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# **Free and Not so Much: Black Slavery in the Spanish Colonial World**

*Taylor Ritz*

Imagine you are in an alternate world where you are working, slaving away, and the belief held by your authority is that the only way to keep you working is to physically torture you, so much so that you are almost to the point of death. You are even treated worse than the animals on the plantation. You are terrorized and extreme physical coercion is no foreign concept.

Imagine you are under control your whole life, and there is a slight hope and possibility that you can be offered freedom. You must offer yourself to a cause or try to purchase your freedom, and that freedom will be granted and guaranteed. However, your promisors have backed out on their word and, even though your future offspring might have a chance at freedom, you are still trapped under their power. Or, you might gain your freedom, but it is not exactly being “free” as there are laws on what you can and cannot do, say, wear, and where you can and cannot go.

Now, you are probably formulizing in your mind that the scenarios discussed previously pertain to black slavery in the United States. However, the instances described above would have actually taken place in colonial Latin America. Although started by the Portuguese and used widely in Brazil, the slave trade and the use of slaves were quickly adopted by the Spanish in the Western World.<sup>1</sup> Not much is known about the black slavery that happened in Latin America or how it was different from the common idea of slavery in the United States. This paper’s objective is to open the reader’s eyes and inform them about what black slavery was like in colonial Spanish America.

In theory, it was assumed that slavery in the southern United States had the same principles, and was the same, as Latin American black slavery. However, in practice, black slavery was a very unique and different concept in Latin America because physical labor, punishment, and mistreatment among slaves were torturous in Latin America, racial mixing of slaves was more tolerated in Latin America for the benefits of the white race, slavery was significant to the Spanish economy, and access to freedom for slaves was greater in Latin America but at a certain cost with certain restrictions.

The treatment and punishment of slaves in colonial Latin America was extremely severe, especially on the plantations. The slaves in Brazil lived in very difficult conditions. The homes the African slaves lived in were made of mud with thatched roofs. Inside, there was very little furniture or material for the slaves, and slave owners spent little to nothing on clothing for their slaves. Men usually wore only pants, no shirts, and children received very minimal clothing.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to horrible living environments, the African slaves were extremely malnourished and dehydrated. According to an account of a Portuguese physician, slaves were only allowed a certain amount of water, and that amount was very little. The water was also poor in quality because of the climate and conditions.<sup>3</sup> Along with not receiving enough water, slaves

were not fed properly. Food would be insufficient because slave owners believed that the less quality and quantity of food their slaves would receive, the better and healthier the workforce would be. Some food given to the slaves by the masters was even too coarse to digest, and when they tried to pass the food from their bodies as waste, it would be incredibly painful. Because of this, slaves would often try to work their own plot of land to provide food for themselves, even after putting in their work hours for their masters that day.<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising that slave owners mistreated slaves by physically abusing them. Slave owners felt like they needed to apply force in order to control their slaves as the African population kept flooding in.<sup>5</sup> Masters were free to apply any form of physical punishment that they wanted or saw fit. It was believed in that time period that in order to keep control and order on the plantation and to keep the slaves working, the slaves must be terrorized. The treatment of slaves was so terrible that one testimony from an eighteenth century writer stated, “The Portuguese peasant treated his oxen better than the Brazilian slaveholder treated his workers.”<sup>6</sup> One example of the use of physical violence was the stocks. The stocks were made from wood boards with holes cut out to allow the slaves to put their feet, hands, or even their heads through them. Stocks were designed either for the slave to stand up or lie down but, either way, it was painful and damaging to their bodies. Slaves would get thrown into the stocks for any misdemeanor, no matter how small or unimportant, and would have to remain there for up to two or three months at a time.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most popular forms of physical punishment was whipping the African slaves. Whippings were not just limited to certain slaves. No matter who committed a wrongdoing, that person was punished. Even pregnant female slaves were beaten. If a pregnant woman needed to be punished, she would lie face down on the ground, her belly in a dug out hole to protect the baby. Then, the slave owners would whip her back very severely.<sup>8</sup>

Whippings were also inflicted on African women after the birth of their children. If their infant was a stillborn or died immediately after birth, the mother would be whipped and, in some cases, even the black mid-wife would be punished. This was because infant survival was so important to the colonies’ slave population and future workforce. The slave masters claimed that the death of the infants would be a cause of “sorcery,” using science vocabulary that only white literate males could understand. And as science increased, the practice of midwifery became “untraditional” and the black midwives became a target for beatings if they continued their practices.<sup>9</sup>

