

## Landscapes of Slavery, Rumors of Freedom

Long before the Comunero Revolution and the electric 1790s, many free people in the New Kingdom of Granada believed slaves lived in a near-constant state of conspiracy to destroy the masters, kill “all the whites,” and upend the social order. For generations, masters and other observers resorted to the trope of slaves trying to take over cities and shatter the reigning order. Although the plots could rarely be confirmed, many officials reiterated that slaves, as a matter of course, sought to turn the world upside down. It was thus better to kill the suspects than for free folk to wait to be murdered or turned into serfs, many believed. Over the centuries, hundreds of slaves perished in the recurring crazes.<sup>1</sup> The physical and social destruction of cities by slaves, however, almost never happened. Rebellious slaves typically left urban centers, avoiding direct confrontation with authorities and masters.<sup>2</sup>

Blanket characterizations of slaves as criminal conspirators gained more currency toward the turn of the nineteenth century. Already evident during the Comunero Revolution, stock accusations became salient in the wake of the French and Haitian Revolutions. Age-old fears of slave uprising decidedly shaped masters’ understanding of the potential home effects of social upheaval abroad. As we zoom in to study the three most relevant slave societies in the viceroyalty (the jurisdictions of Cartagena, Antioquia, and Popayán) during the turbulent change of the century, we shall see how prejudiced, stereotyped

perceptions of slave action were present across the board. People in power reproduced formulaic ideas about slaves allegedly seeking emancipation through violent means and, by extension, the destruction of all that was sacred and natural.

These simplifications rested on the ways in which people in corporate societies essentialized others. Legal inequality allowed ample room for individuals to believe that innate, natural traits characterized different groups of people. The idea that vice and virtue accrued according to people's social station, religious confession, political background, and genealogy was widely accepted. Many Spanish-speakers took it as fact that Jews were duplicitous, Indians drunk, the French godless, and slaves deceitful and treacherous.<sup>3</sup> They took rumor of slave conspiracy seriously. As the old Spanish saying went, one would be wise "not to discard altogether rumors spread by the common people."<sup>4</sup> This led to judicial scrutiny, biased interrogation, and torture to corroborate the presumptions.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, people mobilized these convictions to fit their own purposes and advance their interests. The challenge for the historian is to probe the ways in which specific New Kingdom officials and slaveholders interpreted and used the specter of slave insurrection to further their own political agendas and special interests. This approach will allow us to sketch a more accurate portrait of slaves' culture of expectation, the necessary counterpoint to the stereotypes propagated by unsympathetic commentators. This culture of expectation encompassed the actual notions about the end of slavery shared by many slaves, as well as their actual tactics to improve their working conditions or accelerate the coming of emancipation. Both dimensions had an undeniable legal tinge that was already apparent in the sources regarding the year 1781. Evidence of the legal imagination of the enslaved appears even more clearly within the interstices of sources from the 1790s and early 1800s.

Clues from those records show that many slaves envisioned their deliverance from captivity as a peaceful process. Many enslaved communities told hopeful tales of liberation and legally recognized emancipation, and the rumor that a merciful monarch had decreed collective freedom reappeared periodically.<sup>6</sup> For some slaves, the hope continued to be based on manumission promises by masters; others thought that God would somehow end slavery and punish the masters;

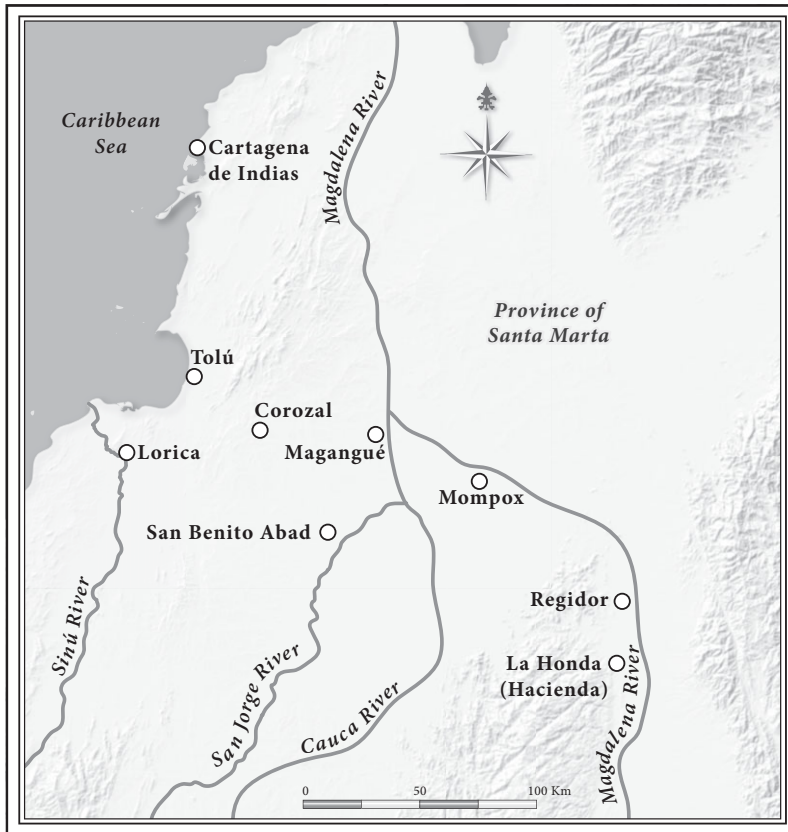
and many hoped that they could become full members of the body politic (paying taxes, obeying magistrates and priests, even living in their own towns) after emancipation.

