From Shipmates to Soldiers

Emerging Black Identities in the Río de la Plata

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University of New Mexico Press ✣ Albuquerque

Printed in the United States of America
20 19 18 17 16 15 1 2 3 4 5 6

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Borucki, Alex.
From shipmates to soldiers : emerging Black identities in the Río de la Plata / Alex Borucki.
pages cm. — (Diálogos series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8263-5180-7 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-8263-5179-1 (electronic)
1. Blacks—Race identity—Uruguay. 2. Blacks—Río de la Plata Region (Argentina and Uruguay)—Social networks. 3. Blacks—Río de la Plata Region (Argentina and Uruguay)—History. 4. Slavery—Río de la Plata Region (Argentina and Uruguay)—History. 5. Río de la Plata (Argentina and Uruguay)—Social conditions—19th century. 6. Slavery—Uruguay—History. 7. Uruguay—Social conditions—19th century. I. Title.
F2799.N3B68 2015
305.8960163'6809034—dc23
2015001992

Cover illustration: Above: Juan Manuel Besnes e Irigoyen (1789–1865), *Batallón de Infantería al mando del S. Coronel Lavandera*, Durazno, Uruguay, 1839. Source: Biblioteca Nacional, Colección Besnes e Irigoyen. Album Viaje a la Villa de Durazno, Lámina 11. Courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional, Uruguay.
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Designed by Lila Sanchez
Composed in Minion Pro 10.25/13.5
Display type is Minion Pro

INTRODUCTION

Slavery, War, and Abolition in the Río de la Plata

THE RÍO DE LA PLATA REGION—WHAT IS TODAY ARGENTINA, Uruguay, and Paraguay—has a long but neglected history of slave trading and slavery. The River Plate, as the English called it, is in fact an estuary that forms the big dent in South America's Atlantic coast between Argentina and Uruguay. Although the Spanish named this estuary after the belief in a mythical mountain range of silver located upriver, the "Silver River" region lacked precious metals. Instead, it was Atlantic commerce on the River Plate, some of it illegal, that carried silver mined in the faraway Andes to Spain, Portuguese Brazil, the Netherlands, Britain, France, and elsewhere. Among all trades, it was the slave traffic that commanded the highest volume of silver exports and gave rise to complex Euro-American merchant networks. In 1585, just five years after the permanent foundation of Buenos Aires, its *cabildo*, or town council, requested permission from the Spanish Crown to introduce enslaved Africans to Peru—the core of Spanish South America. In response, Portuguese slave traders disembarked nearly 45,000 slaves along the River Plate between 1587 and 1640, when Portugal broke from Spain. Slaves constituted two-thirds of the value of all imports entering Buenos Aires before 1645.[1] Thereafter, the city became a hub for Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French traders attracted by silver. This book opens in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, when the Spanish crown created a vast new administrative district centered on Buenos Aires in 1776, just as the

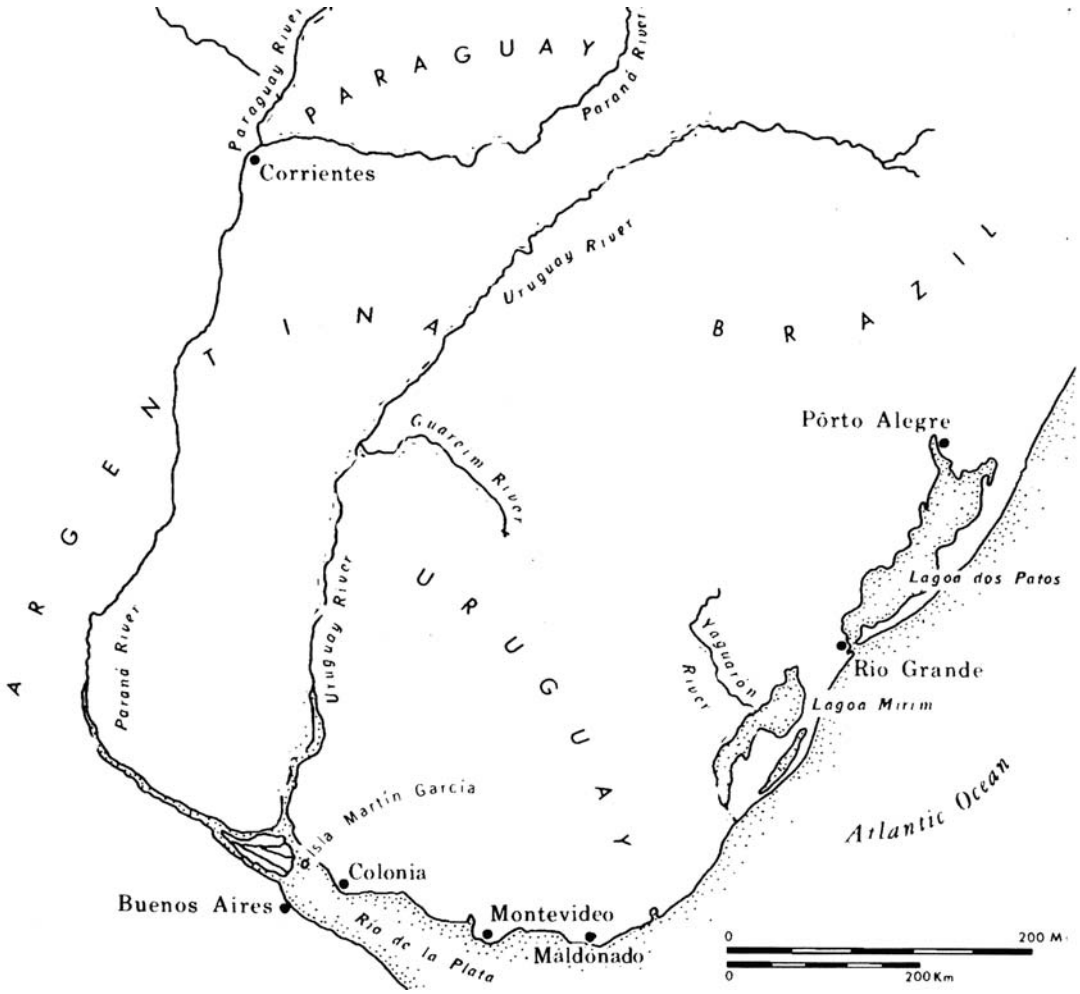
River Plate slave trade began to rise again. Nearly 70,000 captives arrived from both Brazil and Africa between 1777 and 1812, when the revolutionary government of Buenos Aires forbade the slave trade. The traffic continued, sporadically, despite British and local efforts to suppress it. The last transatlantic slave voyage direct from Angola arrived in Montevideo, the capital of what is today Uruguay, in 1835, closing a 250-year history. Direct trade with West Central Africa (Angola and the mouth of the Congo River) was not the whole story: the Río de la Plata depended heavily on Rio de Janeiro and Salvador da Bahia for the supply of slaves, a connection with important political, social, and cultural ramifications.

