

# Free Black Women, Slavery, and the Politics of Place in Chocó, New Granada<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is a historical study that examines the strategies and arguments employed by two *mujeres libres* [free black women] to protect or free their enslaved kin in Pacific coastal province of Chocó, the region with the highest concentration of slaves in the young republic of New Granada, in the 1830s and 1840s. It examines how these two free black women in Chocó mobilized a “*politics of place*,” referring to the ways in which subalterns harnessed the power of ‘ordinary’ places to leverage their everyday struggles.

**Keywords:** free black women, slavery, Chocó, resistance, politics of place

## Resumen

Este artículo es un estudio histórico que examina las estrategias y argumentos empleados por dos mujeres libres para proteger o librar sus parientes esclavizados en la provincia costera del Pacífico del Chocó, la región con la más alta concentración de esclavos en la joven República de la Nueva Granada, durante los años 1830 y 1840. Se examina la forma en que estas mujeres libres en el Chocó usaron una “*política de lugar*”, haciendo referencia a las formas en que los subalternos emplearon el poder de los lugares ‘ordinarios’ para sus luchas cotidianas.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres libres, esclavitud, Chocó, resistencia, política de lugar

This article is a historical case study that examines the place-based strategies and arguments employed by two *mujeres libres* [free black women] to protect or free their enslaved kin in the gold-mining, Pacific coastal province of Chocó, the region with the highest concentration of slaves in the young republic of New Granada. It focuses particularly on the 1830s and 1840s, the years after republican officials instituted a gradual emancipation law in 1821 designed to slowly abolish the institution of slavery in Gran Colombia. Gendered histories of slavery and emancipation in the Americas have revealed how enslaved and free black women used judicial strategies and the space of the courtroom to lessen the pain and violence of slavery or seize their right to freedom (Townsend; Eugenia Chaves; Cowling; González Undurraga). Instead of focusing exclusively on the courtroom, this article analyzes how two free black women in Chocó utilized their claims to everyday places—particularly the public streets of the capital of Quibdó and the parish church of the small mining town of Lloró—in their pursuit for justice for their enslaved kin. Based on never previously utilized criminal and civil suits, government correspondence, notarial records, and other archival holdings from the Archivo General de la Nación, the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, the Archivo Central del Cauca, and the Notaría Primera de Quibdó, I argue that these women mobilized a *politics of place*, referring to the ways in which subalterns harnessed the power of otherwise ‘ordinary’ places to leverage their everyday struggles.<sup>2</sup>

The *politics of place* relies upon expanding the conventional definition of “politics,” traditionally referring to the activities of the government, formally collectivized bodies, or the state, to include the negotiations of power in the quotidian lives of individuals. Functioning from an alternative definition of politics, the politics of place concerns the power struggles taking place in spaces outside formal political participation—inside homes, churches, streets, public markets, or traversing river streams. This emphasis on other places is central because, as the late historian of slavery Stephanie Camp astutely argued, “places, boundaries, and movement were central to how slavery was organized and to how it was resisted” (8). The first section of the article presents a historical overview of slavery, free black community formation, and the place of enslaved and free black women in Chocoano society after the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1819. With this historical context in mind, the next two sections turn to the specific case studies that reveal the place-based strategies and arguments under investigation in this article. The second

section analyzes an elderly free black grandmother's street protest against the death of her enslaved grandson in Quibdó in 1836. It shows how she transformed the streets of Quibdó into a battleground to demand justice for her deceased *nieto*. The third section looks at a free black mother's legal struggle in Lloró in 1843 to liberate her son who remained bonded to his master. I demonstrate how she also wielded a place-based argument—primarily her belonging to a local church in Lloró—to win over her son's legal freedom. While both cases are unquestionably distinct in their aims and circumstances, they fundamentally point to how free black women during slavery in New Granada drew upon all the legal and extralegal resources they could, including their claims to everyday places, to demand the dignity and termination of enslavement for their loved ones.

### 1. Slavery and Freedom in Republican Chocó

Located between the *cordillera occidental* [western Andes] on the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west, the northwestern province of Chocó was the heart of Colombia's gold mining economy throughout the colonial period. The first black *cuadrillas* [slave gangs] were brought to the region to mine for gold in 1690, only to be followed by thousands of more slaves purchased in the Caribbean (Mosquera, "Los procesos de manumisión" 99). With booming investments in gold mining and, to a lesser extent platinum, over the course of the eighteenth century, the black population of Chocó gradually emerged as the largest racial group in the region. In 1704, over 600 slaves were imported into Chocó. By 1724, 2,000 slaves worked the province's mines (Sharp 21-22). The first major census conducted in the region in 1778 definitively shows how slaves and free blacks dominated Chocó. Of the 14,662 residents, 332 were *blancos* (2%), 5,414 were *indios* (37%), 3,160 were *libres* or free blacks (22%), and slaves constituted the majority with 5,756 (39%) (Tovar Pinzón, *Convocatoria al poder del número* 353-357).