Hanging of African slaves was also a common practice in colonial Spanish America. If a slave master thought that slaves were conspiring to rebel against slave-owners and employers, the “conspirators” would sometimes be dragged into town to be publically hanged or worse.<sup>10</sup> Maria Elena Martinez gives an example of a hanging situation that happened in colonial Mexico:

On the morning of May 2, 1612, a Wednesday, thirty-five blacks and mulattoes (twenty-eight men and seven women) were escorted by New Spain's authorities through the streets of Mexico City. They were being paraded on horseback, shamed before the residents of the viceregal capital, before all were summarily hanged in front of a large crowd in the central plaza

facing the church and palace. The bodies of some of the victims remained suspended in the air through the next day, which happened to be the celebration of the Holy Cross, the fiesta de Santa Cruz. The horrible spectacle did not end with the hangings. After consulting with a group of doctors about the fate of the bodies, Mexico City's royal tribunal, the Audiencia, ordered twenty-nine to be decapitated and the heads left to rot on top of the nine gallows (eight of which had been made for the occasion). The other six were quartered, and the parts were placed on pikes on the city's main streets and roads. Serving as potent symbols of royal power and of the marginal place occupied by people of African ancestry within the Spanish colonial order, the body parts were left on display until their stench became both unbearable and insalubrious for the residents of the capital.<sup>11</sup>

This incident shows just how violent the slave-owners were with their slaves. Even though the conspiracy never had a chance to happen, the slave masters didn't take any chances. It shows how strict they were with their laws and rules, and how they would do anything to keep their slaves in line.

Slaves on plantations in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, were forced to work excruciatingly long hours in horrible labor conditions. On the sugar plantations, slaves had to start "grinding" the sugar in the late afternoon and then work clear into the night, sometimes even until the next morning. The slaves would work in shifts but, more often than not, they would have to work double shifts. If slaves didn't work in the late afternoon, they would work in the very early hours of the morning. Men would wake up at five in the morning and work until six at night, sometimes with their babies strapped to their backs, and they would only receive two short breaks during their thirteen-hour shift. The slaves would become so tired that they would fall asleep anywhere and everywhere. Because they were so tired, they would often fall asleep on the job and get their arms caught in mills or cutters, having their flesh and bones torn apart. It wasn't uncommon to see slaves working in the fields with only one arm, one hand, or a few fingers. Other times, many slaves would be put into the hot rooms working with "stokers." This was punishment for trying to escape from the plantations, and the heat and conditions would become so unbearable that a slave might even throw himself into the furnace to end his life. The only time a slave could take a "long" break was if the machinery and equipment broke down, there were a lack of resources for fuel, the rain was too heavy to do their work, or holidays, which were usually Catholic holidays. Sometimes the slave owners would give the slaves Sundays off but, more often than not, the masters would make the slaves work, believing that time off caused drinking, dancing, and other inappropriate behaviors.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, because the labor demands were so high and excessive, the male slaves would even try to protest and rebel, run away, or refuse to work.<sup>13</sup>

Although the punishments and treatments of the slaves were severe and hostile, slaves were allowed to procreate with members of a different race. While this seems like a benefit to the Africans, there were a few different motives for why there was the allowance of racial blending. Whether a mulatto (mixed African and white), pardo (mixed African, white, and Amerindian), or zambo (mixed African and Amerindian), there was a high amount of racial mixing among

Africans and other races. Slave parents played a huge role in racial blending, especially when it came to their daughters. In Cuba, when finding a suitor for their daughter, slave parents thought of social ranks and mobility. Because being white was of extreme importance, African slaves would try to “whiten” their lineage by marrying off their daughters to a man with light complexion. They would often reject men that were slaves or had dark complexions. It would also help their chances of becoming free if they married someone who was white.<sup>14</sup>

Another motive for racial mixing among the slaves was the fact that it would “eliminate” the Amerindian and African races from Spanish America. Because white blood was considered “stronger” and purer (“limpieza de sangre”) than the blood of other races, the thought process was that if the black slaves bred with the white population, the racial mixes would lean towards the whiter end of the “spectrum”.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the high population of Africans, miscegenation increased radically in Latin America. Mixed races became even more populous than that of just whites, especially in places like Venezuela where there was vast countryside, haciendas, plantations, agriculture, and raising of animals, such as cattle.<sup>16</sup> Below is a chart showing the difference in population and the vast numbers of pardos. The number of pardos is 28.87 percent higher than whites alone, and 30.82 percent higher than the slave population, almost quadrupling the numbers of whites and slaves. This shows just how popular and common miscegenation was in colonial Latin America.