Typically, slaves made their points during unwelcome criminal interrogations, and these judicial forum encounters were fraught with dangerous possibilities. Unequal access to the judicial sphere, however, did not stop slaves from monitoring the circumstances around them to find the right moment to advance their aspirations. During the crisis of 1781, for instance, Antioquia slaves from across various districts planned to appeal to the monarch's mercy by collectively petitioning before local and provincial officials – a legal tactic used widely by free vassals but typically outside the reach of the enslaved.<sup>7</sup> Slaveholders and magistrates, however, worked hard to stymie these requests, accusing petitioners of criminal conspiracy. Such accusations took on even more alarmist tones after 1791, when slave action was alleged to be modeled after the example of slave unrest in the Caribbean. Let us then peel back those accusations starting in the province of Cartagena, where some officials touted the idea that slaves would emulate or collaborate with their counterparts from the French islands.

### **Cartagena and the Specter of “French Blacks”**

Located on the Caribbean coast, the province of Cartagena extended across the northern plains of Colombia, hugged by the Caribbean Sea to the west, bound by the Magdalena River to the east and north. The region had a relatively dense network of roads and waterways, and the provincial territory was large and directly connected with the Atlantic. The Magdalena, in turn, facilitated access to the rugged interior. Most merchandise and travelers bound for the mountain provinces passed through this territory, traveling by boat before continuing the overland route up the steep slopes of the Andes. Aside from commerce with Spain, trade and smuggling with British Jamaica and Dutch enclaves off the coast of Venezuela was prevalent. The province had a total population of around 120,000 people, including around 10,000 slaves.<sup>8</sup>

Only a small proportion of Cartagena slaves worked in gold mines. Most worked on rural estates, growing sugar, cacao, cotton, and herding cattle. A small number worked for merchants and smugglers.



MAP 4 The province of Cartagena. Map by Gerry Krieg.

Around 2,000 lived in the provincial capital, the city of Cartagena de Indias, but some lived in smaller urban centers (see Map 4). In the provincial capital, many slaves were hired out. Others, however, served in the palatial homes of patrician families who were proud to live in the most important port town of the viceroyalty and the second most important city after Santa Fe. A crucial military and commercial hub – in effect the front gate to Spanish South America – the walled city of Cartagena resembled Havana in Cuba or Cádiz in Spain.<sup>9</sup>

The province had remained particularly calm during the Comunero Revolution, but the 1790s here, as elsewhere in the Caribbean, would be characteristically troublesome. In 1793, Cartagena was rattled by news of arson and accounts of a potential slave conspiracy in the rural

hinterland, where the majority of slaves lived and worked. The events unfolded in Mompox, the second most important urban settlement in the province (see Map 4). In January, a series of seven individual conflagrations consumed over 400 houses in this prosperous freshwater port on the Magdalena. Although the matter was never clearly understood, slaves were the main suspects.<sup>10</sup>

Mompox was home to a group of rich families who lived in fine townhouses with their slaves and retainers, and whose patriarchs held sway over the local corporations and royal posts. This upper echelon of the local patriciate had large rural estates, where slaves and peons worked year-round. Some even exploited a few gold mines and other mineral deposits. With the town built on a strategic point on the Magdalena, the richest slaveholders had important commercial interests too. The docks, warehouses, and merchants' homes were stages for a thriving exchange and transshipment of merchandise.<sup>11</sup>

Although fires were by no means rare in this preindustrial town with its numerous thatched houses, in 1793 the flames seemed unstoppable and were oddly similar. Structures were engulfed by flames on January 5th, 6th, 11th, 14th, 15th, 17th, and 29th, and several of the fires began between two and three in the afternoon. Before long it was insinuated that slaves might be involved.<sup>12</sup> The notion that slaves might set towns ablaze was not difficult for free people to imagine; indeed, slaveholders and bureaucrats in the Americas were quick to accuse slaves of arson. Some slaves did occasionally use fire as a weapon against the masters, but false accusations seem to have been more frequent than actual instances of arson. The resentful, arsonist slave motif, moreover, is one that features regularly in narratives about slave conspiracy from ancient Rome to seventeenth-century Barbados and beyond.<sup>13</sup>

While slaves might not have been involved in stoking this crisis, some hazarded the chance of turning it into an opportunity to broadcast their hope that slavery might be disrupted, if not by men, then by spiritual forces. Such was the case with Juan Santiago Fontalvo, who was accused of arson by his mistress, the rich widow Mariana Damiana González. Fontalvo made subtle but legible statements about the iniquities in Mompox, where slaves were mistreated, poorly fed, and barely clothed, and his words had connotations of divine judgment, seemingly referencing the Bible. The widow González claimed

that Fontalvo had predicted the conflagration of the 15th, causing her to rush to pack garments and valuables in preparation for what he called a “great fire.” The widow asserted that he had foretold the fire from “the looks of the sun.”<sup>14</sup> Fontalvo later said, his mistress claimed, that “two legions of Demons” had caused the inferno. During interrogation, Fontalvo corroborated his mention of mystical descriptions and made them more explicit: people should leave town, he advised the magistrates, for God had vented “the arm of his justice.”<sup>15</sup> “Mine arms shall judge the people,” reads the book of the prophet Isaiah (51:5).