Colonial Río de la Plata was a borderland, in many senses, but in the eighteenth century it transitioned from backwater to commercial center, connecting Spanish colonies from the Atlantic to the Pacific. First Buenos Aires and then Montevideo were the southernmost Spanish ports in the Atlantic, located in lands claimed by both the Spanish and Portuguese empires. In 1680 the Portuguese founded Colônia do Sacramento (hereafter Colonia) across the River Plate from Buenos Aires, setting the stage for future Iberian imperial rivalries. The Río de la Plata was also a region of Amerindian frontiers, where semisedentary indigenous societies adopted European horses and weaponry in order to resist Spanish encroachment. Effective Spanish jurisdiction stretched just a few miles south from Buenos Aires, but even within the extensive territories claimed by the Spanish between Buenos Aires and Potosí, in the Andes of present-day Bolivia, large areas remained under Amerindian control down to the era of independence. The Guaraní missions, headed by the Jesuit order up until 1767 on the shores of the Paraná and Uruguay Rivers north from Buenos Aires, also functioned as a buffer between Spanish and Portuguese claims, even as they were under Spanish jurisdiction. In addition, the Río de la Plata was a maritime frontier, where an invading army could disembark and march toward Upper Peru, the main silver-producing region of the seventeenth century. This is why the Río de la Plata proved strategic for the Spanish Crown. Military threats from France, Portugal, and Great Britain were common, and they became real during British invasions of 1806–1807.

Unlike Brazil and the Caribbean islands, the Río de la Plata had no slave-based export sector, no tropical plantation society. These temperate lands were characterized by big rivers and thin streams, where shoreline forests led to ample, green grasslands that served as ideal pastures for European cattle. Land was plentiful, but labor was dear. In this context, enslaved

Africans were not only the most important object of trade from Buenos Aires to the hinterland stretching north all the way to Lima but also the workers who fed the city of Buenos Aires and who performed most urban crafts, from carpentry to tailoring, and from shoemaking to baking. Slaves also produced the regional export commodity of greatest value: cattle hides.

Even though the Río de la Plata was not a plantation society, large urban black communities and social life typical of the most important slave trading ports in the Americas developed here during the late eighteenth century. *From Shipmates to Soldiers* analyzes how Africans and their descendants living in Montevideo and Buenos Aires created social identities on the basis of their common experiences in the era of Atlantic slaving



Map 1 The Río de la Plata by 1830. Note: Only some cities, towns, and rivers are marked. The names of countries are placed for orientation, but no national limits are drawn.

and emancipation, focusing on the processual formation of social identities emerging from shared experiences. These ranged from shipmate ties on late eighteenth-century slave vessels to service as soldiers in the independence-era black battalions of the following century. Analysis of any one field of experience produces only partial knowledge of identities. This study shows how multiple arenas of experience shaped individual lives and collective identities. Social identities emerged from the interplay of external factors and self-understandings.[2]

To study identity formation, I look at experiences that bound Africans and their descendants to each other and to the larger society in which they found themselves. The slave ships and holding barracks, black Catholic confraternities, African-based associations, and black battalions were not isolated from each other. Mapping the different arenas of social experience and studying how individuals operated across them leads us to build a more complete and more complex interpretation of black identity formation. These fields of experience shaped the social fabric upon which Africans and their descendants embroidered collective identities and interacted with the dominant sectors of society. From these social networks, Africans and their descendants pushed against the limits of domination within the Spanish colonial regime. Shared experiences not only bound black communities together by providing individuals with a sense of belonging but also tied them to the larger colonial society and thereafter to emerging nations such as the Republic of Uruguay. Rather than ascertaining whether social identities were more oriented toward African origins or New World developments, this study seeks to connect the various fields of experience in which Africans and their descendants participated and to assess how these experiences led them to build social identities.

From Shipmates to Soldiers shows both enslaved and free Africans and their descendants not only moving across the Atlantic but also within the Americas, as their lives connected Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires, and it points out the translocal connections of enslaved and free black communities across imperial boundaries, as this movement and interconnection profoundly shaped local community contours and enabled the emergence of cosmopolitan black leaders in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Canonical studies of the slave experience in the United States have tended to focus on plantation societies where black identities emerged from shared religious practices, family ties, folk culture, and other types of community interaction—more commonly in the rural south than in the urban north.

These works depict black identities as coming from a single location and downplay the translocal links of black populations.[3] In places such as New Orleans, Havana, and Rio de Janeiro, however, Africans and their descendants engaged in cultural—albeit unequal—dialogues with peoples of European and, to a lesser extent, Amerindian origins. The anthropologist Lorand Matory asserts that black identities emerged *because of* these Atlantic dialogues rather than *in spite of* the cultural interactions of Africans with other groups.[4] In the nineteenth century, black populations living in the Atlantic littoral produced the cultural amalgam from which emerged key features of national identities in the United States, the Caribbean, Brazil, and the Río de la Plata.[5]