However, after a crisis in gold production in the mid-to-late eighteenth-century, the demographics of Chocó began to radically shift, as more slaves began to purchase their freedom (self-manumission) and form free black households and *pueblos* along the tributaries of the province's three main rivers: the Atrato, San Juan, and Baudó (Jiménez, "El Chocó" 126-127). By 1808, free blacks were the majority, composing 60% of the total 25,002 inhabitants, with slaves comprising 20%, indigenous 18%, and whites 2% (Sharp 16). The majority of these free blacks in late colonial Chocó were poor men and women who lived, fished, and panned for gold along the rivers of the province, while a minority formed what historian Sergio Mosquera calls a small but powerful "*mulatocracia*," an exclusive, wealthy group of *libres* who were mine owners and slaveholders that developed strong ties to the white, slaveholding class and authorities into the early nineteenth century (Mosquera, *De esclavizadores* 21-24).

The Wars of Independence (1810-1819) altered the political universe of slaves in Chocó and New Granada who acquired the possibility of eventual freedom by joining the patriot or Spanish royalist armies (Pita Pico; Echeverri). But the real blow in the eyes of New Granadan slaveholders arrived in 1821 when Colombian delegates in the Congress of Cúcuta established a gradual emancipation law. This law, enacted in 1821 in the aftermath of the Wars of Independence against Spanish colonial rule, banned the international slave trade, established local civic councils to manumit "deserving" slaves, and included a Free Womb clause that declared the children of slave mothers to be born free, yet bonded them to their mothers' masters until the age of adulthood (Restrepo Canal 231-232). Any child of a female slave born after 1821 was thenceforth referred to as a child of the Free Womb—*un hijo libre por la Ley* or *manumitido*—who would acquire their full legal freedom only after serving and working for their mother's master until the age of 18 (and then 25, after changes to the law in 1842). By destroying the genealogical inheritability of enslavement from mother to child, the Free Womb law abolished the centuries old institution of chattel slavery in Colombia. In the early 1820s, one mine owner from the former capital of Nóvita in Chocó complained profusely about the 1821 law: "[...] the war has drawn away all the best negroes, and the laws of the Congress are taking the rest."<sup>3</sup> Years later in 1845, the Governor of Chocó stated that "the law of manumission gave a mortal blow, snatching away more than one hundred workers a year [...]"<sup>4</sup>

Yet, despite the "mortal blow" to chattel slavery represented by the gradual emancipation law, the slave trade continued to flourish as strongly in the republic as it had during the late colonial period. In 1810, when Chocó was still controlled by the Spanish Crown, forty-three slaves were sold in homes, public auctions in the plaza, and the notary's office of Quibdó, while sixty-two were bought and sold just fifteen years later in 1835 under republican rule.<sup>5</sup> That same year in 1835, 604 enslaved women and a slightly larger number of 661 enslaved men were counted in the census of Chocó.<sup>6</sup> Despite their relatively smaller numbers, enslaved women played a crucial role in the mining industry, society, and slave trade in the region. In Chocó, the vast majority of slaveholders were small-scale miners who owned three or four slaves.<sup>7</sup> These owners relied largely on panning with *bateas* (large, shallow wooden basins to scoop up gravel) and diving to acquire gold dust and nuggets from the riverbeds. For this type of work, the preferred laborers were enslaved women, whose racialized and gendered bodies were deemed more physically "equipped" to perform exerting and carefully executed labor (Boussingault; Taussig 71). The preference for female slaves was reflected in the regional slave trade as well. According to available records from the Notaría Primera de Quibdó, a little more than half (58%) of slaves bought and sold in Quibdó from 1828-1852 were female (293).<sup>8</sup> Apart from panning and diving for gold, enslaved women also worked as seamstresses, cooks, cleaners, ironers, wet nurses in households, assistants for

shopkeepers in the capital or surrounding towns, or farmers who tended their owners' *rastrajos* [agricultural fields].