The expectation that divine judgment was potentially imminent functioned as a statement on the sins of the people of Mompox. Among the enslaved, such expectation may have implied the meting out of punishment for their masters. This aspect of Fontalvo’s message made patricians uncomfortable. They did not care to be seen as the subject of a coming reckoning, and when Pablo Álvarez (the *fiscal* or prosecutor) prepared his accusation against Fontalvo, he seems to have intentionally dropped any suggestions of prophecy and judgment.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of focusing on the content of Fontalvo’s message (divine judgment, and by extension the sins of Mompox), Álvarez focused on the form (the act of prophecy). In order to undermine Fontalvo’s message, the prosecutor sought to paint him as a sinner. Prophecy, Álvarez wrote, could only happen in two ways: by actual knowledge of things about to take place or by the “Gift of revelation.” As a sinful man (during his depositions he had been led to confess to illicit sexual liaisons and nearly pushed to admit theft), Fontalvo could not be admitted the privilege of revelation, argued Álvarez. It followed that he had to be “adivino” or “agorero:” a diviner, a practitioner of the “vain art of divination” through omens that were often associated with readings of the sun.<sup>17</sup> Álvarez believed that Fontalvo had relied on “diabolical art” for his divination and even recommended that the prisoner be tortured to extract a full confession. This was admitted because Fontalvo was “vile,” a man of “servile condition,” and thus presumed to be guilty and allowed to be tortured (patricians were legally protected from torture).<sup>18</sup> Silencing this would-be prophet prevented a potential identification of Mompox as the collective subject of divine judgment. Although the fires continued after Fontalvo’s arrest, his imprisonment dragged on for another two and a half years.

He languished in jail, isolated from anyone who might pay heed to his message.

However, there were some who believed that clashing elite families were responsible for the crisis. The lieutenant governor, the top local magistrate, intimated that the “conspiracy” was a byproduct of a feud among patricians.<sup>19</sup> Circumstantial evidence suggests that there may indeed have been other local tensions at play. While the González clan repeatedly distanced themselves from Fontalvo (who, as their slave, was seen as a member of their household and an extension of their will), a member of their rival clan, the Mier family, came to his aid.<sup>20</sup> In 1795, someone from this family advocated on behalf of the jailed slave, marking the only time anyone of influence interceded on his behalf. Although the *procurador*, who had a legal responsibility to defend slaves, managed to avoid defending Fontalvo, it took the open intervention of a member of the Mier family to finally bring Fontalvo’s case to a head, ending in a final sentence of three years forced labor.<sup>21</sup>

While no mention of any potential connections with events abroad was made during the Mompox fires, fears of contagion from the French Caribbean emerged around this time. Cartagena slaveholders were acutely aware of the epochal events unfolding in places like Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe. News from the French islands made it to Cartagena shores in a matter of days. Sailing from Cartagena, it took about five days to get to southern Saint-Domingue. By contrast, it could take more than a month to travel to Santa Fe, which was located inland at 8,612 feet above sea level. Masters and officials understood the unusual character of the events in Saint-Domingue: as far as anyone could tell, it was the only large-scale slave insurrection in recent memory; nonetheless, accounts from the neighboring islands seemed merely to confirm prejudices about slaves’ criminal impulses.<sup>22</sup>

In their interpretation of slave uprisings on the French islands, Cartagena’s officials relied heavily on ready-made notions. The Spanish secretary of state ordered administrators to avoid getting involved in Saint-Domingue’s struggles. He exhorted officials to lend a helping hand to those who could be affected by *malhechores* (bandits), pirates, and *negros* from the French colony, who, he suggested, no doubt intended to “destroy” white people.<sup>23</sup> This vocabulary served to validate stereotypes about those held in slavery as well as about people who came from the French world. The sum of two great

fears, *negros franceses* was shorthand for the combined apprehension about criminal slaves and godless French-speakers.

In April 1799, a “French black” conspiracy was allegedly uncovered in the provincial capital. Framed by stock accusations and the idea of foreign influence, governor Anastasio Cejudo’s reports on the events reflect how entrenched these stereotypes were. He reported that a group of slaves from the French Caribbean, in cahoots with local slaves, planned to murder him, take over the walls and fortresses, kill the “whites,” and loot the city. The biased imagery did not stop there. Cejudo reported that he had foiled the plot at the very last minute, the night before it was all supposed to happen. Indeed, last minute, quasi-providential foiling of criminal plots is yet another motif that features across many instances of conspiracy accusations against slaves.<sup>24</sup>

The label “French blacks” used by Cejudo seems clear-cut, but this expression did not neatly map onto clearly identifiable people. Cejudo never mentioned any of these “French blacks” by name. Rather than recalling specific individuals, Cejudo used the expression to evoke a set of concerns that had become commonplace by 1799. The foreigners, he claimed, had struck an alliance with local militiamen of color, bringing people together across the lines of slavery and freedom to separate Cartagena from the Spanish government. The plan was not just to emancipate the enslaved but also to bring political liberty to other commoners. In the governor’s parlance, the suspects carried the “detestable maxims of liberty and disobedience.”<sup>25</sup> The conspirators thus allegedly challenged both the authority of masters over slaves as well as the power of the king over the viceroyalty.

Such loaded terms, however, potentially mask the local dynamics behind this alleged discovery of a devastating plot. Cejudo was keen to underscore that he remained in full control of a jurisdiction that had come within hours of full-blown revolution. However, his grasp on the government had been tenuous ever since taking office as governor in 1796. Cejudo’s promotion came after twenty years of work as a local military officer; thus, he took charge of the post with plenty of enemies and found himself entangled in further power struggles.<sup>26</sup> Cejudo’s position turned even more delicate when he proved unable to discharge one of the most crucial obligations of the post: keeping the city well-supplied and its soldiers fed. War with Great Britain interrupted flour supplies in 1796, and Cartagena’s maize fields were damaged by



floods in 1798.<sup>27</sup> With corn jobbers storing much of the remaining grain, Cartagenans began to feel the pinch. Even the Queen's Infantry Regiment, its numbers already dwindling due to tropical disease, seemed at risk, and Cejudo fretted over the dangerous prospect of hungry soldiers. A subsistence crisis in a time of war loomed at the horizon for the troubled governor. Threatened on multiple fronts, Cejudo overstated his role in keeping at bay a much-touted threat from foreign agents, perhaps in an attempt to rally his opponents behind him.<sup>28</sup>

Like the magistrates dealing with the Mompox fires earlier that decade, Cejudo carefully selected what he wished to highlight and to silence when he talked and wrote about the challenges he faced during his governorship. For instance, his surviving reports fail to mention a serious episode of slave action unfolding in alarming synchrony with the alleged near destruction of the provincial capital. Considering that this episode took place in La Honda, an important rural estate south of Mompox (see Map 4), Cejudo must have been aware of it. Pressed by masters seeking to regain control of La Honda, the magistrates in Mompox opened criminal proceedings. The surviving depositions and letters are abundant, allowing us to catch a glimpse of the many ways in which slave tactics and goals defied the stereotypes.