The Slave Trade, Slavery, and Population Growth

Despite a long history of slavery and slave trading, Buenos Aires and Montevideo have remained in the shadows of recent Atlantic world scholarship on these subjects. Buenos Aires, established by the Spanish temporarily in 1536 and then permanently in 1580, was the principal city of the Río de la Plata.[6] Founded on top of a small coastal cliff looking at the River Plate, Buenos Aires was close to both the delta of the Paraná River, where this river joins the Río de la Plata, and the Matanza Creek (the southern city limit of today's Buenos Aires, aka Riachuelo). The site offered relatively secure disembarkation. From this cliff, Buenos Aires developed in the standard Spanish colonial grid pattern, commanding the grassland located westward. But this port had a shallow anchorage and could offer little protection for large, ocean-going vessels, particularly in the eighteenth century, when these grew massive. Across the estuary from Buenos Aires, the Portuguese town of Colonia served as a competitive but also complementary port from 1680 to 1777. From here goods and slaves were smuggled into Buenos Aires until the Spanish expelled the Portuguese in the latter year. In the interim, the Spanish founded Montevideo (1726) to reassert their claims on the northern shore of the River Plate. Located in the best natural bay in the region for ocean-going vessels, this town completed the system of ports in the Río de la Plata. Montevideo developed as a walled town located on a peninsula, just south of the large bay of Montevideo. The bay itself was guarded by a fortress located on a hill (*cerro*) to its northwest; this fortress was on the opposite side of the bay from the peninsula where the town of Montevideo was built. Although the

Portuguese were officially ousted from Colonia in 1777, some of Colonia's merchants moved their commercial operations to Spanish Montevideo, where they merged with local elites and reestablished Luso-Spanish trading networks.[7] These Luso-Spanish networks made Montevideo a hub of slave trading during the late eighteenth century.

The significance of slave trading for early Buenos Aires remains barely known despite some venerable scholarship. A commercial venture organized by the Bishop of Tucumán, an inland town located in today's Argentina, brought the first registered slaves to Buenos Aires in 1587 from Brazil.[8] From then until Portuguese independence from Spain in 1640, Portuguese slave traders disembarked nearly 45,000 enslaved Africans in Buenos Aires.[9] Most of these captives were brought illegally, without royal license. They arrived as either "legalized contraband," in which case the slave traders paid a pardon (*indulto*) to colonial authorities, or as entirely unregistered imports. As the historian Zakarías Moutoukias notes, without trade Buenos Aires lacked the very basic means of subsistence, even as metropolitan authorities tried to curtail commerce. Colonial authorities were all but forced to tax illegal trade through indultos to fund the local treasury. Without these fines, they would have been all but broke. On the other side, merchants used royal provisioning licenses meant to supply Buenos Aires with food as legal cover to smuggle slaves. Without the possibility of trading slaves for silver from the deep interior, these traders would not have provided the basic merchandise needed by the early colonists under royal orders. When paying the indultos, merchants contributed to the local administration. Thus the contraband slave trade materially supported colonial rule. But contraband trade also enabled the export of silver outside of the Spanish realms, a constant concern for metropolitan authorities and merchant guilds.

Mostly non-Spanish European merchants operated as middlemen in the slave trade to Spanish America before the late eighteenth century. Apart from dividing the New World between Spain and Portugal, the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) forbade the Spanish to engage directly in trade and exploration in sub-Saharan Africa, which the treaty left to the Portuguese. While the Spanish engaged in some direct slave trading in the earliest period of colonization in the Americas, only in the late eighteenth century did Hispanic merchants both in Spain and the Americas create a steady and direct-to-Africa Spanish slave trade.

Seventeenth-century Buenos Aires never surpassed 10,000 inhabitants, so most slaves entering this port were sold to the interior of what is today

Argentina (Tucumán, Córdoba, Salta), where local economies were set up to sell agricultural products, including cattle and mules as well as textiles, to the silver-producing region of Potosí.[10] As in other parts of Spanish America, the Jesuit order was the largest corporate owner of slaves. The Jesuits owned ranches with cattle, sheep, and mules in Córdoba to generate revenue to support their university in this city. Many Africans were of course also sold to the vineyards, ranches, and mining camps of Greater Peru, where they could be exchanged for silver. Buenos Aires performed the strategic role of connecting local, interior economies oriented toward Potosí with the Atlantic. The ability of Buenos Aires merchants to extract silver from the South American interior via interregional trade networks attracted Dutch, English, and French slave traders after the Portuguese secession in 1640. In the following century, slave trading connected this region to various commercial endeavors, including the French Compagnie de Guinée, and the English South Sea Company. A few Spanish merchants and many Portuguese smugglers from Colonia also brought slaves to Buenos Aires between 1680 and 1777.

From a second-tier town, Buenos Aires grew exponentially throughout the eighteenth century to become one of the two biggest cities in Spanish South America, comparable to the viceregal capital of Lima. By 1744, nearly 12,000 people lived in Buenos Aires. Scholars disagree sharply in their reading of sources, but by 1810 the city's population ranged from 43,000 to 76,000 inhabitants.[11] Buenos Aires was certainly the fastest-growing city in Spanish America, outpacing Mexico City and Lima. Built on trade, eighteenth-century Buenos Aires added military and bureaucratic functions, all of which pushed salaries up, attracting more migrants. Rapid population growth resulted from the combined effects of Spanish immigration, particularly from northern Spain, regional migration from Paraguay and the provinces of what is today Argentina, and the transatlantic slave trade. The creation of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata in 1776, which took the territory of present-day Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, and Uruguay away from the Viceroyalty of Peru, reinforced this trend. Buenos Aires emerged as a major Atlantic seaport and viceregal capital, commanding a vast and wealthy hinterland.

Across the River Plate, permanent European settlements in the territory of what is today Uruguay were established very late in comparison to the rest of Latin America. During most of the seventeenth century, the Banda Norte or Banda Oriental (known as Uruguay only after independence) was a

transient place marked by intermittent European occupation, tense Spanish-Amerindian interactions, and periodic military interest from Buenos Aires even though no permanent European settlement existed on the ground before the 1680 founding of Portuguese Colonia. In the late colonial era, the territory of what is today Uruguay was under the overlapping and sometimes competing jurisdictions of Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and the Guaraní missions. Portuguese jurisdiction over Colonia lasted from 1680 to 1777, with a few interruptions. Founded in 1726, Montevideo only began to experience population growth comparable to that of Buenos Aires in the last thirty years before 1810. About 6,000 people inhabited Montevideo by 1780, but by 1810 the city boasted a population of nearly 20,000.[12] Montevideo initially grew as the official deepwater port serving Buenos Aires. It was also the Spanish navy's base in the South Atlantic. Although the crown declared Montevideo the only authorized entry point for slaves to the Río de la Plata in 1791, a portion of the late colonial slave trade flowed directly to Buenos Aires. This is why data on slave arrivals for Buenos Aires and Montevideo are inseparable from each other. Rather than attempting to parse the volume of slave arrivals for "Argentina" vs. "Uruguay," it is wiser to encompass the entire Río de la Plata region.