Moreover, enslaved women in Chocó tended to acquire freedom at slightly higher rates than men, as reflected in the *cartas de libertad* [freedom papers] recorded in the Notaría Primera de Quibdó. *Cartas de libertad* were documents granted to slaves by the notarial official after they paid their masters a particular amount of money for their freedom. The freedom papers legally sundered the contract of *servidumbre* between slave and master, and secured the ex-slaves' full claim to legal freedom. Of the available *cartas* from late colonial Quibdó in the Notaría Primera, 42 male slaves and 44 female slaves were freed through self-purchase from 1810-1819, while 51 male slaves and 64 female slaves purchased their freedom from 1828-1852. The larger presence of female slaves in self-purchase records corresponds to trends in manumission practices across Atlantic slave societies where women—and particularly domestic slaves—had greater access to and opportunities for manumission (Morrissey; Beckles; Schwartz). While unfortunately the census records calculating the number of free black women in Chocó do not exist, the trail of fragmentary documentation they left behind show that they played a critical role in the day-to-day operations of this frontier society.

A handful of these free black women, like the *liberta* [free black] María Cruz de Vidal, owned slaves. Vidal was one of the rare free black slaveholders who amassed a small slave trading empire for herself and her family in early-to-mid nineteenth century Chocó. Over the course of nearly twenty years, Vidal was a principal stakeholder in the local and regional slave market, selling a total of twenty slaves and one *manumitido*, while purchasing nineteen slaves and seven *manumitidos* for herself and others. Overseeing a commercial network that stretched across the upper white and free black classes, Vidal managed her slaving business and investments without the assistance of a husband.<sup>9</sup> Most free black women in Chocó, however, were either of the poor or middling classes, such as the free black woman and child of ex-slaves Catalina Lago who asked her one surviving illegitimate daughter to give her a proper burial “bearing in mind my poverty” in her last will and testament in 1819.<sup>10</sup>

Free black women also helped their loved ones acquire their freedom either by providing or loaning money for the *cartas de libertad*, or initiating freedom suits against masters in the local tribunals. In 1827, for example, the free black grandmother Juana de los Santos paid 60 *patacones* (a colonial and nineteenth century currency) for her five-year-old granddaughter Geronima's freedom in 1827, while the free black woman Clara Eredia loaned 200 *patacones* for her enslaved sister María de la Cruz's freedom in 1833. The *negra libre* Marta Valencia took her enslaved husband's masters to court over his freedom, which she won in 1848.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, free black women were enormously integral actors in the making and unmaking of slavery in the province of Chocó. But, as

this article shows, these women did not only assert their political subjectivities in the courtroom or *oficina de la notaría*; they utilized all the resources and *places* available to them in their struggle for dignity and freedom despite the limitations imposed upon them by slavery. The following section examines how one free black woman, the elderly grandmother Petrona Cordova, used the public streets of the Chocoano capital in 1836 to demand justice and dignity for her deceased grandson, a slave named Justo.

## 2. “Justice for Justo”: Petrona Cordova's Street Protest (1836)

In the main church of Quibdó, located in the plaza of the capital, the head teacher of the local school and his white and *mestizo* male *alumnos* gathered together with their prominent *padres de familia* in July 1834 to showcase the children's “enlightened” education in a public competition that had been taking place in the city for several years after Independence in 1819. A report sent from Quibdó to Bogotá cheerfully approved of the elite spectacle, announcing that “very soon we shall see the absence of roughness, and of Colonial vices” in Chocó, as Quibdó's illustrious sons were publicly christened the region's leaders that would, as a local newspaper noted, “remove Chocó from the darkness in which it is buried.”<sup>12</sup> But nearly two years later, the celebrative tone of the capital would shift to one of panic after officials reported that a street protest led by an older black woman in Quibdó placed the city in a state of “general alarm.”<sup>13</sup> Her name was Petrona Cordova, and on hot August day in 1836, she had reportedly run through the main streets of the capital, shouting that her enslaved grandson Justo had been brutally murdered by his master, Nicolas Bonoli, an Italian slaveholder and one of the wealthiest, most powerful men in the region. Apart from a criminal investigation, Petrona and the street mourners, which included many family members, demanded justice for Justo and specifically requested the exhumation of his body after his burial.

According to two witnesses, night had fallen when Justo's long and harsh punishment began in early August of that year. Both witnesses testified to have first heard his moans around 9:30 in the evening, moans that did not cease until 1:00 in the morning. The following day, they saw Justo working in his master's shed “with a chain on his neck, which was full of sores caused by the whippings [Bonoli] had given him.”<sup>14</sup> Others also confirmed sightings of Justo “with his buttocks and testicles covered in sores,” while another claimed they had seen lacerations “from his back to his testicles.”<sup>15</sup> Justo continued to be punished for several consecutive days. The city's *personero público* [public representative] Juan Arrunategui testified that one evening Justo went to his home with a chain on his neck, imploring Arrunategui to “speak on his behalf so as to reduce the imprisonment and punishment [Bonoli] was giving him.”<sup>16</sup> When asked why Bonoli was punishing him, Justo responded that he had previously run away fearing Bonoli's

abuse. Arrunategui requested that Justo return early the next morning to move forward on the case, but later discovered that Justo fled yet again. When apprehended, the torture undoubtedly continued. Witnesses stated that Justo was at some point forced to take a cold shower, causing him to fall ill with *pasmo*, a heavy fever. Despite alleged assistance from a medical doctor and a nurse, Bonoli's close friends, Justo died a few weeks later in his master's home at around 5 or 6 in the morning on August 18. Shrouded and lying on the kitchen floor, his body was taken to the cemetery a few hours later at around noon.<sup>17</sup>

