and 1834. Her engagement with community took place on multiple levels. In addition to fighting to protect the community in which she lived, Carabalí and those around her also communed with the divine through the liberating rituals of Vodou. Moreover, their sense of community crossed temporal boundaries; they remained connected with past black revolutionaries by remaining mindful of those, like Cécile Fatiman, who lit the spark for the Haitian Revolution in 1791.

Women continued to band together and fight over the course of the next century, even after ostensibly achieving their freedom. Lumina Sophie, also known as Surprise, joined with other men and women in her community to rise up against the white elites who controlled the French colony of Martinique in 1870. Despite the abolition of slavery,

these poor and working-class black women remained confined to second-class citizenship. Quickly emerging as a leader in the Insurrection of the South, Lumina Sophie challenged white middle-class gender ideals as she burned plantations and demanded liberation from ongoing French domination.

In times of legal slavery and after abolition, women forged connections that linked them to allies. They activated these networks to protect their families, to fight legal injustices, and to affirm that their lives as individuals were part of something greater than themselves. Some women served their communities by creating legal precedent. In 1734 Rhode Island, Sarah Chauquam sought reparations for her unlawful enslavement, asking for repayment of three years wages, and won. Chauquam's was one of the first and only cases of its kind in New England, and likely inspired others to claim their freedom and sue for damages. Much later, like Mary Ellen Pleasant, who was a member of the free black abolitionist community in the United States, Emma Coger neither acted alone nor did so only on her own behalf. In the 1870s, when she orchestrated her challenge to the discrimination practiced by a steamboat company, she did so with the support both of African American crew members as well as the Prince Hall Masons, a US organization deeply engaged in civil rights work. Her case went all the way to the Iowa Supreme Court, and it is still cited in legal decisions today.

Similarly, Laura Titus sought to protect members of freedom's first generation in the United States by building community institutions in her city of Norfolk, Virginia. Convinced that schools and settlement houses would inculcate the moral values and skills necessary to disprove the racist stereotypes so popular in the late nineteenth-century United States, Titus made the expansion of access to education and the establishment of community institutions her life's work. In the process, she helped to build and sustain Norfolk's black community. Laura Titus was also a founding member of organizations that were essential to emerging black political networks in the United States, such as the National Association of Colored Women and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. By participating in these networks, Titus hoped to beat back the rising tide of racism.

Other women took on the role of spokesperson for their communities, placing their intellectual work in the service of the campaign to end slavery and extend human rights to people of African descent. Even before slavery was outlawed, recently freed black women and their daughters pushed back against the national mythologies designed to write

them and their foremothers out of the nation. Inaugurating a process that would continue into the twenty-first-century, black women engaged in intellectual work that placed them in the vanguard of the ongoing quest for freedom. Free black women writers placed the pen in the service of the larger cause, writing poetry, novels, and essays in support of the movement. Just as women had kept alive family history by transmitting genealogies from one generation to the next, they also insisted on telling their own stories by dictating or writing their own memoirs.<sup>32</sup>

These women were essential to the emergence and expansion of black women's intellectual tradition, a tradition that was essential to freedom movements across the diaspora. Brazilian writer Maria Firmina dos Reis was a pioneering black woman intellectual. One of the first black woman novelists in the hemisphere (her novel *Ursula* was published in 1859 – the same year as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*), Maria Firmina used literary culture to give a voice to the enslaved, critique the institution of slavery, and, in the process, support the cause of abolition.<sup>33</sup> Born a few decades later in the United States, Carrie W. Clifford embraced her role as an intellectual and articulated a revolutionary version of history, one that challenged the proslavery version of history promulgated by white Southern writers and public intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition to speaking for her community as an intellectual, Carrie W. Clifford sought to protect her community from the racial terrorism accompanying Jim Crow. She did so by writing back against the narratives used to justify white attacks on black communities and individuals in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States.

Work like that of Maria Firmina dos Reis and Carrie Clifford spoke truth to power and served the ongoing fight for justice. It complemented the actions of activists on the ground who organized, participated in labor strikes, created institutions, and campaigned for justice in an effort to make their lived experience of freedom something far more than the absence of legal bondage. Now, in the twenty-first-century, their descendants continue to find inspiration in their foremothers' lives and labors, placing the memory of these women in the service of the battles of the present day. Just as the knowledge of the Haitian revolution swirled in the collective consciousness of Petra Carabalí and her sisters as they prepared to rise up against Cuban planters, the knowledge of these foremothers continues to

<sup>32</sup> Cooper, 2017; Bay et al., 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Harriet E. Wilson, *Our nig, or, Sketches from the life of a free black* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

inspire those who continue to fight for true emancipation and the abolition of racist and sexist regimes of oppression in the Americas.