Formulaic depictions of arsonist slaves can be counterpointed with the actual steps taken by slaves on the La Honda sugarcane hacienda. With just over 100 slaves, this was one of the biggest such estates in the Kingdom. In mid-April 1799, the slaves declared themselves free and expelled their overseer. The tactics and legal strategy employed by these captive workers hoping to achieve emancipation emerged clearly during the early stages of the movement.<sup>29</sup> Aware that their master had promised them manumission (effective after his death), La Honda leaders insisted that they had patiently waited for his passing, all the while diligently doing their jobs. When the day finally arrived, they took their own freedom by expelling the late master's proxy, but the use of force stopped there. They stayed put in the estate, arguing that their master's promise (in fact formalized in his last will) rendered their course of action legal. Furthermore, they hoped authorities would now recognize this hacienda as a formally incorporated settlement of free people. They would defend themselves if attacked, slave leaders insisted, but they would much rather live peacefully.<sup>30</sup>

The people of La Honda's aspiration to form a settlement of free vassals living in peace was underpinned by their understanding of the Spanish hierarchical municipal regime. In conversations later retold before Mompo magistrates, the slaves Antonio, Ascención, Valerio, and Vicente revealed that they hoped to continue to live on the former estate but under the authority of a priest and a magistrate, paying tithes and taxes. They thus voiced their desire to live *en policía*: settled around a church and abiding by the laws of "both majesties" – God and the king. The La Honda people clearly understood that successfully achieving freedom and peace did not depend on manumission alone; they also had to form a corporation adhering to the land within the Spanish political order.<sup>31</sup> Their aspirations to transition into free vassals, though articulated with different legal references, resembles the aspirations of some Antioquia slaves who, back in 1781, imagined themselves paying taxes "like Indians" or mazamorreros. By May 1803, however, the master's inheritors had retaken the hacienda, causing death, flight, and the final disintegration of the La Honda community. In the end the former slaves had to fight – and their emerging town was destroyed as a result – but they did not choose violence to speed their freedom.<sup>32</sup>

Most slaves usually waited for specific windows of opportunity (a political crisis, the death of a master, the replacement of an overseer) to take steps toward making their lives more tolerable or achieving emancipation. Some patiently saved money to purchase their own freedom or to pay for the emancipation of their loved ones.<sup>33</sup> Many slaves even nurtured the hope that a powerful person would come to deliver them from slavery. Rumor spread from time to time that a distant king had ordered the masters to set all people in bondage free. Such anticipations of freedom were not uncommon on the Caribbean islands, and, as we have already seen, they also existed in the Andean province of Antioquia, but these rumors must also be carefully examined.

### Antioquia and the Rumor of "Candanga"

Cartagena's neighbor to the south, Antioquia was an Andean province bound by the Chocó to the West and the Magdalena River to the East. The Magdalena provided navigable access to Cartagena and the world

beyond, but this river marked the outermost confines of the province. Antioquia's epicenter, the neighboring valleys of Cauca and Aburrá and the adjacent plateaus of San Nicolás and Los Osos, struggled to efficiently communicate with the Magdalena. It took two or three weeks to descend to the river. Small, tightly packed, and tucked away, Antioquia's provincial heartland is best described as landlocked (see Map 2). However, Antioquia had gold, and this important and easily portable commodity linked its economy to wider trade networks. Out of a total population of close to 80,000 people at the turn of the nineteenth century, around 10,000 were slaves, and most of these slaves worked for gold mines.<sup>34</sup>

Panning for gold in the cool highlands of San Nicolás and Los Osos during the rainy season, many slaves also toiled the fields or tended cattle in the warm valley of Aburrá and the hot Cauca River valley, especially over the dry months. They thus moved up and down through the four areas where both population and resources concentrated, all located within one or two days of travel from each other. Most slaves lived in small groups, but they easily communicated with others across jurisdictions. (In Cartagena, by contrast, slaves faced more travel restrictions and longer distances.) Some Antioquia slaves also split their time between the countryside and the two main urban centers: the city of Antioquia (the provincial capital), and the crossroads town of Medellín. These urban enclaves resembled modest Spanish towns in Andalucía and Extremadura.<sup>35</sup>

Masters and magistrates in Antioquia worried that slaves would organize an uprising, and that revolutionary contagion from France might help catalyze revolt. This preoccupation was further stoked by their knowledge that slaves from different districts regularly exchanged opinions about their potential emancipation. The exchanged messages included familiar narratives, model fables that people drew on when emancipation seemed possible, rather than tactical signals to accelerate freedom through violent means or by replicating events from abroad.<sup>36</sup> One prevailing fable was that the monarch had decreed emancipation, but the masters and magistrates kept the freedom decree secret.<sup>37</sup> Times of political uncertainty seemed to lend more ubiquity to such ideas. As we have already seen, in the year 1781 the provincial governor insisted that captives from three different districts (San Nicolás, Aburrá, and the provincial capital)

were in cahoots and planning a wholesale destruction which would be followed by making themselves “owners of everything.”<sup>38</sup>

One might be tempted to see the expectations of royal clemency that surfaced again in Antioquia during the turbulent turn of the century (in 1798 and 1806) as yet another mischaracterization of slaves’ ideas by anxious masters. However, the legal tinge of one model fable relayed by word of mouth suggests that these ideas and forms of communication underpinned the slaves’ culture of expectation. Most of the freedom tales told and retold by slaves circulated as rumor. Though the message traveled through whispers, it consistently communicated a core idea: freedom was coming, perhaps for all slaves, and in a shift of status not only legitimate but sanctioned by sacred and royal majesties.<sup>39</sup> To grasp the texture of this culture, however, we must read our sources with an eye for potential political manipulations and the ever-present specters of homegrown unrest and foreign influence.