Table 1  
Population of the City of Coro, 1761

Whites	3,771	14.34
Indian Tributaries	768	2.91
Indians exempt from tax	7,143	27.15
Slaves	3,261	12.39
Pardos	11,366	43.21
Total	26,309	100%

*Source:* Javier Laviña and Michael Zeuske, “Failures of Atlantization: First Slavery in Venezuela and Nueva Granada,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 31, no. 3 (2008): 309.

Having African slaves in colonial Latin America was significant to the economy. Although the Spanish crown preferred encomiendas to slavery, the encomiendas brought in less revenue compared to alternate versions of labor, thus resulting in the slavery of Amerindians and, later, the importation of Africans.<sup>17</sup> According to Seed, the blacks in the economic status of society were divided into groups of “skilled and unskilled laborers on sugar plantations and in mines, and servants in the great houses of the major cities.”<sup>18</sup> Because of the repartimiento of 1514 (the development of sugar plantations and increase in productivity of gold mines), Amerindian workforce population quickly declined due to illness and diseases, being over worked, and the fact they ran away due to harsh treatments. In order to fulfill the work demands of the plantations and mines, the Spanish brought in the Africans to work. Stone stated that the

Jeronymites, those “who advocated the importation of thousands of African slaves,”<sup>19</sup> really got the ball rolling for the importation of slaves. In order to make the economic transition from gold to sugar smoother, and Amerindian to African, the Jeronymites asked the Spanish Crown for incentives. Spanish residents who set up plantations received economic incentives such as purchasing their slaves without paying taxes. This aided the economic transfer to sugar plantations, and by the 1530s led the Spanish to ship twenty-five thousand pounds of sugar to Spain.<sup>20</sup>

The African slaves also helped stimulate the economy by working on the indigo plantations. Indigo was expanding in the world-market, and in order for the Spanish to keep up with their indigo rivals, the Dutch and English, they needed a large slave population to make and distribute the dye. By 1664, records show that two thousand slaves were brought to Guatemala to work in the indigo mills. In 1776, 500 Africans were imported annually to work. By having large numbers of slaves, the Spanish were able to cultivate their indigo and sell it to Europe (the dye was used to make the uniforms for the European armies).<sup>21</sup>

Although treated harshly, slaves did have an opportunity to gain their freedom. During the colonial time period, there was quite an emphasis on freedom. Although one was either free or not free (there was no middle ground), there were still conflicts that freed slaves had to face.<sup>22</sup> From the beginning, freedom was offered to slaves, since it was part of the Christian practice. However, factors such as religion, culture, and economy affected whether or not a slave could gain their freedom.<sup>23</sup> And because of “sistema de castas,” or the caste system, Spanish lawmakers ranked the Africans near the bottom or at the very last rung of the social ladder. Most of the time there were many restrictions and laws enforced that affected their “freedom.”<sup>24</sup>

Some slaves were allowed to marry free peoples, which would benefit their offspring. When the enslaved peoples got married and had children, their children had a better chance of being free than the slaves themselves. Children would follow the status of their mothers, since she was the one physically giving birth and bringing them into the world. So if a mother was “free,” the union stated that her children would be declared free upon birth. However, it was different with the status of fathers. If a child was born to a free father but not a free mother, the child was not declared a free person. However, the father could have the option to buy freedom for his children if their relationship was actually acknowledged by the Spanish law, which often times it wasn't.<sup>25</sup> Whether or not the father or mother was a slave, marrying a free person would open up more possibilities and give their children more options. So, the slaves themselves might not gain freedom when marrying a free person but, looking at the big picture, they were doing it for their future children.<sup>26</sup>

Slave women were more likely to gain freedom than male slaves. According to Werner, “female slaves were much more likely to be freed than male slaves; this is particularly because of their ‘ties of affection’ to powerful slave owners.”<sup>27</sup> This means that, because the female slaves would have relations with the slave masters, they would have an inside track and connections along with a relationship status based on affections, and possibly children, therefore bettering their chance of being declared free. However, after they were granted freedom, their lives

wouldn't necessarily get better. Much of the time freed black women held demeaning positions, such as washerwomen or prostitutes.<sup>28</sup>