TOWARDS A NEW HISTORY OF EMANCIPATION  
IN THE AMERICAS

*As If She Were Free* is a hemispheric history of women who claimed the word freedom. The women in this collective biography gave that word different meanings, but they all agreed that freedom was a state of being they desired to experience and to share with others. To be safe from harm, to protect loved ones from violence, to live in community – these freedoms were the constants in women’s lives, regardless of time or the place where they lived. Specific dates and locations allow for nuance in the following stories, but they also reflect that the complicated history of women as agents of emancipation had a singularity of purpose. The timeline of the women subjects’ lives marks change over time while pointing to the constancy of the goal of freedom, from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century (Figure I.2).

The history of emancipation is tied to New World slavery, its abolition, and the antiblackness that reached every corner of the American hemisphere. Everywhere in this territory enslaved women experienced the consequences of laws that upheld the power of slave owners over their bodies. And everywhere women tried to deny them that power. Their individual actions, hundreds of thousands of freedom claims, pressed against the restrictions of slavery until the legal system could no longer sustain the affront. Women like the ones in this collective biography made abolition possible, and they built black antislavery politics from the ground up. The need to be free, the persistence of the fight, happened everywhere.

Mapping the places where these women lived is an exercise that expands the geography of emancipation. The dots on the map in Figure I.3 represent women who made radical claims to their bodies, for their families, and on behalf of their communities. They stand for complicated people who must be understood as participants in a 400-year freedom struggle that spanned the hemisphere. Even if they did not see themselves as connected to black antislavery politics, each of these women were practitioners of emancipation. Far and wide, women thought about freedom because the laws of men tried to keep them unfree. They sought freedom over decades of careful strategizing and journeys over hundreds of miles, and they met with resistance and sometimes outright failure. Yet they persisted.

## TIMELINE OF SUBJECTS' LIFESPANS

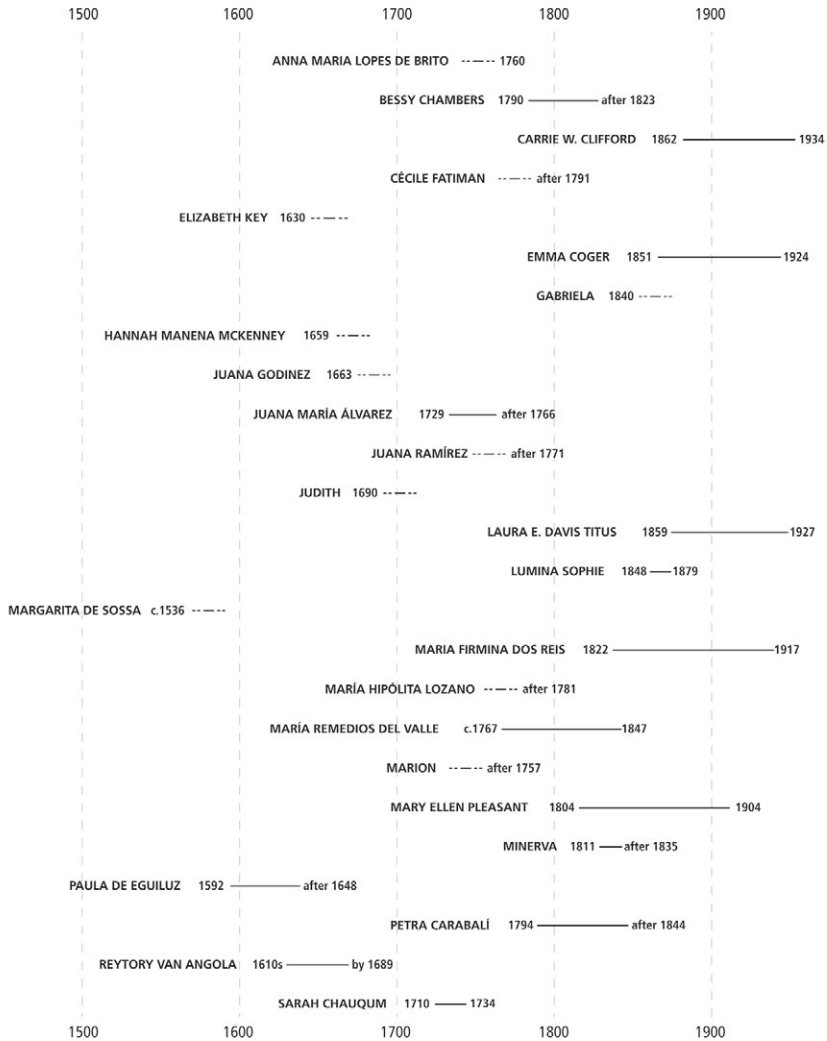


FIGURE 1.2 Years of women's lives

Source: Timeline created by Alex Killough.



FIGURE 1.3 Places where subjects lived

Source: Map made by Alex Killough.