In both Buenos Aires and Montevideo, Africans and their descendants, most of them enslaved, were the fastest-growing sector of the population in the eighteenth century. In the Río de la Plata, slaves were employed in the urban economy as domestic servants and artisans, as laborers on farms producing wheat, vegetables, and cattle that supplied the cities, and in the production of hides for Atlantic commerce. Slaves had been the main laborers of the Jesuit haciendas in Córdoba and the Argentine Northwest before this order's expulsion in 1767.[13] Afterward, royal officials auctioned the Jesuits' slaves and rural properties to private individuals. Slaves had also been prominent in rural production and urban crafts in distant parts of the viceroyalty, such as La Rioja and Santa Fe.[14] In San Isidro, the main wheat-producing region supplying Buenos Aires, slaves outnumbered free workers among the labor force by 1815.[15] In contrast to most plantation societies, slaves worked alongside wage and family laborers on the rural estates of the late colonial Río de la Plata.[16] The simple technology of cattle ranching and the open land of the frontier made labor the principal expenditure for entrepreneurs. On cattle ranches, slaves constituted a source of continuous labor in contrast to the shifting and seasonal availability of free workers. Slaves performed year-round tasks while free workers performed seasonal labor.

Hides, the main but not the only product of the ranches of the Río de la Plata were, with silver, the most important means of payment for slaves in the late eighteenth century. Leather was used throughout the Atlantic world at the end of the eighteenth century much as plastic and rubber products are used today. Markets in the Northern Hemisphere demanded leather goods for a wide range of industrial and domestic purposes.[17] The Río de la Plata also diversified its agricultural output during the viceregal period to supply consumers in places as far away as Lima, Rio de Janeiro, Boston, and Hamburg. The burgeoning late eighteenth-century slave trade was an essential ingredient of this rapid expansion of production, trade, and population in the Río de la Plata.

Trade and War during the Age of Revolutions

This book spans a major watershed in Latin American history, beginning with Spain's so-called Bourbon reforms in the second half of the eighteenth century and ending with the emergence of new nation-states after the Wars of Independence in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Bourbon kings of Spain, particularly Charles III, enacted a set of policies to increase royal revenue from the colonies and improve their defenses. These reforms increased both the slave trade and slavery in the Río de la Plata as well as the recruitment of free blacks in the colonial militias of Montevideo and Buenos Aires.

To better administer and defend the vast borderland with Brazil, and to reduce the cost of transporting silver from Upper Peru, the crown created the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata in 1776.[18] The inflow of Upper Peruvian silver to the new viceregal capital at Buenos Aires provided the means for defense and administrative maintenance of the greater Río de la Plata district.[19] All viceroys of the Río de la Plata were military men whose overall policy of militarization was exemplified by the 1777 expulsion of the Portuguese from Colonia.

Military policies were costly. Colonial expenditures went up alongside royal concerns about the economic viability of the colonies. The metropolitan desire to make the colonies more financially viable was one of the main impulses behind the Bourbon reforms. In the Río de la Plata, commerce expanded with the introduction of measures allowing freer trade, first with other Spanish colonies (1778), then with foreign colonies (1795), and finally

with neutral powers during wartime (1797). The first edict authorized direct trade between the Río de la Plata and Spain and also reinforced the position of Buenos Aires as the main commercial link between the Andes and the Atlantic; the second edict legalized commerce between the Río de la Plata and Brazil; the third encouraged trade with the US merchant fleet after the British navy blockaded Spain.[20] All these actions paved the way for the rise of the slave trade, since they favored slave-trading activities within the Spanish domain, with Brazil, and with US slave traders. Additional measures established taxation, shipping, and commercial policies to encourage direct Spanish engagement in the slave trade in order to expand colonial agriculture and commerce.[21] In the 1790s local traders built a merchant fleet by purchasing ships in Brazil and the United States, establishing a maritime insurance company, and founding a nautical school.[22] The growth of late colonial Montevideo came to an end as the Wars of Independence unfolded from 1810 to 1830, when most of the port's merchant community disintegrated and traveling armies from Buenos Aires, the Banda Oriental, and Brazil consumed large numbers of cattle.

In its late eighteenth-century heyday, the growing slave trade transformed the Río de la Plata as it provided this region with direct links to Africa. When the Spanish Crown threw open the slave trade to all participants first in 1789 and then again in 1791, the Río de la Plata first drew on inter-American slave trade networks, maintained mostly by Luso-Brazilian slave traders based, for example, in Rio de Janeiro, then launched their own transatlantic slave voyages. As a result, River Plate traffickers received captives from many different African regions—an unusual pattern in the broader context of Atlantic slaving.

Freedom and Gender

In addition to this swift rise in demand for slave labor, slave manumission and slave flight reduced supply, and this, too, accounts for the increasing number of slave arrivals. Fugitive slaves and negative ratios of slave reproduction were pervasive in the Río de la Plata.[23] In Buenos Aires, slaves could flee southward to the Indian frontier, whereas in Montevideo they could join parties of bandits operating in the countryside and in the borderlands. In both cases, they apparently had the option of starting a new life as wage earners in another town under the protection of local householders. Slaves also

became acquainted with the Spanish legal procedures of manumission and forced sale, which most commonly favored women and small children. Almost 60 percent of manumissions legally registered in viceregal Buenos Aires benefited women.[24] Women's litigation for freedom in turn reinforced the gender imbalance of the slave population, which was already skewed by the high ratio of men brought by transatlantic slavers. All this reduced the possibilities of slave reproduction.