Let us begin in 1794, when the rich peninsular merchant Juan Pablo Pérez de Rublas, a cabildo member and interim governor in the provincial capital, informed the viceroy that individuals with revolutionary, egalitarian sentiments were wreaking havoc on the social order. Aware of the pasquinades affair in Santa Fe, Pérez de Rublas assumed that, in all likelihood, the “pernicious maxims of the French” had reached Antioquia.<sup>40</sup> A reader of the *Papel periódico de la ciudad de Santafé de Bogotá*, the merchant drew on the anti-French sentiments prevalent at the viceregal court, but he was careful in choosing who to accuse as the agent of impending trouble in Antioquia.<sup>41</sup>

A successful merchant, Pérez de Rublas accused the taxman Francisco José Visadías of being the malevolent egalitarian threatening the established hierarchy. Already engaged in a legal battle against Visadías over issues of taxation and the creation of a new Royal Mint in Medellín, Pérez de Rublas had strong reasons to undermine this royal treasury official. Along with a business partner, Pérez de Rublas controlled 40 percent of legal trade in Antioquia’s capital. He was a man of consequence, taking advantage of his interim governorship to further merchants’ goals. Visadías firmly opposed him.<sup>42</sup> The merchant reported that Visadías was a depraved, irreligious womanizer who was bent on inciting plebeians to revolt and on stoking a fire that would “embrace and consume this unhappy city and the entire

province.”<sup>43</sup> Pérez de Rublas could not substantiate his accusations, but he insisted that Visadías had suspiciously friendly relationships with plebeians in the capital city’s jurisdiction, where less than 2000 people could claim Spanish status.<sup>44</sup>

Pérez de Rublas asserted that Visadías promoted revolutionary collaboration among slave and free alike, highlighting Visadías’ “unnatural” association with slaves and people of enslaved ancestry. Pérez de Rublas also mentioned that Visadías treated “mulato” families – who straddled slavery and freedom – as though they were of noble stock. He even suggested that this cabal had already tried to turn the world upside down during the Comunero Revolution. Visadías’ public pronouncements in favor of “liberty,” he claimed, had stimulated slave conspiracy in 1781. Pérez de Rublas now recalled that, as a cabildo member, he himself had helped stop a slave uprising in that fateful year. Encouraged by Visadías and hoping to “see themselves freed from captivity,” Pérez de Rublas told the viceroy that slaves now seemed ready to strike again.<sup>45</sup>

If the patrician Visadías broke conventions by interacting with his social inferiors, he was not the only one and his activities were much less dangerous than suggested. Pérez de Rublas and other merchants regularly associated with people known or rumored to have enslaved ancestry, some of whom gained wealth and political prestige. Most of these people remained in their social stations throughout their entire lives, but service to the king, economic achievement, and ascendancy could sometimes officially clean a “stained” genealogy, raising an individual’s *calidad*. Most usually, a few people improved their social position patiently and silently as they expanded their businesses and respectability. After 1795, some people would translate such good fortunes into firmer political belonging, entering the group of Spaniards (*criollos*) by obtaining *gracias al sacar*. A paid-for royal grace, this document granted the status of “white” regardless of the beneficiary’s genealogy. Changes in *calidad*, whether officially recognized or not, rarely happened free from tension and uncertainty.<sup>46</sup>

This struggle between treasury officials and merchants, and their anxieties about slaves and free people of color, unfolded against the backdrop of a gold boom in Antioquia. With population growth and the exploitation of new deposits, the provincial economy was already expanding by 1781. From 1780 to 1799, Antioquia mined some

236,000 pesos worth of gold: four times what it had mined between 1750 and 1779. Prospecting, rather than large-scale gold mining or agriculture, allowed some people in Antioquia to better their lot by accumulating some riches. With a predominantly rugged terrain, the cultivation and export of a cash crop had no chances of success. By producing valuable and portable gold, however, miners had better fortunes, especially those who could afford to buy a few slaves.<sup>47</sup>

Commerce increased and some humble people benefited from this expansion, but the social structure remained strong. Although trade was difficult, merchants began to introduce more manufactures and other goods from Santa Fe, Cartagena (via Mompox), and Quito (via Popayán). Petty traders expanded their own operations too. In a telling detail, two Antioquia brothers of enslaved ancestry who participated in this boom ranked among the very first people ever to obtain *gracias al sacar* in Madrid.<sup>48</sup> But improvement of one's *calidad* remained rare. Not unexpectedly, in the end nothing came of Visadías' alleged social leveling plans. Still, anxieties about restive commoners and social climbers did not go away. And neither did the rumors of freedom, which slaves revived again in 1798.

