

Trans-imperial History in the Making of the Slave Trade to Venezuela, 1526-1811

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The last two decades have witnessed an unprecedented expansion of knowledge about the transatlantic slave trade, both through research on specific sections of this traffic and through the consolidation of datasets into a single online resource: *Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* (hereafter *Voyages Database*). This collective project has elucidated in great detail the slave trading routes across the Atlantic and the broad African origins of captives, at least from their ports of embarkation. However, this multi-source database tells us little about the slave trading routes within the Americas, as slaves were shipped through various ports of disembarkation, sometimes by crossing imperial borders in the New World. This gap complicates our understanding of the slave trade to Spanish America, which depended on foreign slavers to acquire captives through a rigid system of contracts (*asientos* and *licencias*) overseen by the Crown up to 1789.¹ These foreign merchants often shipped captives from their own American territories such as Jamaica, Curaçao, and Brazil. Thus, the slave trade connected the Spanish colonies with interlopers from England, France, the Netherlands, Portugal (within the Spanish domain from 1580 to 1640), and eventually the United States. The importance of the intra-American slave trade is particularly evident in Venezuela: while the *Voyages Database* shows only 11,500 enslaved Africans arriving in Venezuela directly from Africa, I estimate that 101,000 captives were disembarked there, mostly from other colonies. This article illuminates the volume of this traffic, the slave trading routes, and the origins of slaves arriving in Venezuela by exploring the connections of this Spanish colony with the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French Atlantics. Imperial conflicts and commercial networks shaped the number and sources of slaves arriving in Venezuela. As supplies of captives passed from Portuguese to Dutch, and then to English hands, the colony absorbed captives from different African regions of embarkation.

This article seeks first to establish the volume and direction of the slave trade. Such an analysis will lay the foundation of a reassessment of the history of Africans and their descendants in Venezuela. As in the rest of the Americas, once the general features of the traffic are clear, scholars can proceed more confidently to study the social and cultural implications of the slave trade. Scholars have already carried out such preparatory work for many of the British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese

colonies, but not yet for Spanish America, with the exception of Cuba, where the historiography of slavery and the slave trade is central to the national narrative. The most important works on the Venezuelan slave trade were written half a century ago, before recent advances in knowledge on the connections between Africa and the Americas.²

The history of the slave trade to Venezuela can be divided into six broad but unequal periods, as shown in Table 1. The available data makes it possible to study in some detail the routes taken by the slaves and the regions from which they embarked. I use the *Voyages Database* as a key element of this article, but augment this source with new findings from the Seville and Caracas archives as well as secondary sources on slave voyages to Venezuela and Spanish Trinidad.³ This has permitted the construction of a separate database comprising known slave voyages, annual data on legalised slave contraband, and estimates of the Curaçao-Venezuela slave traffic. Table 1 provides revised estimates of the volume and fluctuations of slave arrivals in Venezuela based on these new sources.

Table 1. Slave arrivals in Venezuela, 1526-1811

Years	Total slave arrivals	Percentage	Slave arrivals per year
1526-1594	6,400	6.3	93
1595-1640	6,400	6.3	139
1641-1714	33,687	33.3	455
1715-1783	35,617	35.2	516
1784-1794	17,056	16.9	1,551
1795-1811	2,032	2.0	120
Total	101,192	100.0	354

Sources: *Voyages Database*; Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Indiferente 2819, 2821 and 2823; Archivo General de la Nación, Caracas, Real Hacienda, Común y General, T. XII, fs. 25-25v, T. X, fs. 132-3, Colección Diversos, T. XXXIII, ff. 159-159v; Intendencia del Ejército y Real Hacienda, 103, f. 25, 131, f. 334, 211, f. 403; *Actas del Cabildo de Caracas*, vol. 1, 153 and vol. 2, 153-57; Acosta, "La Trata de Esclavos en Venezuela;" and *Vida de los esclavos negros en Venezuela*; Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela colonial*; Arcila, *Hacienda y Comercio de Venezuela en el Siglo XVI*; Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean*, 341; Troconis, *Documentos para el estudio de los esclavos*, 35; Klooster, *Illicit Riches*; Palmer, *Human Cargoes*, 107-9; Donoso, *El Asiento de Esclavos con Inglaterra*, 589-90; Garate, *La Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas*, 580; Lucena, *Visperas de la independencia americana*, 58-60. Pierre and Huguette Chaunu, *Séville et l'Atlantique*, vol. III, 326, 364, 414; vol. IV, 38, 58, 158. Apart from *Voyages Database*, my estimate on the slave trade from Curaçao to Venezuela is based on Aizpurúa, *Curacao y la costa de Caracas*; Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean*; Vega, *El tráfico de esclavos con América*; Klooster, "Curaçao and the Caribbean Transit Trade"; and Jordaan, "The Curaçao Slave Market." For estimates before 1640 see Almeida Mendes, "The Foundations of the System."

The total of 101,000 enslaved Africans arriving in Venezuela falls below the figure of 121,000 slaves estimated by Venezuelan historian Federico Brito based on licenses and contracts alone.⁴ This article thus corrects and fleshes out Brito's figure, and, more important, it incorporates hard data on slave arrivals. It also adds what is missing in the *Voyages Database*—the large and centrally important intra-American traffic. In addition to the total of 101,000 in Table 1, one thousand slaves

fled from Dutch-controlled Curaçao to Venezuela in the eighteenth century alone. Liberated by Spanish authorities, they lived as freedmen.⁵ What remains unknown is the number of slaves arriving from Cartagena (or broadly New Granada), although it should be noted here that Cartagena slaves went mostly to colonial Colombia, as well as cities and coastal estates in Ecuador and Peru.⁶ Nevertheless, it is clear that slightly more than 101,000 Africans arrived in Venezuela from all sources.