The historians Arturo Bentancur and Fernando Aparicio found that gendered patterns of slave manumission in Montevideo were similar to those found in other parts of the Luso-Hispanic world.[25] Bentancur and Aparicio list 741 manumissions in Montevideo between 1790 and 1820. Masters granted almost half of manumissions; slaves purchased the other half.[26] Even when they granted manumission, almost half of all masters asked slaves to perform additional services. They were loath to give up access to a former slave's labor.[27] Masters unconditionally granted freedom only in 29.5 percent of all cases, and while masters granted manumission almost equally to enslaved men and women, enslaved women purchased their freedom twice as often as men did (even when, by 1812, men and women comprised a similar share of the slave population).[28] The common practice of enslaved women hiring themselves out on feast days and Sundays generated the money to purchase freedom, while slave families' strategies for achieving freedom tended to pool resources to free the female spouse first. Bentancur and Aparicio add that the slave herself paid for manumission in 66 percent of all cases of purchased freedom. Enslaved women represented almost 60 percent of those who were freed according to notary documents, a pattern similar to that found in other colonial Latin American cities. At the other end of the spectrum of slavery and freedom, notary records report that in Montevideo, from 1790 to 1820, twenty-six slaves were owned by women of African ancestry compared to only nine by men of the same origin, a pattern that reveals the relative wealth of a very small minority of free black women.[29]

Although women of African ancestry were quite active in the urban economy and—in comparison to men—more successful in purchasing freedom, this book delves more deeply into the lives of men, whose actions and movements are generally better documented. While chapter 2 focuses on shipmate networks emerging from the slave trade, we lack information on ties between women because the notaries producing the evidence—marriage files—only requested testimonies about the status of grooms, not

brides, in Montevideo. Why? Because men were seen as more prone to commit bigamy than women. Leadership roles were also skewed in favor of men, at least in the official sense. Given that patriarchy as well as Catholicism set the boundaries for both the larger colonial society and local identities in colonial Latin America, these features ensured that in most cases men of African ancestry, rather than women, led black communities. Spanish gender constructions barred women as institutional intermediaries. Thus men of African ancestry represented black communities in negotiations with the dominant sectors of society. This did not thwart women from becoming the main authority in three African-based associations in Montevideo of the 1830s or in Buenos Aires in the 1860s, but life-course analysis of leaders of black confraternities yields good data only on men, even though women participated in these groups.[30] The free black colonial militias and black battalions of the revolution were mostly male worlds as well, although this did not prevent women from benefiting from family ties with black soldiers. Chapter 6 explores the life of a black writer, again a man rather than a woman, because he left a comprehensive record. We may wonder what a study focused mostly on the life experiences of men of African ancestry suggests about the social networks and identities of black women. While some fields of social interaction such as colonial militias and national battalions were arenas for men, the most enduring black associations, confraternities and what were known as African "nations," also had many women members.

While this book focuses on social networks and identities of people of African ancestry living in cities, this is not a study of urban slavery. The historian Mariana Dantas reveals that the density of black social life in cities pushed the limits of slavery in favor of those who sought freedom in widely separated Baltimore (Maryland) and Sabará (Minas Gerais).[31] Rather than the oft-mentioned spatial permeability of urban settings, Dantas notes that specific actions by free blacks and slaves redefined the terms of slavery in cities. Her analysis of material life provides the skeleton of an interpretation of urban black communities, but not the flesh and nervous system. The meanings of social relations reside in the role of culture within social networks—the very cultural activities that led slaves and freedmen to form black social identities in urban settings. In focusing on how social relationships led to the formation of social identities, this book aims to connect experiences with meanings for both slaves and free blacks.

Black Confraternities and African "Nations"

Numerous urban black associations, mostly led by free rather than enslaved Africans, played a central role in the formation of slave culture and social identities throughout colonial Latin America. Free Africans and Afrodescendants petitioned Catholic Church authorities in order to form a confraternity, which allowed them to collect money in order to adorn the altar of a saint (e.g., St. Benedict of Palermo), as well as to organize its annual procession. Thus the official function of these confraternities was Catholic devotion. But their central, everyday function was to fund wakes and funerals for their members. Both for African religions and for Catholicism (and for Catholicism in Africa as practiced by Africans), the most important rituals were destined to ease the passage from life to death. In the case of Africans in the Americas, such passage also meant the oft-mentioned return to their homelands.[32] In the late eighteenth century, African-based associations disconnected with the church emerged in the Río de la Plata (first called *tambos* and then *candombes*, and generically throughout the period *naciones*, or African "nations").[33] The first denomination for African meetings in the Río de la Plata was *tambos*: a funeral ritual from Portuguese Angola, as wakes and funerals were probably the first occasions for Africans to congregate in a tightly organized form in the Río de la Plata.[34] They also held weekly meetings for drumming and dancing, ritual acts whose religious meaning is missing from surviving sources. While black Catholic confraternities were the first stable associations of Africans in the Río de la Plata, African "nations" proliferated in the nineteenth-century urban public space.

Of course, labor rather than religious ritual determined the rhythm of everyday life for slaves, as well as the limits of their physical circulation within the city. However, this book traces the connections that free blacks and slaves willingly made with each other. Labor in a specific craft did provide a potential field of shared experiences for free blacks and slaves as they joined artisan guilds, for instance, those of tailors. While guilds existed in vicegeral capitals, they did not emerge in Montevideo partly because this city developed only in the late colonial period.[35] Cross-checking the data on black guild leaders in Buenos Aires with records of black confraternities and militias might reveal an additional layer of social networking. However, guilds provided no lasting bond across generations for free blacks and slaves in this region. In fact, these associations lost their institutional basis after independence. While African "nations," black brotherhoods, and military

service generated opportunities to envision "otherness" and "belonging" for both their members and for the larger society throughout the period of this study, an attempt to establish a guild of black shoemakers in late colonial Buenos Aires is the only example we have of a guild-centered social space for people of African ancestry. Workshops provided everyday contact and cohabitation for laborers, but in the words of the historian Lyman Johnson, certain "superficial intimacy" was prevalent in their interactions.[36] It was in confraternities and African "nations" that free blacks and slaves chose to participate and invest their time outside of labor.

Free Black Militias

Late colonial Buenos Aires and Montevideo probably had an equal share of whites (both European and locally born) on the one hand, and a combination of people of African and, to a lesser extent, Amerindian ancestry on the other. In this context, blackness rapidly became the most important marker of otherness for colonial elites.[37] Although free people of color were a minority in the Río de la Plata compared to those enslaved, they performed a leading role in founding black confraternities in both Buenos Aires and Montevideo, as well as in forming black militias, another type of institution from which black leaders emerged in colonial times.

In wartime, men in Spanish American cities formed militias (distinct from the regular Spanish army) to defend against internal threats such as Amerindian revolts and external menaces such as pirates and foreign navies. These militias were formed according to origin, *calidad* (or "quality," a term discussed below), and profession. For instance, there were militias made up of Aragonese men, of merchants, and of free black men. Slaves were excluded. Free blacks formed militias in Buenos Aires in the aftermath of the Seven Years War (1756–1763) and during the conquest of Colonia (1777) in the Río de la Plata. Free black men from Buenos Aires were central to the foundation of Montevideo's first black militia in 1780. This book shows that militia membership reinforced preexisting patterns of black leadership and social networks in both cities. Thus the militia was only one of many arenas of experience helping to define black identities in the colonial era.