The midday sun glistened, perhaps interspersed with an occasional drizzle typical of the Pacific lowlands, when Justo's body was carried out of Bonoli's home, located in the center of town across the busy Atrato River and city church. But as his body passed by the houses of Quibdó's elite and governmental authorities, Justo's grandmother Petrona Cordova began "yelling through the streets until he was buried, denouncing the author of the murder," followed by other "mourners [who] yelled throughout the streets that his master Bonoli had killed him with whippings, and that they recognized the body because it had many wounds and a ripped testicle."<sup>18</sup> A man named Ricardo Olaechea, who would later defend Petrona as her legal representative, stated that as Justo's body passed by the Governor's home "in the middle of the outcries and shouting, the mourners demanded justice for Justo."<sup>19</sup> Justo's death was no longer a private matter, as Petrona's street protest forcibly publicized Bonoli's crime.

But who, in fact, was Petrona Cordova and what moved her to publicly condemn her enslaved grandson's undignified death? Described as "miserably poor" and "a woman in her eighties,"<sup>20</sup> Justo's grandmother Petrona Cordova likely worked the Royal Gold Mines of San José de Murri just north of Quibdó, as her name is listed in an inventory from 1831 alongside other known relatives who joined the mourners that hot August afternoon.<sup>21</sup> Every person interrogated about the case confirmed that Petrona Cordova led the protest. The city's public representative Juan Arrunategui, who Justo had petitioned before his death, also stated that Cordova appeared before him carrying a mining tool called a *barretón*, a large bar used to hammer and lever ore from the ground, requesting his help after Justo's death.<sup>22</sup> The Governor, unquestionably aiming to discredit Cordova's petition, further asserted that Cordova appeared to have consumed "liquor putting her in a complete state of drunkenness, [as she] began to publicly yell that the master had killed the slave."<sup>23</sup> Anonymous letters sent to Bogotá after Cordova's protest informed judicial authorities that Justo's relatives "were going to bury him ten hours after his death."<sup>24</sup> These are the fragmentary pieces of information left in the archival holdings that offer a few critical facts surrounding Cordova's actions. Read through the bureaucratic gaze, these details present the image of an "unruly," intoxicated, elderly black woman, angered at the brutal death of her grandson. However, an examination of traditional Afro-Pacific funerary rituals allows us to see that

Cordova requested the exhumation of Justo's body in part because she was leading *la novena*, a nine-day long funerary ritual necessary to put the souls of the deceased to rest.

The ritual of *la novena* is certainly not unique to the Afro-Colombian spiritual tradition. Practiced across the Catholic world, *la novena* consists of nine days of mourning after the death of a loved one, typically accompanied by private or public prayers, rosary devotions, and a feast in honor of the deceased. After a person's death, the shrouded body of the deceased is displayed in the home for several hours so that relatives, friends, and other loved ones can say their last good-byes to the dead as their soul gradually transitions to the afterlife. They are then buried that evening, and the loved ones return to the home for eight more consecutive days to continue the devotional funerary ritual (Hilgers, "Novena"; Davis 21-27). In black communities along the Pacific in Colombia, the oldest woman of the family, known as *la gran madre*, leads the singing of the *alabaos*, or funerary songs, to aid this transition and honor the deceased's soul (González Zambrano 33). With influences from popular Catholicism, Emberá (the largest indigenous community of Chocó) shamanism, and Afro-Colombian traditions, the collective consumption of *aguardiente*, a popular liquor produced from sugar cane, is critical for *la novena*'s rituals, as the combination of singing and drinking of *aguardiente* is said to heighten memory and spiritual understanding (Losonczy 49). Along with *aguardiente* consumption, high-pitched lamentations by the *gran madre* and female relatives are necessary for the ritual, which requires expressive emotions from them such as crying, groaning, and at times convulsions. On the day of the death, the relatives are responsible for organizing the funerary arrangements, informing and waiting for absent relatives and indigenous *compadres* to arrive and say their blessings to the deceased before their body is carried to the cemetery for burial typically in the evening (Serrano Amaya, "Hemo de mori cantando....").