Enslaved and free Africans arrived in Venezuela at the very outset of colonisation, but a more or less continuous stream dates only from 1526, which coincides with the first transatlantic slave voyages direct from Africa to the Spanish Caribbean.⁷ The last recorded slave ship arrived in La Guaira—the port serving Caracas—in 1811, just one year after the revolutionary government had prohibited the slave trade.⁸ In what follows I explain my periodisation, the construction of my estimates, and, most important, from whence captives came. Taken together, these elements provide a new and comprehensive view of the slave trade to Venezuela.

The Beginnings of Colonisation, 1526-1594

The first period of the slave trade to Venezuela covers the early stages of colonisation, when enslavement of Amerindians and *encomienda* (labour grants) predominated.⁹ First in Cubagua Island in 1516, and then in the larger Margarita Island in 1530, the Spaniards established small settlements to oversee the harvesting of pearls by Indian labourers. Initially, the Spanish in Cubagua obtained the pearls through trade with indigenous people from Margarita, but once the native population was decimated the Spaniards began slave-raiding expeditions in the Lesser Antilles and the mainland. When pearl fishing activity in Cubagua was at its peak in 1526, enslaved Africans began to arrive in a steady stream, mainly from Santo Domingo. While enslaved and free Africans initially worked alongside Amerindians, by the turn of the century they had almost completely replaced them. Teams of slaves sailed to the fisheries in canoes before reporting back to their masters; thus, they had opportunities to run away and/or keep some pearls for themselves. By the late sixteenth century, these canoes had latten sails and were manned by crews ranging from twenty to thirty slaves, a black captain—either free or slave—and a Spanish pilot, giving some indication of the complexity of this work.¹⁰

The early black experience in Venezuela shared features observable in the rest of the Caribbean subject to Spanish colonisation. Some had lived as slaves in the Iberian Peninsula, others were “Black Conquistadors” who secured Spanish settlements, and yet others worked in the gold extraction sector.¹¹ A couple of *berberiscos*, slaves originating either in Islamic Spain or the Mediterranean, arrived in Venezuela in 1534. A “Black Portuguese” was in the army of Diego de Losada, who founded Caracas in 1567, and slaves took part in the expeditions to both Tunja (modern-day Colombia) and Trinidad.¹² While the Spanish established their political center in the mainland port of Coro in 1527, the economic center changed with the discovery of alluvial gold. Enslaved Africans were first sent to work in gold extraction in Borburata, then Buria, and eventually Caracas as well, which became the capital of the province in 1578. After the 1530s, gold production declined steadily to the almost trivial levels of the early seventeenth century.¹³ The first recorded slave

uprising in Venezuela took place at the gold site of San Felipe, where 80 slaves rose against the Spanish and tried to establish a runaway community in 1553. Some masters encouraged slaves with the promise of freedom if they found new sites of alluvial gold.¹⁴ This was the time of *El Dorado*, when the riches of Mexico and Peru enthralled all Europeans as well as the Spanish conquistadors of the Orinoco and Amazon rivers.

Specific data on slave arrivals survives for the pearl fisheries in Margarita, the mines in Buria and Borburata, and also for the valley of Caracas with its port in La Guaira. Early-colonial Venezuela received slaves mainly from Santo Domingo. Very few transatlantic slave voyages appear to have arrived in Venezuela before 1595. The English ship *Tiger*, captained by John Hawkins with slaves from Senegambia and Sierra Leone; the Portuguese *Nossa Senhora da Ajuda*, with slaves embarked in the Cape Verde Islands; and the French *Fleur-de-Lys*, which was taken as a prize by a Spanish ship, all arrived before 1580. Three other slave vessels arrived in La Guaira in 1586-90 as Portuguese trade with Spanish America increased following the Iberian Union of 1580. All slave shipments for which data survive suggest that 1,727 captives disembarked from 1526 to 1594.¹⁵ However, this is just a fraction of actual slave arrivals—a discrepancy that holds for the entire traffic to Spanish America in this period. Between 1526 and 1594, documents revealing specific landings of slave ships show only 33,424 slave arrivals for all Spanish America, while *Voyages Database* estimate that 124,500 captives were disembarked in these colonies. I apply the ratio between known and estimated slave arrivals in Spanish America in this era to the known figure of disembarked captives in Venezuela in order to provide an estimate of 6,400 slaves arriving in Venezuela before 1595.¹⁶ Most of these captives were likely brought under the license granted to the Welsers, a prominent family of German bankers that lent money to the Spanish King Charles V. In return, they were granted the government of the province of Venezuela from 1529 to 1538 and a license to ship four thousand slaves to Spanish America. However, it seems that only 2,500 captives arrived.¹⁷ The previous anecdotal evidence of enslaved Africans working in pearl fisheries and gold mining supports this estimate of 6,400 slaves arriving in Venezuela before 1595.

Most captives at this time came from the regions of Senegambia and West-Central Africa, the main sources of the Portuguese slave trade as a whole before 1595. Neither the licenses nor the documents on slave arrivals make it possible to separate out slaves from Kongo from those leaving Portuguese Angola given that both streams were shipped first to São Tomé Island before making the Atlantic crossing. Islands were of the utmost importance to the slave trade at both ends of the Atlantic before 1595. The Portuguese were only just beginning to establish commercial networks with African powers and lack of trust between Portuguese and Africans meant that Portuguese slavers used the Cape Verde Islands and São Tomé rather than settlements on the mainland as factories. The main markets in the Americas were the islands of Hispaniola, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. Scholars now agree that the first enslaved Africans arriving in Spanish America were mostly from Senegambia, but later an “Angolan wave” got underway, originating in Portuguese Angola and passing through São Tomé.¹⁸ A minor exception to this pattern comprised a few arrivals from Bonny and Old Calabar in the Bight of Biafra.