In Spanish America, the Bourbon reforms and later Wars of Independence encouraged the mass recruitment of people of African ancestry.[38] In theory, militia membership gave free blacks a better social standing than the

poor, the enslaved, and Amerindians, given that the crown conferred benefits on black militiamen, such as tax exemptions, fixed salaries, honors, and the military *fuero*—a separate justice system to which only the military had access. In practice, black militiamen received almost none of the above for their service in Montevideo. Black officers were respected by neither the larger Spanish society nor by the professional military. The only respect they could count on came from black militiamen. Thus it was leadership within black communities that encouraged free black men to join the ranks of officers.

The proliferation of militia units after the Seven Years War provided an opportunity for leadership to free blacks born in the Río de la Plata region. This book shows that all identifiable captains of black militias in Montevideo were born in neighboring Buenos Aires. They emerged as captains because of their knowledge of the Spanish colonial world and (in select cases) their reading and writing skills. Whereas free black captains were born in the region, the majority of commissioned and noncommissioned officers of color were free Africans who were already heading black confraternities. When choosing noncommissioned officers, black captains saw participation in confraternities as an index of black leadership. Along a continuum of black organizations ranging from the free black militias to predominantly slave African "nations," black brotherhoods provided a middle ground where African-born and American-born slaves and freedmen mingled. All this social interaction shaped black social identities, as black leadership roles consistently overlapped in confraternities, African "nations," and armed black units before and after independence.[39]

While the historians George Reid Andrews and Gabriel di Meglio recognize the existence of black militias in viceregal Buenos Aires, they argue that these units were active only after 1801. They find the British invasions (1806–1807) and wars following the Revolution of 1810 as the first meaningful acts of military participation by people of African ancestry.[40] By contrast, this study not only spells out the social significance of early black militias in Buenos Aires, it traces their history all the way back to the 1770s. In 1778, right after the Spanish conquest of Colonia, the free black Captain Manuel Valladares traveled from Buenos Aires to Madrid to win recognition from the Spanish crown for his fellow black militiamen. Six years later another free black leader, Bentura Patrón, sailed to Cádiz to seek the rank of colonel in order to head all black militias in Buenos Aires. Some ordinary black recruits no doubt found military service a burden, but black officers and noncommissioned officers most likely looked upon their participation as a source of potential benefits.

National Armies, Abolition, and the Day of Kings

Military allegiances during the period covered by this book were nothing if not complex, especially in the region that became Uruguay. Colonial militia service overlapped with slave enrollment during the Wars of Independence all over the Río de la Plata, and cross-river struggles for recruits and allies followed as factions multiplied. Indeed, few places in Latin America endured such a complex process of state formation as Uruguay, given the engagement of local, regional, and imperial interests. When the revolution began in Buenos Aires in 1810, most Montevideo elites remained royalist. A Banda Oriental criollo who belonged to traditional families and had served in the Spanish army, José Artigas, became the local leader loyal to Buenos Aires who fought against the royalists.[41] He gathered support from diverse social groups such as landowners, the rural poor, and local Amerindians. After the final defeat of Montevideo's royalists in 1814, war broke out between the centralist rulers of Buenos Aires and the federalist forces of Artigas. By March 1815, the entire Banda Oriental was under the rule of Artigas, who became head of an unstable alliance with the provinces of Entre Ríos, Corrientes, Santa Fe, Córdoba, and Misiones. The Liga de los Pueblos Libres (League of the Free Peoples) as this alliance of provinces was known, was an alternative political organization for those opposed to centralization as demanded by Buenos Aires. To complicate this scenario even further, in 1811 Portuguese troops from Brazil had invaded the Banda Oriental to support the Spanish royalists but then moved back to Rio Grande do Sul, the Portuguese captaincy bordering the Spanish Banda Oriental, after reaching a peace agreement with the revolutionary government of Buenos Aires. A second Portuguese invasion took place in 1816, but this time Artigas relied solely on the forces of the Banda Oriental to repel the attack, as opposed to 1811, when Buenos Aires and the other provinces were still allies of Artigas. The Portuguese entered Montevideo early in 1817, and they continued fighting Artigas in the countryside until 1820. The now-occupied Banda Oriental joined the newly declared Empire of Brazil in 1822, but open war against Brazilian rule raged from 1825 to 1828, with the rebels receiving, this time, decisive support from Buenos Aires.

The Estado Oriental del Uruguay emerged in 1828 from peace negotiations arranged by Britain between Brazil and Argentina. Even so, Uruguayan independence was again at risk during the Guerra Grande (1839–1852), the "Great War," a civil war pitting the Argentine Federales (Federalist Party)

and the Uruguayan Blancos (White Party) against the Argentine Unitarios (Centralists) and the Uruguayan Colorados (Reds), which involved British, French, and Brazilian military intervention.[42]

Colonial black militias in the Río de la Plata had been open only to free blacks, but this situation was very different after 1810, when an expanded black presence in the general armed forces heralded the end of slavery. In exchange for freedom, slaves joined forces on all sides of the armed conflicts across the Río de la Plata—and the Spanish Americas more generally—after 1810. They were conscripted or enrolled voluntarily in the royalist forces of Montevideo, the revolutionaries of Buenos Aires, the local party of José Artigas, and the Luso-Brazilian army occupying Montevideo. In the 1830s black soldiers formed the backbone of the first professional Uruguayan infantry, and by the 1840s almost all able-bodied men of African ancestry had been conscripted into the army during the Guerra Grande (1839–1852) and freed. The Colorados proclaimed abolition in Uruguay in 1842, and the Blancos followed suit in 1846.[43] The abolition of slavery in the Río de la Plata by the end of the Guerra Grande, as the first national constitution of Argentina abolished slavery in 1853, concludes this study. It seems a fitting end point, since the balance of power emerging from this conflict survived more or less for the remainder of the century.