The African slaves who worked in urban areas were also more likely to gain their freedom than those who worked in rural areas on plantations. Kicza points out that in the cities, slaves had more "access to cash through their involvement in the market economy."<sup>29</sup> Also, because they worked so closely with their masters and the families, they developed close relationships, whether emotionally or sexually. These factors helped the slaves gain their freedom emotionally as well as financially.<sup>30</sup>

Often times, slaves would try to sue their masters for freedom. Slaves often sued by using "letters of freedom" (cartas de libertad). They also tried to find a new master, usually one that was more lenient towards letting their slave become free. It is still unknown why the court admitted these slave cases but, nevertheless, it was allowed. It was also never a surprise to the judges when slaves submitted their cases. Because of their lack of surprise, it is assumed that slaves actually had the rights in Spanish law to file these cases.<sup>31</sup>

Even if slaves did happen to gain their freedom, there were still many pressing issues that loomed over them in their days ahead. A couple examples were unfair laws and racism that were just as alive, if not more, in Latin America as they were in the United States, and they certainly did not vanish, even if the slaves were considered free.<sup>32</sup>

The freed slaves were put on the same level as Jews, New Christians, and non-Catholics. The Iberians and the legislators in metropolitan areas would attack freed slaves. One example of this is the law that forbade African women from wearing what they wanted. Freed slaves couldn't dress the same as the white elite women. Another example is the law that banned freed slaves from attending universities. They weren't allowed to get an education and, therefore, weren't allowed to obtain a professional occupation or higher governmental positions in colonial Latin America. When it came to militia services, which, by law, was an obligatory service for all freed people, the Africans were separated from the whites into their own regiments. Even the priests, who were supposed to be loving and accepting of all, wouldn't allow freed African slaves to join in their priesthoods.<sup>33</sup>

Freed slaves were also socially restricted by Spanish law. Many blacks would go to the urban area's bars and taverns. They would drink heavily and become extremely drunk, disorderly, and sometimes violent. Because of the heavy consumption of alcohol, officers restricted the number of blacks who could go downtown and who could go to public places. If an African did go to a social gathering, he/she would be publicly insulted with racist remarks coming from white bystanders. As the black population began to grow even more, the Spanish Crown emphasized the surveillance and supervision of "freed" blacks.<sup>34</sup>

Another problem that freed slaves had to face was the identifying of their families. When slaves were first brought to the West Indies, they were stripped of their culture and ancestry. It was difficult for them to assimilate into a new way of life with such old, long-lasting traditions. The law, missionaries, and slave owners then wouldn't recognize slave families or marriages as being legitimate if they didn't follow the tradition and ways of the Spanish law and church.

When a slave became free, they could then file to have their families recognized by the law if they had certain documents of proof, i.e., “plantation registries, slaveholder memoirs, and missionary accounts,” according to Morrison.<sup>35</sup> However, these would be hard to acquire (and often refused) and, therefore, African family units and relationships wouldn’t be recognized by the colonial government.<sup>36</sup>

African slavery in colonial Latin America was a very unique concept, from the miscegenation to the purchasing of freedom. If one were looking at slavery from a North American point of view, they might think of a plantation, slavery with no freedom, and no rights to any of the slaves. However, from the research previously described, we have to look at colonial Latin American slavery differently.

The physical conditions and treatments of the slaves was terrible: mud huts, no clothes, beatings, whippings, the stocks. The use of physical violence wasn’t just for punishing but to enforce authority and control, which was embedded in the minds of the Iberians.

Miscegenation was actually allowed. The breeding between races was done between all races: black, white, and Amerindian. However, the blacks would prefer to breed with the whites, as to gain freedom, and the whites would want to “lighten” the races by breeding with the blacks.

Slavery was essential to the expanding economy of the Spanish government in Latin America. That was the very reason (plus the declining population of Amerindians) why the Iberians brought them to the New World. Without the high population of black laborers, the economy wouldn’t have been as big as it was, even if it did rise and fall throughout the years.

Although a brutal practice, slavery did have many areas of independent action in urban areas and a few on plantations. However, once “freed,” the Africans still had to face many trials and hardships such as close monitoring by the law, rules that were unfair and prejudice against the blacks, lack of education, racism, and much more. They were considered free, but in reality, “not so much.”