The Iberian Union and the Portuguese *Asiento*, 1595-1640

The Iberian Union (1580-1640), when both Portuguese and Spanish realms were under the Spanish Crown, led to the second phase of this traffic and was also dominated by Portuguese slavers. In 1590, the municipal authorities of Caracas entrusted Simón Bolívar (an ancestor of the *Libertador*) to seek a series of concessions from the Spanish Crown. The top two requests concerned coerced labour: the first sought an end to the royal prohibition of *servicio personal* of *encomiendas* and the second was to obtain additional licenses to introduce African slaves. The crown approved both of these requests. Moreover, Portuguese merchants obtained contracts to introduce enslaved Africans to Spanish America from 1595. While the last phase of gold mining pushed up demand from Caracas elites for African captives, cacao production also began to absorb the new slave arrivals.¹⁹ By 1607, a minor export trade in agricultural products had developed from the valley of Caracas to the Caribbean and Cartagena, but the main exports—tobacco and hides—went to Spain. Four decades later no less than half of Venezuelan exports comprised cacao beans, for which the main market was New Spain.²⁰ As cacao harvesting expanded, local elites obtained increasing amounts of Mexican silver that, *inter alia*, they used to purchase Africans from Portuguese slavers for as long as the Iberian Union lasted.

Cacao was one of the most valued staples sent from Spanish America to Europe, but it was also an item that was widely consumed in colonial Mexico. Initially, cacao was harvested by Indian coerced labour in Venezuela to supply the Mexican market. Cacao and slaves were certainly in the minds of planters and Spanish authorities from early on: a 1614 letter from the Governor of Venezuela, García de Girón, pointed out that it was possible to buy enslaved Africans with the cacao harvested by Amerindians.²¹ But rather than bartering slaves for cacao as this letter suggests, it was Mexican silver that facilitated the exchange. Slaves unloaded in Caracas were most likely paid for in New Spain, with revenue from cacao sales in Mexico. The size of the Portuguese *asiento* suggests that large-scale bartering along the Venezuelan coast would have been unlikely. The intermarriage of Portuguese merchants with Venezuelan elites in this era facilitated such transactions.²² While initially Indian coerced labourers harvested cacao under the supervision of Spanish overseers in coastal estates connected with external trade, during the seventeenth century enslaved Africans began collecting cacao, then clearing new land, and finally installing irrigation so that the bean could be cultivated.²³ Most of the cacao was still harvested by both indigenous people and enslaved Africans during the Iberian Union, but cultivated crops drawing on slave labour and new land predominated by the end of the seventeenth century. In 1691, the Spanish crown finally prohibited all Indian coerced labour in Venezuela, a measure that provoked resistance, but nothing in comparison to Caracas' elites reaction in the previous century, when Bolívar was sent to Spain. By this time cacao production depended solely on the labour of enslaved Africans.

While the use of slave labour in gold mining decreased in seventeenth-century Venezuela, slaves continued working in the copper mines of Cocorote, where more than one hundred captives laboured by the end of the Iberian Union. They consumed locally grown cattle and corn, the production of which also absorbed slave

labour. Cacao, mining, local agriculture, and a few sparse sugar plantations all drove the slave trade to Venezuela.²⁴ As enslaved Africans shared workplaces with Amerindians and Europeans, *mestizaje* and manumission generated a new group of free people of mixed origins, *pardos*, who would become the majority of the Venezuelan population by the end of the colonial regime.

Records have survived of 4,871 slaves disembarking in Venezuela from 1595 to 1640. For these years, I calculate that nearly 6,400 enslaved Africans were disembarked, based on the ratio between known and estimated slave arrivals in all Spanish America.²⁵ The yearly average of slave arrivals increased from ninety-three in the previous period to 139 during the times of the Portuguese *asiento*. The growing use of slave labour for production of cacao and for other branches of commercial agriculture, combined with the increasing availability of Portuguese-supplied slaves, meant that Venezuela gained relative importance as a slave market, even though it remained minor in comparison to Cartagena and Veracruz. The rising significance of the Caracas valley is clear: most known slave vessels arriving in Venezuela disembarked captives only in La Guaira. A few others arrived in Margarita, Maraicao, and Coro.²⁶

A general shift in the center of gravity of the slave trade from islands (Hispaniola) to the mainland (Cartagena and Veracruz) took place in this period. The African side of the traffic also saw a shift from islands to mainland, as Luanda (founded in 1576) became the principal port for captives leaving for Venezuela. Almost ninety per cent of known slave arrivals in this period came from direct transatlantic slave voyages. Most of the remaining ten per cent were Africans who had initially been shipped from Angola to Northern Brazil, and were then trans-shipped to Venezuela. During this period nearly half of all direct slave arrivals to this region embarked on the Angolan coast. This is not surprising given that Luanda alone accounted for at least 46 per cent of all slaves who crossed the Atlantic from 1595 to 1640.²⁷ Yet, the link with Upper Guinea continued, with the Cape Verde islands (drawing in part on what is today Guinea-Bissau) supplying twenty-two per cent of slaves departing from Africa to Venezuela. Portuguese hegemony in the traffic to Venezuela accounts for this pattern.