Whereas colonial black militias, including officers, were entirely drawn from people of African ancestry, Uruguay's revolutionary and postindependence black battalions were commanded by white officers who also participated in the politics of the new nation. After independence, black soldiers not only bonded with each other but also participated in networks headed by white officers and caudillos—the leaders of nineteenth-century popular politics. To a limited extent, these ties were already present in the colonial era when black militia officers sought the support of Spanish officers in their quest for the protection of the military fuero, or legal privilege. After 1810, increasing militarization created vertical links via a new patriotic culture.[44] In part through their participation in military coups led by white officers, black soldiers contributed to national politics in mid-nineteenth-century Montevideo.

In essence, the army itself had become the political arena in which Montevideo's black populations met elites and engaged in early nationalist discourse.[45] During war and peace, the last generation of blacks who lived through the era of slavery (1830s–1840s) was thus actively engaged in early expressions of nationalism, ranging from pamphlet publication to performances in theaters and festivities celebrating the independence of Uruguay.

In Buenos Aires, the experience of war and the figure of the "citizen-soldier" symbolized for plebeians the identification of military service with the ideals of the revolution. Military service to the homeland tied plebeians to a society ostensibly based on freedom, justice, and egalitarianism.[46] While the impact of militarization on Montevideo's society at large demands further research, this book shows that military participation tied Africans and their descendants to nascent Uruguay through two expressions: their relationship with the politics of white military leaders and the celebrations of black associations. The dominant discourse on slave emancipation portrayed military service as a duty in exchange for freedom bestowed on slaves by the state in Uruguay. This narrative was embedded in patriotic expressions, given that elites assumed that a link of gratitude tied freedmen to the homeland and, more concretely, to the elites who had decreed abolition. Black petitioners defending their rights before the state, both individually and collectively, turned the tables on this narrative of emancipation and patriotism as they based their claims on past and present military service. For them it was the larger Uruguayan society that owed gratitude to the black population. In repeatedly voicing this interpretation, they asserted their new place in the national community.

The most visible effects of nineteenth-century militarization on black identities was the Day of Kings in Montevideo, on January 6, when members of African "nations" wore military uniforms while celebrating with African-style drumming and dancing. From Havana to Buenos Aires, black associations celebrated the Day of Kings to honor their leaders and their African homelands. In Montevideo, Africans wore military uniforms and flew the national Uruguayan flag during this festivity, even while facing police repression in the 1830s. The national uniform became a sign of black leadership, as the kings of African-based associations, dressed as generals of the Uruguayan army, paid a visit to the president and other authorities. Experiences such as camaraderie in arms impacted African-based celebrations and show how two or more arenas of social experience together shaped black identities.

Race and Language

In colonial documents, Africans and their descendants described themselves and were categorized by others according to (1) legal status (enslaved, freed, free); (2) color and ancestry (black or of mixed origin such as *pardo*); and

(3) geographical origin (born in America or in Africa, and, if the latter, in what region). All these categories were embodied in the colonial term *calidad*, or "quality," which incorporated multiple markers, such as phenotype, occupation, family background, legitimacy, and honor.[47] This book is not about race and ethnicity as conceptualized, described, and debated in modern North America but rather aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how people subjugated by slavery—or by the proximity of it—acted and expressed themselves according to the categories available to them at the time, a time before the emergence of race and ethnicity as distinctly modern concepts.

While comprehensive racial terms are rare in this study, labels reflecting the dynamics of "race thinking" are not.[48] Terms such as *pardo* ("brown") and *indio* ("Indian") blended a combination of legal status with lineage and bloodline, as they developed specific meanings in Spanish America that were not entirely connected to biological differentiation.[49] Spanish colonial societies created various nomenclatures to describe phenotypical difference. In Spanish, *negro* means both the color black and a person of full sub-Saharan African ancestry. While the word *moreno* implies dark color in Spanish, it does not stand for a specific synonym for the color black. However, *moreno* became the euphemistic Spanish term for *negro*, a person of full sub-Saharan African ancestry in the Río de la Plata. These terms were locally rooted rather than uniform across the Americas. *Moreno* in Cuba meant "light black," a person of mixed European and African ancestry.

Ben Vinson's analysis of the language used by crown officials and black militiamen in early eighteenth-century Mexico is almost entirely applicable to late eighteenth-century Río de la Plata.[50] He finds that militiamen of full and mixed African ancestry consistently used the term *moreno* to mean people of full African ancestry and *pardo* to mean mixed ancestry. When Spanish officials used this terminology, they also employed the more derogatory terms *negro* and *mulato*. The same is true for the Río de la Plata, where I found a few examples of a person of mixed ancestry calling himself mulatto rather than pardo. The term *negro* connoted slavery (current or recent), and as a result most free blacks called themselves *moreno* in Montevideo and Buenos Aires.

Neither *moreno* nor *pardo* resonate as meaningful terms for English readers, so some further discussion is required. The first written definition of *moreno* captures its initial euphemistic nature. Apart from connotations related to dark color, the first edition of the Real Academia Española Spanish

dictionary (*Diccionario de Autoridades*, 1734) offered this: "Moreno refers to the intensely dark Negro man to soften the term Negro, which is the applicable descriptor for him."[51] Thus *moreno* "softened" *negro* but was equally applicable to a person of full sub-Saharan African ancestry. The 1734 dictionary suggests that this meaning of *moreno* was rooted in the era of wars between Catholics and Muslims in Iberia. By contrast, the term *pardo* does not figure in any eighteenth-century Spanish dictionary as a synonym of *mulatto*. Only in 1899 does one find "Pardo. (pr. Cuba y Puerto Rico) Mulato" in a Spanish dictionary. The term was officially recognized only after centuries of usage in the Americas.[52] Notably, the term *mulato* translates readily into English, yet there is no euphemistic term for "mulatto" in English to help us make sense of the Spanish term *pardo*.[53]