As people prepared for the end-of-year festivities in December 1798, news spread in Medellín that slaves believed freedom was about to materialize. Cabildo magistrate José Joaquín Gómez Londoño reported that the slaves were determined to "violently" shake off the yoke of servitude. Nevertheless, his source indicated that slaves expected emancipation through legal means. Gómez Londoño himself wrote that slaves believed a "high order" granting them freedom existed, albeit currently withheld by magistrates. Relying on information provided by a spy, Gómez Londoño also reported that slaves believed the cabildo would soon enforce "general freedom." With the coming cabildo meeting of January 1, expectations may have been unusually high in December. The rumor of the emancipatory decree gained traction. Partly coinciding with hopes reported back in 1781, the spy reported that slaves expected an official announcement of their freedom on New Year's Eve.<sup>49</sup>

As had happened seventeen years earlier, other clues indicate that the slaves may have been preparing for legal action rather than insurrection. Gómez Londoño reported that some slaves expected to be allowed to buy their freedom at the price of one gold peso, hoping to

live in their own, separate town under their own elected magistrates. Like the slaves of La Honda near Mompox, some slaves in Medellín hoped to become free vassals living *en policía*. Slaves of the Restrepo clan, a family of influence in Medellín, seem to have talked seriously about the prospects of legal, general emancipation. A slaveholding patrician reported that the slaves José Manuel and Pablo, belonging to two of the Restrepos, had stated that, should freedom be withheld after the end of the year, they would travel to request their liberty from the king himself. Another master testified that Javier de Restrepo's slave was raising funds to litigate for collective freedom.<sup>50</sup>

Some slaves also expected Providence rather than human action to speed their freedom. The slave Miguel, owned by José María de Restrepo, denied any knowledge that slaves were about to rise up, conceding nonetheless that "God was to punish all the whites for holding them as slaves." Even more explicitly than the slave Montalvo in Mompox, this man expected divine justice, not insurrection, to come to right the wrong of slavery.<sup>51</sup> José Ignacio, another skeptical slave, believed that freedom would come from God, not from men.<sup>52</sup> Though at first glance somewhat restrained, the suggestion that the masters were about to face divine reckoning was a radical one. It turned the murky issue of slavery and freedom into a clear-cut matter of good versus evil.

Gómez Londoño, however, obfuscated the complexities of slave testimony by intentionally distorting his information about the slaves' ideas and plans. Víctor Salcedo, the provincial governor, did not fully trust Gómez Londoño. Because the latter was a native of Antioquia, the governor presumed his reports might be motivated by intricate entanglements of friendship and hatred. The governor did think that slaves may in fact be on the verge of insurrection, yet he also mentioned that Gómez Londoño was known for his bad temper and litigious inclinations. Hoping to gain a better grasp of the situation, the governor sent his lieutenant Antonio de Viana to Medellín. Viana arrived on December 31. Gómez Londoño then admitted he had no evidence to prove that the slaves were planning an insurrection.<sup>53</sup> New Year's Day, 1799 arrived and nothing happened.

Nevertheless, further evidence on coordination across several districts suggests vigorous organizing for collective legal action among the enslaved in Antioquia. Viana gathered information indicating that

slaves in Medellín held communication and coordinated with slaves in San Nicolás – the epicenter of the 1781 events.<sup>54</sup> Back during the comunero movement, slaves from different jurisdictions had been in communication about how best to make claims before local and provincial magistrates. Some slave leaders probably tried to enter the judicial forum via written or oral petitions, seeking to express their hope to legally end their captivity. But masters and magistrates stifled their voices, preventing slaves from exercising the privilege to petition for redress, which free folk had regularly exercised for generations.<sup>55</sup>

The barriers preventing slave leaders from making claims through written petitions stimulated the oral nature of their culture of expectation as well as the spiritual, though somewhat unconventional tenor of its contents. Although Gómez Londoño's reports painted slaves' plans as a full-fledged insurrection, he also left behind some non-stereotyped evidence on the contents of their conversations: he wrote that the slaves had "baptized their revolution, or designs, with the name of La Candanga." The word Candanga was prevalent among slaves in the Medellín district.<sup>56</sup> Unrestrained by the formalities that would have shaped their vision on a written legal document, people in captivity freely used this word as part of their sustained conversations on emancipation. One of its potential meanings points in the direction of monarchs of African origin and Christian virtue as deliverers of freedom.<sup>57</sup>

Among the enslaved in Medellín, the use of the name Candanga was probably connected with the fable of an African queen, perhaps the mythical Candice of Ethiopia (Candaces or Kandake in Spanish), who had come to enact emancipation.<sup>58</sup> Known as the "Queen of Ethiopia," the biblical figure of Queen Candice (Acts 8:27) was recognized as a member of the "illustrious" cadre of black people who had allegedly belonged in the Catholic church.<sup>59</sup> Inducted into the rudiments of the Christian history of salvation, slaves may have referred to this queen by the name of Candanga. While the 1798 records do not offer much detail, the liberating queen shows up again in later documents.

The name Candanga resurfaced in Medellín a few years later, and this time the symbolic connection with an emancipatory black queen is more tangible in the evidence. In March 1806, rumor spread among slaves in Medellín that a royal decree for their liberation existed but



the local postal administrator kept it secret.<sup>60</sup> Believed to be in alliance with slaves in Los Osos, the slaves of Medellín were again accused of planning insurrection.<sup>61</sup> One of the witnesses in the criminal inquiry declared that he had heard from a woman that a “black Queen” had arrived in Antioquia to grant all the slaves their freedom. The Queen was hiding away, the woman had added, and “she heard mass every day from a priest at her hide-out.” This queen, presumably African, like Queen Candice, also seemed to be perceived as a pious Catholic monarch.<sup>62</sup> Benevolent like her Spanish counterpart, this justice-delivering sovereign was also a virtuous Christian.

Slaves’ dialogues on where their freedom might come from, how best to speed the hour of their deliverance from slavery, and what type of legal status they might enjoy afterwards elicited accusations that they were out to undo the entire social order. Entangled in local struggles and relying on prejudices about unfree people and people of color, the accusers ignored or misrepresented these vibrant dialogues. Throughout the lands of Popayán, similar dialogues and accusations also took place. With a master class that had more to lose, Popayán’s political and economic order was starkly predicated on continuing enslavement. Those at the top in this order staunchly defended it as everlasting. Nonetheless, we can catch glimpses of the slaves’ culture of expectation, including something of their repertoire of familiar narratives anticipating change.