Dutch Curaçao as Slave Entrepôt, 1641-1714

Events in Spanish America and the broader Atlantic shattered the structure of the slave trade to Venezuela in the mid-seventeenth century and led to Dutch traders replacing the Portuguese as the main source of slaves. In 1640, Portuguese independence from Spain curtailed Portuguese slave contracts just at the time that the Dutch occupied Luanda (1641-48). The separation of Portuguese merchants from Spanish America coincided with the well-documented crisis of production and trade in the Spanish Atlantic—particularly in Mexico—from 1640 to 1660.²⁸ Payments in silver in the cacao trade between Venezuela and New Spain fell and the price of cacao decreased sharply as cacao from Guayaquil began to reach Mexico. To make matters worse for Venezuelan planters, an earthquake hit Caracas in 1641 and a plague destroyed cacao fields.²⁹ Yet the trade in both cacao and slaves in Venezuela had recovered by 1680. The Governor of Venezuela reported that when he took office (in 1677) there were two hundred thousand cacao trees and six thousand

slaves in the province, and that cacao and slaves were still abundant by 1681—only silver continued to be in short supply.³⁰ An anonymous French resident in Spanish America reported in the 1680s, when France aimed to take over Spanish commerce and colonies, that Venezuela's "wealth consists in slaves brought from Ethiopia and cacao which exist in abundance, [there is] some tobacco and pearls but in small quantities."³¹ If Portuguese transatlantic networks with Venezuela disintegrated and Mexican silver had fallen in the past decades, how was it that the traffic in both cacao and slaves were flourishing by 1680? The key lies in the island of Curaçao, which after Dutch occupation became the largest slave supplier not only for Venezuela, but also for the Spanish circum-Caribbean from 1657 to 1714.

Immediately after the Twelve Year Truce with Spain ended in 1621, the Dutch Republic launched expeditions against the now-merged Portuguese and Spanish overseas colonies. In their search for empire, in 1634 the Dutch seized Curaçao, a tiny arid island forty miles off the Venezuelan coast. Starting in the 1650s, Dutch Curaçao developed close commercial ties with the Spanish Caribbean. As this relationship grew, Amsterdam became as important a market for Venezuelan cacao as Mexico and Spain combined. This was in addition to the silver, hides, tobacco, mules, and provisions that the colony exported to Curaçao.³² In return, the Dutch provided European textiles and hardware as well as olive oil, alcohol, and of course slaves—all items that were scarce in Venezuela given that the colony was distant from trading routes to Cartagena and Veracruz.³³ Spanish American demand for slaves drove the Dutch transatlantic slave trade between 1641 and 1714. In these years, fifty-nine per cent of the Dutch slave traffic was directed to the Dutch Caribbean (largely to disembark slaves destined for Spanish colonies), Spanish America, and Spain.³⁴

After the end of the Portuguese slave trading contracts, the Spanish Crown granted licenses to introduce slaves to Spanish merchants, but with no success. Given the complete disarray of Spanish Atlantic commerce—particularly the slave trade—by the mid-seventeenth-century, probably no slave shipment reached Venezuela between 1641 and 1657. Transatlantic slave voyages began arriving in Curaçao in 1657 as Dutch authorities there responded to Spanish mainland buyers. Both the inability of Spanish traders to supply slaves and the rising Dutch contraband trade persuaded the Spanish Crown to reinstate the *asiento* monopoly in 1662 to avoid further losses to the treasury. The Crown granted the *asiento* to the Genoese merchants Grillo and Lomelín, who bought slaves from Curaçao rather than direct from Africa. The Dutch banker Balthasar Coymans became the administrator of the contract. Coymans family members alongside other Genoese merchants held consecutive *asientos* interrupted by short-term Portuguese and Spanish holders (who also relied on Dutch suppliers) up to the end of the century.³⁵

Sephardic merchants from Amsterdam, whose lineage went back to Portugal, participated in the Dutch takeover of Curaçao, invested in slave trading at least as early as the 1660s, and eased the transition from Portuguese to Dutch preeminence in the slave trade. Once in Curaçao, these traders established a Dutch bridgehead in Venezuela called Tucacas, near Coro, which operated from the 1690s to the 1720s. In 1711, almost half of all sloops shipping cacao to Curaçao came from Tucacas, also carrying tobacco, mules, and cows. There is evidence that these merchants sent at least 1,071 slaves to Spanish America from 1700 to 1710 alone, the

majority of whom probably landed in Venezuela—and this is only a partial figure.³⁶

While the Dutch slave trade to Curaçao is well documented, the distribution of slaves sent from this island is much less so. Dutch data do not reveal Spanish American ports and Spanish records are sparse given that most of this traffic was illegal, with the exception of the Grillo and Lomelín *asiento*.³⁷ Klooster and Jordaan's estimate that ninety per cent of slaves disembarking in Curaçao were sent on to Spanish America between 1662 and 1714 seems reasonable.³⁸ Given that the *Voyages Database* shows 32,412 captives arriving in Curaçao from 1663 to 1674, an estimated 29,171 captives would have been sent on to the Spanish mainland. We know that 19,514 captives arrived as part of the Grillo and Lomelín contract.³⁹ We can conclude that nearly ten thousand slaves—one third of all slaves departing from Curaçao to Spanish America—were illegally introduced. Table 2 summarises these procedures.

Table 2. Discrepancy between departures and arrivals of slaves to Spanish America via Curaçao, 1663-1674

Slaves arriving in Curaçao from transatlantic slave voyages	32,412	100 %
Slaves departing from Curaçao to Spanish America	29,171	90% (100%)
Slaves arriving from Curaçao in Spanish America	19,514	(67%)
Difference between departures and arrivals	9,657	(33%)

Source: For row 1, Voyages Dabatase, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1663&yearTo=1674&mjstpltmp=32110>. For row 3: Vega, *El tráfico de esclavos con América, 186-7; 194-201*.