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. R. Russell-Wood, "Iberian Expansion and the Issue of Black Slavery: Changing Portuguese Attitudes, 1440-1770," *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 1 (1978): 16-42

<sup>2</sup> Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2012), 145.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery, Freedom, and Abolition in Latin America and the Atlantic World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Jefferson and Paul Lokken, *Daily Life in Colonial Latin America* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 110.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Vinson, "Fading from Memory: Historiographical Reflections on the Afro-Mexican Presence," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 33, no. 1 (2005): 59.

<sup>6</sup> Ann Jefferson and Paul Lokken, *Daily Life in Colonial Latin America* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 110.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan Green and Sue Branford, *Faces of Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 110.

<sup>8</sup> Duncan Green and Sue Branford, *Faces of Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 110.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Vinson, Rachel Sarah O'Toole, and Sherwin K. Bryant, *Africans to Spanish America: Expanding the Diaspora* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 190.

<sup>10</sup> María Elena Martínez, "The Black Blood of New Spain: Limpieza de Sangre, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico." *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 479-481.

<sup>11</sup> María Elena Martínez, "The Black Blood of New Spain: Limpieza de Sangre, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico." *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004): 479.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Jefferson and Paul Lokken, *Daily Life in Colonial Latin America* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 105-106, 108-109

<sup>13</sup> Rachel Sarah O'Toole and Muse Project, *Bound Lives: Africans, Indians, and the Making of Race in Colonial Peru* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2012), 125.

<sup>14</sup> Kathryn A. Sloan, *Women's Roles in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Javier Laviña and Michael Zeuske, "Failures of Atlantization: First Slaveryes in Venezuela and Nueva Granada," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 31, no. 3 (2008): 308-309, 311.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy J. Yeager, "Encomienda or Slavery? The Spanish Crown's Choice of Labor Organization in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America," *The Journal of Economic History* 55, no. 4 (1995): 843-845.

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Seed, "Social Dimensions of Race: Mexico City, 1753," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 62, no. 4 (1982): 569.

<sup>19</sup> Erin Woodruff Stone. "America's First Slave Revolt: Indians and African Slaves in Española, 1500-1534." *Ethnohistory* 60, no. 2 (2013): 207.

<sup>20</sup> Erin Woodruff Stone, "American's First Slave Revolt: Indians and African Slaves in Española, 1500-1534," *Ethnohistory* 60, no. 2 (2013): 204-207.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Fiehrer, "Slaves and freedmen in colonial Central America: rediscovering a forgotten black past," *Journal of Negro History* 64, no.1 (1979): 40-41.

<sup>22</sup> Norman E. Whitten, Jr., "Emerald Freedom: 'With Pride in the Face of the Sun,'" *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, 3, no. 1 (2005): 2-3.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart B. Schwartz, "Black Latin America: Legacies of Slavery, Race, and African Culture," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2002): 429-433.

<sup>24</sup> Melissa Fullmer, Noelle Anne Morrisette, and Richard M. Juang, *African and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History: a Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 751.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Y. Morrison, "Creating an Alternative Kinship: Slavery, Freedom, and Nineteenth-Century Afro-Cuban 'Hijos Naturales,'" *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 1 (2007): 57-80.

<sup>26</sup> Ann Jefferson and Paul Lokken, *Daily Life in Colonial Latin America* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 20.

<sup>27</sup> Amy Werner, "The Practicality of Slavery in Latin America," *Constructing the Past* 14, no. 1 (2013): 51.

<sup>28</sup> James H. Sweet, "The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 164.

<sup>29</sup> John E. Kicza, "Patterns in Early Spanish Overseas Expansion," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1992): 232.

<sup>30</sup> John E. Kicza, "Patterns in Early Spanish Overseas Expansion," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1992): 232.

<sup>31</sup> Bianca Premo, "An Equity Against the Law: Slave Rights and Creole Jurisprudence in Spanish America," *Slavery & Abolition* 32, no. 4 (2011): 499.

<sup>32</sup> Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 217-219.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 217-219.

<sup>34</sup> James H. Sweet, "The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 165.

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<sup>35</sup> Karen Y. Morrison, “Creating an Alternative Kinship: Slavery, Freedom, and Nineteenth-Century Afro-Cuban ‘Hijos Naturales,’” *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 1 (2007): 58.

<sup>36</sup> Karen Y. Morrison, “Creating an Alternative Kinship: Slavery, Freedom, and Nineteenth-Century Afro-Cuban ‘Hijos Naturales,’” *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 1 (2007): 57-58.

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