Given that "death is considered as the beginning of a journey and not as the annihilation of the person" (González Zambrano 27) in the Afro-Pacific spiritual tradition, and that *la novena* was not properly carried out due to the immediate burial of Justo's body, it is clear that Cordova's protest and her family's requests for exhumation were more than just an outcry for legal justice; they were demands for *spiritual justice*. In this tradition, it is believed that failure to properly attend to the requisite parts of the funerary ritual—the wake, the *alabaos*, and *la novena*—could "endanger the journey of the deceased's soul" (Serrano Amaya, "Hemo de mori cantando") with severe consequences on both living and dead. If the ritualistic process is interrupted, the soul is said to remain in permanent contact with the dead. Contemporary accounts of funerary rites from the southern Pacific coast of Colombia state that the dead will appear occasionally and on certain times of day if the process is interrupted. Not only can they at times appear in dreams, they can also return to sleep alongside their spouses if the soul has not rested (Serrano Amaya, "Hemo de mori cantando").

Thus, it is no surprise that Cordova, as the *gran madre*, was leading the protest, since the eldest woman in the family organized these funerary rituals. The *barretón*, or an iron bar used for mining, she was carrying also could have been part of the ritual, as the mining family was a predominant form of social organization for the enslaved and black underclass in colonial and republican Colombia. Along with other ritualistic items, the bar could have been used to affirm these social and familial bonds of labor (González Zambrano, 21; Sharp; Jiménez, *El Chocó, un paraíso*). Placing the Governor's undeniable attempt to smear Cordova by referring to her intoxication aside, it is possible that Cordova indeed consumed *aguardiente*, given that it was a requirement for the ritual. In fact, her yelling on the way to the burial, while politically motivated, could have been part of her singing the *alabaos*, marked for their piercing, deeply expressive tones.

However, the request by her relatives to bury Justo ten hours after his death unquestionably points that this was one of the primary motivations for the protest and demands for exhumation. As Colombian historian María Cristina Navarrete writes, slaves in seventeenth-century Cartagena preferred to have the wake at night, given that this would allow time for loved ones who lived far away to attend the ceremony. This was especially necessary for the enslaved because of the difficulties they faced for taking time away from work, restrictions by authorities, and African spiritual customs of celebrations at night (91). Though not ideal, ten hours alone with Justo's body before its burial would allow some time for Cordova to proceed over the rituals, while giving the opportunity for loved ones to gather from afar before his final good-bye. Indeed, "one of the conditions of a good death [in this tradition] is the largest possible presence of people" (Serrano Amaya, "'Hemo de mori cantando'"), which was no longer possible after the authorities forced his burial at noon.

Armed with her body and voice, Cordova's street protest and call to exhume the body were not only part of a "mortuary politics," defined "as intense disputes about custom, authority, and religion play out within final rites of passage" (Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* 6), but also a radical display of a politics of place whereby her body and the streets of Quibdó emerged as her primary political vehicles to confront the profound injustice of her grandson's death. While Bonoli may have had absolute dominion and paternal authority in the strict confines of his home as Justo's sole master, Cordova's protest that galvanized Quibdó showed the political power of the city's black residents in the streets who joined her public outcry. As a poor, elderly, free black woman, Cordova had little recourse to protest Justo's murder and call for his body's exhumation aside from initiating a long, drawn-out lawsuit that would inevitably side, one way or another, with Bonoli. Her high-pitched yelling and flailing body in the open streets of Quibdó became the only available avenue for her, especially given the immediate spiritual stakes involved.

In fact, Cordova's authority as the *gran madre*, the spiritual leader of her family (and perhaps of a larger Afro-Pacific spiritual community), may have granted more power to her place-based protest, as the fate of Justo's soul lay solely in her hands. The consequences of the case spanned far beyond the everyday world of the living, as Justo's soul could be perpetually trapped, never reaching final peace. The living, Cordova and her family especially, would have to constantly confront his haunting spirit, which could continue to wander the world of the living if not properly attended to. In pushing for the exhumation of Justo's body, Cordova was therefore mobilizing an ethics of spiritual justice and campaign of "sacred authority" (Brown, "Spiritual Terror") that exceeded the domains of the present world. But in order to fulfill the spiritual requests of the afterlife, she needed to battle in the streets with the living authorities and urge them to carry out the exhumation.