### **Popayán and the “Black Queen” in the Americas**

The governorate of Popayán had the largest jurisdiction in the New Kingdom, spreading across most of today’s southwestern Colombia. With its blurry southeastern limits lost in the Amazon jungle and bound by the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Andes central cordillera in the northeast, Popayán bordered with Antioquia to the north. Two mountain passes allowed communication with Santa Fe and Cartagena, via the Magdalena River valley. Popayán also communicated with Quito, its neighbor to the south, and had ties with Lima. Traveling was a long and costly enterprise in this variegated landscape, but people and merchandise entered or passed through the governorate. The population concentrated on large and fertile Andean valleys, where haciendas produced agricultural goods for urban centers and

the rich gold mines of the Pacific piedmont and lowlands. Formed by several constituting provinces, which together contained about 140,000 people, this kingdom within the Kingdom had about 30,000 slaves. Working on the sweltering Pacific gold districts, many slaves lived far away from their owners, who usually lived in the capital city, Popayán.<sup>63</sup> (see Map 3)

At the provincial capital, an elite class of high patricians enjoyed substantial wealth and influence. They controlled the *cabildo*, held sway over the Pacific mining districts, owned large haciendas, inhabited solid townhouses, and donned garments prohibitively expensive for most people. Spanish *hidalgos* with seigneurial aspirations, Popayán's masters stood at the top of a robust and violent slave society.<sup>64</sup> Here, the famed Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt complained after a visit, lazy young men lived "frightened by the slightest discomfort," "surrounded and served by slaves," "afraid of the sun's rays."<sup>65</sup>

Around 10,000 slaves worked the metal-rich deposits of the Pacific region. Subdivided into five districts (Barbacoas, Tumaco, Micay, Iscuandé, and Raposo), the area was overwhelmingly covered by rain-forest (see Map 3). Hamlets and trails barely made a scratch on the land. Grouped in large work gangs, often in the hundreds, these slaves lived much farther away from significant urban centers than their counterparts in Antioquia and Cartagena. The trip to the capital could take up to three weeks over the wet seasons. Trails were difficult even in the dry months, with porters instead of mules bringing in crucial supplies. Other goods entered by sea and river from Panama, Guayaquil, and Callao. The mining slaves rarely saw their absentee masters, urban dwellers who also spent much time on their near-by rural estates.<sup>66</sup>

As in Antioquia and Cartagena, in Popayán the political troubles of the 1780s and 1790s were bound up with pre-existing issues, especially the tensions between absentee masters and their far-flung slave gangs. Some Popayán families usually found it hard to keep slaves under control. Masters lived in a slow-motion back and forth with enslaved communities, who increased their autonomy by taking advantage of the distance and time mediating between the gold diggings and the capital city. The situation turned even more tense after the year 1781. Some insisted that outside political developments could spark a slave uprising against the king and the masters. However,

slaves did not turn into unwitting agents of foreign powers, and never really exercised the type of wholesale violence predicted by officials and struggling masters.

Take the case of the San Juan mine, one of the many gold mining enclaves on the Pacific slopes of the Andes. Originally owned by José Tenorio (as *alférez real* of Popayán's cabildo, he held the most prominent of municipal posts), San Juan was in the district of Micay (see Map 3). As early as June 1782, just months after the Tumaco uprising and well before the death of Tenorio, San Juan slaves were reported to be in a state of disobedience. Like the slaves of La Honda, the captive workers here challenged their master while staying put, holding on to their clearings in the forest, their thatched houses, and their canoes. When the owner died in 1787, San Juan passed into the sphere of influence of Jerónimo Francisco de Torres, a peninsular and the patriarch of the Torres y Tenorio family.<sup>67</sup>

Who exactly owned San Juan and its self-assertive slaves remained bitterly disputed in probate proceedings. This dispute among putative masters opened a new space for slaves to make work and life decisions by themselves. For the Torres y Tenorio family, it became increasingly difficult to keep authority over the slaves while defending their claim to property in the tribunals at Popayán. Because gold was their most important source of income and the mining site was remote, the would-be-masters had to tread lightly. They negotiated with the people of San Juan in order to elicit a modicum of obedience.<sup>68</sup> A temporary working arrangement seems to have been reached by 1794, when the patriarch himself visited San Juan.

But there was always the fear that slaves might be moved to strike against their masters under influence from outside forces and circumstances. While at San Juan, Jerónimo Francisco received a letter from his son, Camilo Torres. The missive came from Santa Fe, where Camilo was a highly respected lawyer and professor of civil law. Officials there had sought to implicate him in the pasquinades affair. Even before Camilo's letter reached his father, slaves had already received news of the tensions at the viceregal capital. Reassuring his father, Camilo asserted that viceregal authorities had blown the recent episodes out of proportion. The slaves, meanwhile, only saw further proof of discord among masters.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, they were also aware of tensions between Spain and the British monarchy. Because of their

relative proximity to the coast, places like San Juan received not only unofficial information but also official military instructions from authorities, as well as news of Anglo-Spanish maritime skirmishes in nearby waters.<sup>70</sup>

Rather than dealing with foreign influence and sudden uprisings, however, Popayán slaveholders had to contend with long drawn out and carefully calculated challenges from their slaves. Anxiety about the people of San Juan is evident in the family correspondence, which reveals how difficult it was for absentee owners to govern their slaves. Members of the Torres y Tenorio family may have found it hard to keep slaves at San Juan under control and mining for gold, but this does not mean that slaves refused to work altogether: they exercised different degrees of autonomy rather than fully severing the ties of subordination. Still, Camilo complained that he had never known San Juan to yield any profits, not even in the time of his late grandfather. The slaves, he suggested, were to blame, for “they are even capable of letting their owners starve to death.”<sup>71</sup> Shortly thereafter, the same “starving” master presented his betrothed with pearl earrings, a pearl necklace, a diamond ring, a gold belt buckle, and an emerald ring.<sup>72</sup>

As litigation over the mine dragged on, slaves in San Juan more easily challenged or disobeyed commands from people whose positions as legitimate masters remained contested. The masters of today could face a judicial setback and be replaced by a new patrician family tomorrow. Trying to legitimate his possession while keeping the slaves under close watch, Camilo’s father seems to have spent most of the time at San Juan at the turn of the century.<sup>73</sup> Camilo’s brother, Gerónimo Torres, took charge of family affairs after the passing of their father (around 1804).