In translating the sources of this study from Spanish to English, I have tried to maintain parallel meanings. I do not translate *pardo* as "mulatto," given that the people who defined themselves as pardo tried to detach themselves from the pejorative descriptor *mulato*. I sometimes use the awkward English terms "of color" and "colored" to refer to people of mixed ancestry, given their acceptance and usage by the people to whom these terms were applied in the nineteenth century. While modern-day Uruguayans are using the term "Afro-Uruguayo," which may come close to current English-language aesthetics, I do not use it for the subjects of this book, given that to call the people of African ancestry living in late colonial Montevideo "Afro-Uruguayans" undermines its very object: black identity formation. Such usage flattens the translocal connections of black communities in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Further, nobody called themselves "Uruguayans" in the colonial era or even in the aftermath of independence. The predominant term for people born in the territory of modern-day Uruguay was "Orientales," given that the name for this land was first Banda Oriental, then Provincia Oriental, and after independence Estado Oriental del Uruguay.[54] To use the terms "Uruguayans" or "Afro-Uruguayans" for the period 1770–1850 is not only anachronistic but also misrepresents the diversity of subjects in this story by defining a teleological national horizon for them, as some of them were born in Buenos Aires, Brazil, or elsewhere. Thus I use "Uruguay" to refer only to the nation and its government after 1830.[55]

Two additional words need further clarification. The Spanish-language term *criollo*, unless otherwise noted, referred to people of European ancestry born in colonial and nineteenth-century Río de la Plata. As the term was mainly applied to whites and mestizos, contemporaries very rarely used it

to refer to people of African ancestry in this region.[56] This usage is strikingly different from the Portuguese-language term *crioulo*, which referred to people born in Brazil from African ancestry in this period, thus implying blackness. Finally, the term Rioplatense refers to those born in the Río de la Plata region.

Chapter Outline

This book casts new light on the history of the thousands of enslaved Africans who arrived in late colonial and early national Montevideo and Buenos Aires and gives center stage to a single black writer, Jacinto Ventura de Molina (1766–1841), who left a comprehensive record of his time. In the first two chapters, the study focuses on the Río de la Plata by analyzing the slave trade from a South Atlantic perspective. These chapters offer new quantitative data and fresh qualitative analyses. Chapter 3 traces black social life in colonial Buenos Aires and Montevideo through the experiences of leaders of black confraternities and free black militias. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the urban politics and culture of postindependence Montevideo, the less studied of the two main ports in Río de la Plata, without divorcing these events from developments in Buenos Aires. Finally, chapter 6 steps back from Montevideo to encompass the larger Atlantic world through the life and writings of Jacinto Ventura de Molina.

The book begins with an examination of the timing, routes, and dimensions of the slave trade to the Río de la Plata from 1770 to 1839. The analysis of slave arrivals is the foundation of a reassessment of the history of Africans in this region. Apart from elucidating the slave trading routes and regions of departure, this section probes the commercial networks of the Rioplatense traders, the only slavers in mainland Spanish America to establish direct, albeit ephemeral, trade with Africa.[57] Despite this direct traffic, the Río de la Plata continued to depend heavily on Rio de Janeiro and Salvador for the supply of slaves. The trans-imperial networks of the Rioplatense merchants with the Luso-Brazilians led them to introduce twice as many slaves directly from Africa into the Americas as did their Cuban-based counterparts from 1790 to 1805.[58] Trans-imperial networks between Spanish and Portuguese merchants in the South Atlantic thus shaped both the direct and inter-American slave-trade routes that led to the largest introduction of enslaved Africans in the history of the Río de la Plata. These networks survived into

the early independence era as they brought in the "African colonists" of Montevideo, the last generation of captives to arrive in the mainland Spanish American republics direct from Africa in the 1830s.

In chapter 2 I analyze marriage files to study the continuity of bonds among shipmates after slave disembarkation. When explaining how they had met the groom, half of all witnesses in slave marriage files explained that they had been shipmates on board slave vessels or that they had met in other slave ports before arriving in Montevideo. In these records, terms such as "Congo" and its usage by diasporic communities are more informative about slave-trade routes than about precise African origins. These terms described shared experience in the slave trade and reflect the search for social relationships by Africans caught up in this traffic.

The process by which multiple arenas of experience shaped individual lives and collective identities is the subject of chapter 3. Both in Montevideo and in Buenos Aires, the first colonial black militia officers were also leaders of Catholic lay brotherhoods. The overlapping worlds of militias, confraternities, and African-based associations or "nations" shaped networks among Africans and Afro-descendants, enabling them to elaborate a defense against slavery and the colonial state within the parameters of the Spanish community. While records reveal networks of solidarity among black officers, they also reflect struggles for leadership that led black officers to travel back and forth from Buenos Aires to Montevideo when they found themselves in trouble.

Chapter 4 takes up black military life in a new context: the Wars of Independence and the foundation of a new nation (1810–1850). Slaves and freedmen participated in the continuous warfare that further developed black social networks and created new identities in this period. As slaves joined the forces of all sides in the armed conflicts in the Río de la Plata, black soldiers not only bonded with each other but also engaged in networks headed by white officers. In doing so, black soldiers also helped define the balance of power in Montevideo's postrevolutionary factional politics. As black soldiers became ubiquitous, Africans and their descendants created the largest festival in Montevideo, the Day of Kings, an analysis of which is the core of chapter 5.

African-based associations or "nations" held wakes, funeral services, and also weekly gatherings to perform drumming and dancing. Initially, the Day of Kings reflected black participation in Catholic confraternities and the desire of members of these groups to see a crowned African king. This was a

festival of both St. Balthazar and the king of the Congo "nation," the leader of the largest African-based association of Montevideo. The Day of Kings served as a platform for the king of the Congo "nation" to claim authority over all other African-based groups. Eventually, Africans incorporated the new symbols of the larger community where they lived, such as the flag and the military uniform of Uruguay. The festival incorporated what Africans and their descendants wanted to celebrate: the shared African past, the coronation of a black king, and their military role in founding the nation.

Chapter 6 analyzes the unique perspective of a man who lived through the entire period of this study. A literate free black born in the New World, Jacinto Ventura de Molina (1766–1841) was a mediator for black communities. He lived between reality and delusion, and between the world of letters and the world of arms. As Molina was heavily influenced by written culture, the chasm between his investment in European culture and the position he occupied in society fed his anxiety. The three volumes of his surviving writings show how his life experience modeled overlapping black identities, tying Molina to the Spanish regime, the Catholic Church, the African "nations," and the new state of Uruguay. Epoch-changing events occurred during his lifetime: the French and industrial revolutions, the late eighteenth-century peak of the slave trade and slavery in the Americas, and the nineteenth-century fall of Atlantic slaving, the era of emancipation and assimilation. Jacinto Molina's experiences mirror the transformations of his time, in which the Spanish empire disintegrated and a host of new republics emerged.