### 3. "The Public Joy": María Antonia Serna's Battle to Free Her Son (1843)

Much had changed in New Granada between Cordova's 1836 street protest and 1843, when a free black woman named María Antonia Serna began her long and arduous journey to free her son Juan, a "child of the Free Womb," in her small mining town of Lloró. Civil war engulfed the nation for the first time after 1839 when then-President José Ignacio de Márquez shut down several small monasteries in the southern, Catholic stronghold of Pasto. This decision stirred a small but significant regional rebellion against the Márquez administration and centralized power in Bogotá. By early 1840, the caudillo José María Obando, who lost his presidential candidacy to Márquez in 1837, utilized the opportunity to mobilize armies in the south and northeast in his bid to proclaim a federalist Colombia under his name. Obando's armies included Indians, free black peons, and slaves who were offered freedom if they joined his forces, a motley crew of Colombia's underclasses that inspired fear among the slaveholding elite (Bushnell 91-92; Prado Arellano). Chocó, too, became embroiled in the war, with reports of slaves led by a local elite opposition taking over the barracks in Quibdó in the name of Obando in early March of 1841.<sup>25</sup>

After government forces successfully suppressed Obando's revolt across the nation, authorities in Bogotá reacted to the 'black menace' posed by the War of the Supremes by reforming the 1821 Free Womb Law in 1842. The 1842 law extended the age of bondage for children of the Free Womb from 18 to 25 years. According to the new law, the master was obliged to present the *manumitido* to legal authorities of his parish upon reaching the age of 18, and the authorities were thenceforth responsible for apprenticing the 18-year-old either to his master or another person "of respect" for seven more years, that is, until the age of 25.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, in Serna's case initiated less than a year after the 1842 law, neither Serna nor local judicial

authorities made any references to apprenticeship, perhaps evidence of the law's uneven application. As we all see in the following pages, Serna focused solely on the 18 years of required service to the master as ordained by original 1821 Law of the Free Womb.

Standing in the parish court of Lloró in early 1843, María Antonia Serna, a former slave of a deceased holder named Juan Roman, demanded the freedom of her son, Juan, on the grounds that he had “served more than the sufficient years decreed by the manumission law.”<sup>27</sup> According to the court proceedings, Juan would have been roughly twenty-two years old when his mother first initiated the case in 1843, a few years older than the eighteen years ordained by the law.<sup>28</sup> The details surrounding his age were certainly not easy to maneuver. Her son had been sold off to several owners from 1821, when Serna claimed Juan was born, to the start of the legal proceedings in 1843. As Serna explained to the Circuit Judge in Quibdó in late 1844, a then-deceased holder named Juan Roman previously owned her.<sup>29</sup> While working for Roman, Serna gave birth to her son Juan, she later argued, “after the publication of the law concerning the freedom of *partos* of 1821.”<sup>30</sup> In 1827, Roman died, leaving Juan to his granddaughter, Segunda Roman, as part of her inheritance. Soon thereafter, Segunda Roman's husband, Doroteo Prado, subsequently sold the young Juan on behalf of his wife to another local slaveholder, Juan Ramires. Years later, Ramires also passed away, and Juan was sold once again, this time at a public auction to none other than Nicolas Bonolí, the author of Justo's murder as outlined in the previous case. Nevertheless, Bonolí remained largely outside the suit, as the Circuit Judge of Quibdó decided to lay responsibility on Doroteo Prado for the case, given that Prado was the original seller of Juan.

Despite the complex dynamics and background of the case, Serna skillfully summoned witnesses and maneuvered legal complications and incidents to win her case. The foundational role played by everyday places in Serna's legal strategy is evident in one of the main events she asked her witnesses to confirm. In early 1843, Serna asked one witness to verify that “her son was baptized as a *manumitido* and [that] the priest Manuel Guerrero yelled in a loud voice that Juan was the first *libertino* he had ever baptized in this parish [of Lloró].”<sup>31</sup> Serna added details to this incident when she asked another witness to confirm that “*at the door of the church*, [Guerrero] said in a loud voice that [Juan] was the first *libertino* that he had baptized in this parish.”<sup>32</sup> In these brief, but significant, descriptions, we are able to get a sense of the celebratory, defiant nature of this act. Serna is careful to emphasize the tenor of Guerrero's “loud” voice, expressing that he even “yelled,” in addition to stressing the fact that this had been a public act, “at the door of the church,” for all those passing by to hear. In summoning the architecture of the church and the priest's expressive tenor, Serna's argumentation shows us how the church, an otherwise everyday place of worship, was informally

harnessed by disempowered people like Serna in order to assert their formal rights in an increasingly uncertain world.