The Grillo and Lomelín contract mainly was for delivery of slaves to Portobello, Cartagena, and Veracruz—just 1,985 arrived in Venezuela and even fewer went to Santo Domingo and Cuba. How many of the additional ten thousand slaves illegally sent from Curaçao to Spanish America went to Venezuela? The strong commercial ties between Curaçao and Venezuela, the rising cacao trade, and weak or non-existent law enforcement suggest that most of them did.⁴⁰ I assume that twenty-five per cent of all slaves sent from Curaçao to Spanish America (7,293 captives out of 29,171) illegally arrived in Venezuela in the years of Grillo and Lomelín. Moreover, I apply this estimate to the larger period of Dutch dominance from 1657, when Dutch transatlantic slave arrivals began in Curaçao, to 1702, when the War of Spanish Succession reached the Caribbean.⁴¹ Evidence of contraband slave trading from Curaçao to Venezuela emerges from the failed attempts of the Spanish to prevent this traffic. The crown issued four edicts between 1685 and 1705 freeing slaves whose masters could not provide legal titles, but these measures proved ineffective.⁴² While the gap in Table 2 between departures and arrivals represent thirty-three per cent of the slaves sailing from Curaçao to Spanish America, I assign twenty-five percentage points to Venezuela with the other eight percentage points assigned to Santo Domingo and Cuba, areas largely neglected by the Grillo and Lomelín *asiento*. For a total of 80,132 captives sent from Curaçao to Spanish America from 1641 to 1701, I assign 20,033 to Venezuela, where most of the contraband trade would have been absorbed. The most important ports of entry—Cartagena, Portobello and Veracruz—were supplied by traders and from places beyond Curaçao. Apart from the Grillo and Lomelín slave shipments, at least

7,991 captives were brought by other Dutch traders into Cartagena direct from Africa between 1652 and 1711, plus another 2,924 to Portobello, 1,022 to Veracruz, 605 to Santa Marta, and 1,041 with no specific disembarkation. These ports received an additional 11,418 slaves (Cartagena), 3,282 (Portobello), 3,698 (Veracruz) and 6,565 (unspecified) from non-Dutch merchants in these years. Note that these figures do not include slave shipments departing from the Caribbean to Spanish mainland colonies but only those that came direct from Africa. This shows that Cartagena, Portobello, and Veracruz were larger and more diversified slave markets than Venezuela.⁴³

The War of the Spanish Succession increased the Curaçao-Venezuela slave trade even though Spain and the Netherlands were on opposite sides. Despite the Dutch alliance with the British, Curaçao became the lifeline for Venezuela when Britain blockaded Spanish Atlantic commerce.⁴⁴ Allied with Spain, French merchants obtained the right to introduce slaves to Spanish America between 1703 and 1713, but the agents of the French *asiento* in Venezuela mostly purchased slaves in Curaçao. The Dutch merchants of Curaçao profited from this conflict. I estimate that fifty per cent of the slaves sailing from Curaçao to Spanish America from 1702 to 1714—when the Peace of Utrecht took effect in the Caribbean—landed on the Venezuelan coast. The agents of the French *asiento* in Caracas began negotiations with the merchants of Curaçao in 1703, but the Dutch, fearing a French invasion of the island, held back. The Spanish bought slaves there regardless.⁴⁵ As the Dutch-Spanish traffic continued, another agent of the French *asiento*, Jean Chourio, arrived in Curaçao in 1708 to encourage official trade. He claimed that Venezuela could absorb one thousand captives per year from the island and acquired at least 265 slaves in the year of his arrival, furthering the next year 154 slaves, 358 in 1712, and 511 in 1714—all of which is consistent with a rising trend in slave inflows from Curaçao to Venezuela. The Jewish traders of Curaçao continued to be active in 1714 by bringing additional slave shipments. Where one in four slaves sailing from Curaçao to the Spanish mainland went to Venezuela in 1641-1701, I estimate that between 1702 and 1714 this ratio rose to one in two. Thus I estimate 6,838 slaves were sent from this island to Venezuela in these years. Overall, the traffic from Curaçao represented seventy-nine per cent of the estimate of 33,687 captives disembarking in Venezuela from 1641 to 1714 (as shown in Table 1), which illustrates the close commercial link with this island.

The origins of the slaves arriving in Venezuela also changed in this period. Two African regions supplied eighty per cent of the captives arriving in Curaçao: the Bight of Benin (forty-three per cent) and West-Central Africa (thirty-nine per cent).⁴⁶ The majority of captives from the Bight of Benin embarked in Ardra and to a lesser extent in Ouidah, both in today's Benin. The Dutch preferred trading with the King of Ardra, who dominated the region, but pressure from the King of Ouidah, where French, Dutch and English slavers operated, decreased the shipments of captives from Ardra.⁴⁷ Captives arriving from West-Central Africa no longer came from Luanda, as in the pre-1641 era, but rather from north of the River Congo. While the majority came from the Atlantic coast of Loango (present-day Congo), others were probably enslaved up the Congo River (present-day Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola). Large numbers of Fon and Ewe captives from the Bight of Benin and slaves from Loango arrived for the first time in Venezuela. The

eponym Loango eventually became synonymous with Curaçaoan origin in eighteenth-century Venezuela: *Loango* meant both “Curaçao black” and an origin on the coast of Loango.⁴⁸

The British *Asiento* and the Caracas Company, 1715-1783

The peace of Utrecht (1713), which gave the *asiento* in Spanish America to the British, curtailed the Curaçao-Venezuela slave traffic. British merchants expected all commerce with Spanish America to increase and not just the slave trade. The latter became a conduit of contraband merchandise of all types and was denounced as such by Spanish colonial authorities from Veracruz to Buenos Aires.⁴⁹ For the duration of the *asiento* (1715-39), British slavers brought more than five thousand captives to La Guaira, near nine hundred to Maracaibo, and eight hundred to Trinidad, Cumaná, and Margarita combined.⁵⁰ In 1715, Dutch authorities in Curaçao reported that there were no buyers for the nearly one thousand slaves who had arrived on the island.⁵¹ Additional evidence suggests that while Dutch traders continued introducing slaves in Venezuela, only half as many arrived yearly during 1715-29 as arrived during the war years of 1702-14.