The paper trail thins out at this point, and the best source available on what happened at San Juan in the following years is a letter by Gerónimo, penned in 1820. We must take the letter’s content with a grain of salt, as these are not only the words of a typically unsympathetic and prejudiced master, but also years removed from the events, not to mention shaped by the upheaval of the wars of Independence, which took a heavy toll on the slaveholding patricians of Popayán and their sense of identity and purpose. Despite its harshness, Gerónimo’s letter provides evidence for the culture of expectation of the San Juan slaves. At some point around the year 1800, this community came to

believe that the emancipation of all slaves in the mine was possible, and they built their hopes on something even greater than increasing autonomy from the masters.

The letter in question indicates that the people of San Juan believed a redeeming queen of African ancestry had come to their rescue. Gerónimo recalled that during the time of Governor Miguel Tacón, most likely in 1810, the slaves of San Juan seriously challenged their masters on two occasions. First, they refused to work for Gerónimo's brother, Manuel, with the governor punishing the leaders of this action.<sup>74</sup> On a second occasion, the governor had to intervene again, when the captives began to claim that "a black Queen had come to the Americas bringing freedom for the slaves." Also coinciding with a fable that we have encountered before, the people of San Juan claimed that the masters were trying to hide this important development from them.<sup>75</sup>

Gerónimo reported that slaves took further, non-violent steps, holding nightly meetings to discuss how they would attain the freedom to which they now felt entitled by the grace of a monarch. Apparently, the plan was to draw up and send to Popayán a legal petition on behalf of the whole slave gang. But they found it difficult to make any claims through a written document, and the masters relied on the threat of military repression to regain some obedience. In the governorate of Popayán, slaveholders and their proxies worked hard to prevent enslaved communities from making their voices heard through legal means.<sup>76</sup>

Gerónimo, like most other masters, disregarded the slaves' conviction that their freedom would happen with the blessing of a monarch, whether a black Queen or the Spanish king. Instead of recognizing his family's failure to keep their affairs in working order, and the slaves' growing ability to decide when and how to obey commands from masters and overseers, Gerónimo asserted that slaves were naturally prone to disobedience and inclined to hate their superiors. Admitting that the slaves had engaged in continuous attempts to "shake off obedience," Gerónimo believed that this was caused by the slaves' own "innate and irreconcilable hatred" toward their masters, rather than by the burdens of captivity. But then again, he had been raised to believe that "severity and rigor" were the only ways to "govern the blacks."<sup>77</sup> The experience of San Juan and his ingrained convictions about slaves would shape his later political career.

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Collective organizing and dialogues pertaining to their status increased among enslaved communities after 1781, leading to accusations that they were conspiring to turn the world upside down. Relying on ingrained stereotypes about slaves' criminal inclinations, over the three decades before 1810 masters and bureaucrats levied serious charges against people in captivity. It is not unusual to find reports that those held in slavery were interested in defying not just their enslavement but the entire social order of the monarchy, and that they were in cahoots with foreign agents or somehow influenced from abroad. With the memory of the Comunero Revolution still fresh and considering revolutionary events in France and the French Caribbean, typical accusations took on more alarming dimensions after 1793.

A critical examination of the sources, however, reveals that instead of wholesale destruction and sudden revolt many slaves were more interested in thoughtfully figuring out steady avenues toward various forms of freedom: individual, familial, and even for all in bondage throughout entire jurisdictions, mainly at the municipal level. Some even hoped they could become free vassals living in their own towns, abiding by the laws of God and the monarch. Many slaves longed to be peacefully free – even if it meant living under the eyes of a man of the cloth, and under the vigilance of a man of the baton for good measure. Although slaves could in theory aspire to legal aid, it remained extremely difficult for them to effectuate change, or even voice their opinions, by appealing to the justice tribunals and through avenues of their own choosing. Still, some kept on trying, hoping that a better world would one day materialize.

In legal interrogations and over extra-judicial conversations later retold in intricate judicial exchanges, some slaves revealed how they imagined the end of slavery. The evidence indicates that they envisioned a legal and political shift, largely devoid of images of violence and underpinned instead by a repertoire of familiar narratives circulated through rumor. The fables included the notion that justice, in the form of collective emancipation, would be delivered by a monarch. While a distant king or queen was seen as gracious and pious enough to grant emancipation to the slaves, the rumors asserted that masters and officers withheld freedom, partially coinciding with the old claim that the monarch was good but his or her ministers were bad. Slaves' culture of expectation, however, operated on the careful consideration

of many local variables. A master's death, quarrels among slaveholders, and protracted probate proceedings could be used as windows of opportunity to press for autonomy and even individual or collective emancipation. While slaves consciously articulated their hope that a life without slavery was possible and reachable through legal means, masters and officials rarely failed to insist that such a change would only come about through unchecked violence from slaves.

Yet from time to time, some individuals expressed less stereotyped ideas. A few even made insightful claims about the legal dimensions and power dynamics at play in the relationship binding masters and slaves together. Relatively free from censorship, the judicial forum served as a space where some lawyers and litigants critically scrutinized certain aspects of the current social order. Some expressed their dislike of slavery and their aspirations for legislative change, relying on an eclectic and somewhat unorthodox application of legal doctrines.