Once her case reached Quibdó, Serna's *apoderado* [legal representative] Vicente Ferrer also drew upon Serna's place-based argumentation when he made his closing remarks a few years later in 1845. Before the Circuit Judge in Quibdó, Ferrer included among his evidence supporting Serna's argument “*la pública alegría* [the public joy] expressed by the patriotic and philanthropic parish priest of Lloró the day he baptized Juan, yelling at the door of the church that this was the first manumitted by the law that he had baptized.”<sup>33</sup> In this regard, the church setting became the venue for the public manifestation of Juan's freedom as a “child of the Free Womb,” where Serna could leverage the little power that she could wield in Lloró. Moreover, the reference to the “patriotic and philanthropic priest” Manuel Alberto Guerrero was no small detail. A respected slaveholder, Guerrero oversaw the public reading and celebration of the 1821 Constitution in the same church in Lloró in February 1822.<sup>34</sup> Passing away sometime in the mid-to-late 1820s, Guerrero was remembered as a loyal republican priest, whose historical memory Serna and her lawyer could call upon, especially after events that shook the stability of the region after the War of the Supremes.

In the end, the main force driving Serna's case, however, lay in her ability to mobilize a large number of people to testify in her favor. It is clear that Serna quickly learned how to maneuver such a complicated case. When Serna initiated her case, she actually argued that Juan was born only three days *before* the Free Womb Law (established July 21, 1821), and two of the three witnesses she summoned were related to her, a detail exploited by Doroteo Prado. When Serna reinitiated the case again in 1844, however, she abandoned her previous argument, now arguing that Juan was born *after* the 1821 Law. In order to prove her case, she summoned six witnesses living in Lloró, two men and four women who were not related to her by kin. All of the women confirmed Serna's story that Juan was “born after the publication of the law of manumission,” and stated that they were older than 40. The other two men, both unrelated, also verified Serna's argument, stating that they were 30 and 40. By summoning this group of individuals, Serna's neighbors and friends, some of whom she likely confided in during these trying years, Serna mobilized the power of her local community to prove her case. In his closing remarks, Doroteo Prado's *apoderado* did not overlook this point: “It is known that in the small towns there is no shortage of people disposed to bothering the tranquility of honorable men, and we find this in this case.”<sup>35</sup> But much to Prado's disappointment, the people of the small town of Lloró, led by Serna, won. The Circuit Judge of Quibdó decided that Juan would be freed, citing the fact that Serna had more witnesses as a major compelling reason. He also did not hesitate to claim that Serna's witnesses were “equal in reputation and decency to the opposing party.”<sup>36</sup> Hundreds of miles away in Popayán,

the State Attorney also upheld the decision.

The successful outcome of Serna's case was not entirely surprising. Other scholars have shown how similar public officials ruled on behalf of enslaved women, even those with children born before the Law of the Free Womb, in the wake of intense republican fervor (Townsend 122).<sup>37</sup> The Circuit Judge of Quibdó himself expressed this republican zeal when he stated that “depriving [Juan] for a moment of his enjoyment would not only be unjust but tyrannical conduct and everything against a system like ours, liberal and republican.”<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, by 1845, when the Supreme Court in Popayán declared the definitive freedom of Juan, the fear posed by the “black menace” incarnated by the War of the Supremes had relatively subsided. In his annual report to the provincial House of Representatives in 1846, for example, the Governor of Chocó reported that the province “finds itself in complete tranquility.”<sup>39</sup> The final decision in late 1845 may have also reflected changes from above, as the “more progressive” administration of President Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera took office earlier that year (Bushnell 98-99). Nevertheless, a close reading of Serna's legal tactics and arguments can show us how disempowered peoples negotiated power by utilizing the limited resources of their situations—in Serna's case, her local church and village—and exercised a politics of place in order to fully demand their rights in the everyday and in the formal, public sphere of the courtroom, occasionally winning.

#### 4. Conclusion

In their introduction to *Women and the Politics of Place*, scholar-activists Arturo Escobar and Wendy Harcourt argue that “a radical politics of the body and of place suggest that the personal journeys of women are deeply imbued with their political practices; the desires to give voice to women's pain often leads activists to engage in a politics of place” (9). Although Escobar and Harcourt were referring to contemporary place-based movements of women activists across the globe, their words resonate profoundly with the struggles of Petrona Cordova, María Antonia Serna, and many other free black women in Colombia and elsewhere who wielded their bodies in everyday places to assert their claims for dignity, justice, and personhood. A deep-seated pain—in the case of Cordova, the undignified death and burial of her grandson; for Serna, the illegal, extended bondage of her son—motivated these women's actions as they powerfully contested the master class's grip on their loved ones' lives (and deaths). Indeed, the goal of a place-based analysis should not be to displace or downplay the importance of studies on formal political participation among Afro-descendent groups during slavery in New Granada (Múnera, Sanders, Lasso, Solano D. and Flórez), but rather to help us appreciate the critical, vernacular politics of all disempowered peoples, and particularly free black women, before the final abolition of slavery in 1852.