Cacao and slaves continued to flow between Curaçao and Venezuela after 1714. The annual average of Curaçao’s slave trade with Africa dropped from 1,093 captives between 1702 and 1714 (during wartime) to 358 in 1715-29 (during the British *asiento*), which mirrors the partial closure of the Venezuelan market.⁵² While the transatlantic slave trade to Curaçao dropped precipitously, cacao inflows from Venezuela continued almost without interruption. During the war, Curaçao absorbed an annual average of forty per cent of total Venezuelan cacao exports, a ratio that continued to hold from 1715 to 1729.⁵³ Curaçao also absorbed a large share of the exports of both tobacco and hides from Venezuela. Clearly, the Curaçao-Venezuela traffic continued. Documents refer to slave arrivals in Venezuela in 1721, 1723, and 1725 as “*negros de mala entrada*,” or legalised contraband outside of the British *asiento*.⁵⁴ British slavers complained that their trade with Caracas was unprofitable because of this illegal competition.⁵⁵ I therefore estimate that one out of four slaves sailing out of Curaçao landed in Venezuela in 1715-29, from the time of the British *asiento* to the creation of the Caracas Company. It was not the entry of the British that ended this traffic, but rather the activities of the Caracas Company.

The *Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas*, or simply the Caracas Company, was one of the first attempts of Bourbon Spanish reformers to revitalise production and commerce in Spanish America. This company emerged from imperial concerns that Spain was purchasing more chocolate from the Netherlands than cacao from Caracas; in turn, Spanish products were unable to compete with European goods smuggled into Venezuela. In 1728, the Spanish crown granted the monopoly of cacao trade from Venezuela to a company of Basque merchants of Guipuzcoa—excepted from the monopoly was an annual “cacao galleon” which the planters of Caracas were allowed to send to Veracruz. The Crown also charged the Caracas Company with the task of eliminating contraband and promoting all trade between the colony and Spain.⁵⁶ Both the Company and colonial officials acted swiftly in the 1730s. This thrust against contraband also radically reduced the

transatlantic slave trade to Curaçao. From 1730 to 1741, an average of 138 slaves annually entered Curaçao, comprising only one eighth of the yearly arrivals during the War of Spanish Succession and one fourth of the annual slave disembarkation in the first decade of the British *asiento*. Indeed, the 1730s was the decade of lowest slave arrivals in the entire history of the slave trade to Curaçao (1657-1778), which shows how dependent the island was on Venezuela.⁵⁷ I estimate that only five per cent of the slaves sent from Curaçao to Spanish America landed in Venezuela in the 1730s. In the same period, Curaçao absorbed less than ten per cent of the cacao exports of Venezuela.⁵⁸

The British *asiento* ended in 1739 with the return of hostilities between Britain and Spain, which turned the Dutch of Curaçao into a neutral party with whom the Spanish could trade. The War of Jenkins' Ear (1739-1748) and the Seven Years War (1756-63) reopened Dutch slave trading—and overall commerce—to Venezuela. In the last years of the War of Jenkins' Ear, the annual average of slave arrivals in Curaçao—391 captives between 1742-48—was three times larger than during the 1730s.⁵⁹

The Caracas Company carried on its own slave trading activities in both war and peace, but it never ventured to Africa. A coastguard vessel of the Company seized a British slave ship and brought the slaves in La Guaira in 1741.⁶⁰ Agents of the Company began negotiations with the merchants of Saint Eustatius, another Dutch emporium, to buy captives in 1752 and the Company even purchased its own slaves from Curaçao during the Seven Years War.⁶¹ During interludes of peace in the late 1760s and early 1770s, it contracted British and French slavers to deliver African captives to Puerto Rico, from where the Company shipped them to Venezuela.⁶² The last slave shipment of the Caracas Company to Venezuela was in 1779, just when war between Spain and Britain reopened. Britain briefly occupied Curaçao, further contributing to the scarcity of slaves in Venezuela. Because the British had seized most of the fleet of the Caracas Company and the Spanish Crown eliminated its monopoly of cacao in 1782, the Company was dissolved in 1784-85.⁶³

Venezuela also received increasing numbers of slaves from other parts of the Caribbean during the eighteenth century. Expanding sugar colonies like Saint Domingue, Martinique, and Guadalupe lacked mules, an essential power supply of the pre-industrial era. Reports of contraband trade in mules from Venezuela exist from 1754. The Governor of Venezuela tried to legalise this traffic in order to introduce slaves in 1771, but the Spanish Crown rejected his plan, as mules were deemed essential for local production. In 1776, renewed alliances between the French and Spanish led the Governor of Venezuela to authorise planters to purchase slaves in Martinique and Guadeloupe, in exchange for agricultural products and mules, but cacao was excluded from this traffic given the monopoly of the Caracas Company. Venezuelan access to the French Caribbean slave market began in 1777, when Spanish authorities halved the levies on imported slaves. Partial records of this source of slave arrivals exist for 1778-81.⁶⁴ Slaves were also brought as legalised contraband from the Caribbean to Venezuela by what was known as "*composición de negros de mala entrada*"—a mechanism used to avoid the tax collector. Annual data for this category exist for twenty-four scattered years from 1721 to 1790.⁶⁵ These two separate streams of slave arrivals show Venezuelan

planters taking advantage of the rising influx of slaves in both British and French Caribbeans.

The British *asiento*, the Caracas Company, the Dutch merchants, and purchases of local planters in the circum-Caribbean ensured increasing slave arrivals in 1715-83, when I estimate that 35,617 captives—an annual average of 516 captives—were disembarked in Venezuela.⁶⁶ Slave arrivals rose almost fifteen per cent over the previous phase (1641-1714) of Dutch primacy. Almost all slaves arriving in Venezuela in this period had been reshipped, first from the British Caribbean and then, second, from Curaçao and the French colonies.⁶⁷ From 1715 to 1783, Venezuela was increasingly supplied by the growing British and French transatlantic slave trades.

By tracing the origins of captives arriving in the British, Dutch, and French Caribbean, it is possible to shed light on the African departure for those disembarking in Venezuela. During the British *asiento* (1715-39), slaves arriving in the British Caribbean had mostly departed from the Gold Coast (thirty-nine per cent) and the Bight of Benin (twenty-six per cent). While Cape Coast Castle was the main slave port on the Gold Coast, the single most important port in the Bight of Benin—and, indeed, in West Africa as a whole in this period—was Ouidah. Dahomey developed as a slave trading power in the late seventeenth century and Ouidah beach was the main outlet for the slave trading system of Dahomey.⁶⁸ Post-1739—that is, after the British *asiento*—thirty-five per cent of the slaves arriving in the British Caribbean departed from Bight of Biafra (Bonny and Old Calabar), with a further twenty-four per cent from the Gold Coast (mainly Anomabu). The Dutch slave trade continued operating from both the Gold Coast (thirty-three per cent) and West-Central Africa (thirty-seven per cent) in this period. Most captives departing in Dutch vessels from the Gold Coast had embarked in Elmina, while the majority of those from West-Central Africa had sailed from Malembo. When Venezuelan planters bought slaves in the French Caribbean (between 1778-81), the French slave trade was drawing on the Bight of Benin (thirty-two per cent), West-Central Africa (thirty per cent), and Southeast Africa (fifteen per cent)—from the ports of Ouidah, Malembo, and Mozambique, respectively.⁶⁹ Thus, Venezuela received a great diversity of Africans in these years given the multiple slave traders who operated in the Caribbean.

Nevertheless, despite this growing diversity certain patterns are clear enough. For the first time captives from Fante and Asante arrived in Venezuela via Elmina, Cape Castle, and Anomabu, a pattern that corresponds with the increasing entry of this African region into Atlantic slaving. Ouidah ranked as the main slave port in the Bight of Benin both for British and French traders. Apart from Ketu and Fon captives, a few enslaved Yoruba may have arrived in Venezuela via Ouidah because of warfare between Dahomey and Yoruba kingdoms such as Oyo. Both Dutch and French slavers brought captives from the northern regions of West-Central Africa, but instead of embarking slaves in Loango, most of them departed from Malembo, near the present-day Angolan enclave of Cabinda north of the mouth of the Congo River. Dutch and French slavers could trade directly with African rulers in this section of the coast.⁷⁰ Captives from Mozambique would almost certainly have arrived for the first time in Venezuela via the French Caribbean at the end of this period.⁷¹ Over these seven decades British slavers expanded operations in the Bight of Biafra, as shown by two inventories of Venezuelan estates of the 1740s, where most of

slaves were described as *calabari* and with other eponyms of this region.⁷² By the 1780s most of the slaves arriving in Venezuela were known as Igbo, although the most common Spanish eponym for these captives was *calabari* given the earlier importance of Old Calabar as slave trading port. The Bight of Biafra would become the main region of slave departure for Venezuela in the 1780s as a British slave-trading firm took over the entire traffic to this Spanish colony.

From Baker and Dawson to the First Years of the Liberalisation of the Traffic, 1784-1794

Bourbon reforms aimed at developing production and commerce in the Spanish colonies by increasing slave arrivals. The crown first contracted with foreign companies and then opened the entire traffic. After peace with Britain, the Spanish Crown arranged with Baker and Dawson, a major Liverpool-based slave trading company, to deliver slaves in Venezuela via Trinidad in 1784.⁷³ Then, the Crown threw open the slave trade to their Caribbean colonies in 1789. However, no Spanish merchants located either in Spain or its colonies ventured to Africa for captives for Venezuela. Instead, the Caribbean—with the exception of the French colonies—supplied ninety per cent of the captives that arrived between 1790 and 1794. In the period from the contract with Baker and Dawson to the first years of the liberalisation of the traffic slave inflows into Venezuela reached a historical peak. The Baker and Dawson's contract (1784-89) together with the first five years of the liberalisation of this traffic (1790-94) saw an almost tripling of average annual slave arrivals in Venezuela in comparison to the previous period. In just eleven years, I estimate that 17,056 captives disembarked, an annual average of 1,551 slaves. Detailed data on disembarkations survives for 15,506 slaves, to which I add ten per cent. Initially most of the slaves arrived in Trinidad from Africa rather than from other Caribbean ports. Why Trinidad? The Spanish Crown encouraged the settlement of Trinidad given fears of British expansion. In addition, both the Crown and colonial officials suspected that the vessels of Baker and Dawson would disembark smuggled merchandise with the slaves. To discourage contraband, Spanish authorities fixed lightly populated Trinidad as the point of entry into this part of the Spanish Americas. Spanish ships would then take captives to the Venezuelan mainland. But from 1790, liberalisation meant that the British Caribbean, Curaçao, Santo Domingo, and minor Antilles such as Saint Croix and Saint Thomas became the major suppliers of slaves to Venezuela—in effect reactivating the intra-Caribbean slave trading that had predominated before the Baker and Dawson years.