#### Notes

- 1 From 1830-1858, the present-day territory of Colombia was known as the Republic of New Granada.
- 2 In developing this article, I am especially indebted to Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar's work on the politics of place, particularly as explored in *Women and the Politics of Place*. For more studies expanding this notion of political power, see Tilly, 668-670. Also see Scott, Mallon, and Camp.
- 3 Cochrane, 419.
- 4 Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Sección República (SR), Fondo Gobernaciones Varias (FGV), Legajo (l.) 105, Folio (f.) 313v.
- 5 These statistics are based on findings from the Notaría Primera de Quibdó (hereafter NPQ) in Quibdó, Chocó, Colombia from the first half of the nineteenth century.
- 6 AGN, 1835, SR, FGV, l. 44, f. 180r.
- 7 These numbers are based on findings from the NPQ. Of the eighty testators who composed wills before the notary from the creation of the republic (1819) to final abolition (1852), the majority (69 testators or 86%) owned at least one slave. Of these holders, only two holders held more than ten slaves.
- 8 In total, 210 men and 293 women were sold from 1828-1852, for a total of 503 slave purchases recorded in the NPQ.
- 9 This information derives from records left behind by Vidal in the NPQ. Apart from her declaration as a “celibate” in 1858, Vidal otherwise refers to herself as a *ciudadana* [citizen] and *vecina*, and makes no reference to needing the permission of a spouse, a requirement for married women and those unwed under the age of 25 who sought any commercial or legal transaction.
- 10 For Catalina Lago's last will and testament, see NPQ, 1819: 42r-43v.
- 11 See NPQ, 1831: 206r, 206v-207r; 1837: 54r-55v; 1849: 95v-96r.

- 12 On the competition and newspaper article, see AGN, 1835, FGV, SR, l. 44, f. 240r-v; *El Indígena Chocoano* (Quibdó), no. 12, 20 de junio de 1834 (Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, Bogotá, Colombia).
- 13 AGN, 1837, SR, FGV, l. 50, f. 487v.
- 14 AGN, 1838, SR, FGV, l. 56, f. 286r.
- 15 AGN, SR, FGV, l. 50, f. 655r-v.
- 16 Archivo Central del Cauca (hereafter ACC), 1837, República JI 3cr 84, 69r-v.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 67r, 115v.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 48v, 66r-v.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 90v.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 8v, 121v. The term “miserably poor” [*pobre de solemnidad*] was a special legal status that afforded certain rights to those officially deemed “poor.” See Milton.
- 21 NPQ, 1831: 2r. However, a note of sale from 1835 states that Bonoli purchased an enslaved woman named Petrona for 200 *patacones*, see NPQ, 1835: 102v-103r. This could have been Justo’s grandmother, but likely not given that Cordova was never referred to as a “slave” in the lawsuit (which would be necessary for the proceedings), and the fact that an older enslaved woman would not normally be purchased for that amount, a high economic value.
- 22 ACC, 1837, República JI 3cr 84, 67r, 115v.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 120v.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 2v.
- 25 AGN, 1841, SR, FGV, l. 73, f. 69r-v.
- 26 For the final May 29, 1842 Law, see Restrepo Canal, Tomo I 424-431.
- 27 ACC, 1845, República JIII 8em 4026, 1.
- 28 At the beginning of her case, two of her witnesses, Pascual Lemas and Remijia Cordova, godparents and aunt and uncle of Juan, testified that Juan was “just 3 days old when the law of manumission was published in Quibdó,” making him roughly 22 years old in 1843. See *Ibid.*, 4. When the proceedings were continued a year later by Serna again, her witnesses would argue that Juan was actually born *after* the law was published. See *Ibid.*, 19.
- 29 However, Serna was a *liberta*, a free woman by the time she launched her case on behalf of her son in 1843. Free people like Serna were allowed the right to “appear in Court...representing themselves or represented by their legal representatives,” among other privileges including the right to “trade, make contracts, [and] grant wills.” See NPQ, 1838: 108r-v.
- 30 ACC, 1845, República JIII 8em 4026, 24.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 32 *Ibid.*, my emphasis.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 70.
- 34 NPQ, 1827: unpaginated. For more on Guerrero, see his last will and testament in Mosquera, *Memorias de los últimos esclavizadores en Citará* 221-227.
- 35 ACC, 1845, República JIII 8em 4026, 75.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 37 Townsend 122. For a similar case from Quibdó favoring a *manumitido*, see ACC, 1841, República JIII 8em, 4027.
- 38 ACC, 1845, República JIII 8em 4026, 88.
- 39 AGN, 1846, SR, FGV, l. 116, f. 45r.

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