The largest flow of enslaved Africans to Venezuela occurred at a time of major diversification of export agriculture. While cacao amounted to nearly ninety per cent of the legal exports of the province of Caracas in 1778, its share dropped to sixty five per cent in the mid 1780s and to less than fifty per cent in the early 1790s.⁷⁴ Baker and Dawson's slaves arrived just as planters began experimenting with indigo, coffee, and cotton. Ocumare del Tuy, a district of diversified cacao, coffee, and sugar plantations in the valley of the Tuy River south of Caracas, saw the largest increase of slave population throughout in its history between 1786 and 1790.⁷⁵ Concurrently, slave prices were at historical minimum as the prices of adult slaves

oscillated between 167 and 187 *pesos* in 1784-86, compared to 260 *pesos* in 1775 and 275 in 1805.⁷⁶

Buildings were constructed in both La Guaira and Trinidad to quarantine the large numbers of slaves sent directly from Africa by Baker and Dawson.⁷⁷ These sites were essential given the typically high mortality experienced by slaves from the Bight of Biafra, a region supplying over half the British slave trade in this period; thus, most slaves arriving in Venezuela had initially departed from Bonny and Old Calabar.⁷⁸ Waterborne diseases were pervasive in the Niger Delta and killed slaves even after their arrival in the New World. Despite its long-standing role in this traffic, the Bight of Biafra had a dense population by African standards as a result of population growth.⁷⁹ The Igbo component among the enslaved resulted from an internal slave traffic of captives who passed through traders of the Niger River south to the main slave trading ports.⁸⁰ This was the largest arrival of *calabari* captives in the history of Venezuela, and also, coincidentally, the last wave of slaves arriving as a result of a single slave trading contract. Captives arriving in the following five years (1790-94) had multiple origins as they endured various intra-Caribbean itineraries due to the diversity of slave traders who had brought them.

Atlantic Warfare, Rebellions, and the Slave Trade, 1795-1811

Following the upsurge of slave arrivals during both the Baker and Dawson period and the first five years of the liberalisation of the slave trade this traffic stopped almost completely. From 1795 to 1811, nearly two thousand captives appear to have landed in Venezuela. Federico Brito's explanation for why the slave trade ended well before the 1810 prohibition was economic stagnation. He envisioned a "slave mode of production" in Venezuela, which declined due to slave rebellions, miscegenation, and slave manumission. Brito argued that *mestizaje* and manumission led to a new class of free small farmers of mixed African and European origins who worked in a "feudal mode of production." According to his view, landowners began to replace slaves with these free farmers, whose work was allegedly more profitable than slave labour by the late eighteenth century. So, in the critical period of 1797-1808, when British continental blockades interrupted Spanish commerce, Venezuela was transitioning from slave to feudal mode of production, a view that some Venezuelan scholars still accept.⁸¹ But if this were the case, Venezuela would indeed be an exception among New World slave societies at the end of the eighteenth century, given that in all these regions the slave trade ended because of political rather than economic causes.⁸²

While this is not the place to fully discuss the end of the slave trade to Venezuela, I suggest a set of political causes connected to the broader Atlantic world that the old stages theories of history ignore. The first is Atlantic warfare that disrupted the slave trade and the second is the participation of free blacks and slaves in revolts and rebellions across the Caribbean. These political causes are of the same nature as those which determined the changing slave trading routes in the previous phases of this traffic to Venezuela: namely, the interplay of European empires, commerce, and Atlantic warfare. Economic factors also played a role, but I would point to the lack of capital and credit in Venezuela, the rise of slave prices in the British Caribbean, and the lack of locally based merchants able to engage in long-distance

commerce. Analysis of annual slave arrivals illustrates the importance of political factors. From 1790 to 1794 average slave arrivals of 1,437 per year was similar to that of the Baker and Dawson era. This annual *average* is similar to the entire *total* number of slaves known to have entered Venezuela from 1795 to 1811.⁸³ Why this precipitous fall?

The most important slave rebellions in the history of both Venezuela and Curaçao took place in 1795. In May, the first uprising took place in Coro, the nearest port to Curaçao, supported by both free blacks and slaves. As with other late Spanish colonial revolts, the rebels denounced local authorities but defended the Spanish monarchy. Rumors of a law supposedly abolishing slavery in the Spanish realm but concealed by colonial authorities also mobilised slaves.⁸⁴ The French Republic had abolished slavery in 1794, and thereby set off a wave of slave conspiracies and rebellions across the British, Spanish, and Dutch Caribbean in 1795. At the same time as France invaded Holland in 1795, a French agent was sent to Curaçao. Slaves on the island were inspired by the belief that the French edict applied to them. Resistance movements in both Coro and Curaçao were repressed with violence unusual for this region.⁸⁵ Whether or not these events were materially linked to the revolutionary impulse emanating from Saint Domingue, Venezuelan elites saw them as connected. They feared both slave insurrection and a free colored government. In 1796, news of a coup led by free coloreds and supported by black French troops in Curaçao further fuelled the fears of Spanish authorities in Caracas.⁸⁶ In 1799-1800, minor upheavals involving black troops from French Guadeloupe broke out just before the British occupation of Curaçao from 1800 to 1802 and again from 1807 to 1816. Spanish colonial authorities worried that British occupation of Curaçao would inundate their territory with contraband and seditious papers as happened when the British took Trinidad in 1797.⁸⁷ On the mainland, a conspiracy led by *pardo* and *criollo* militiamen in combination with non-elite merchants was revealed in Caracas in 1797, a slave plot was uncovered in Cumaná in 1798, and a conspiracy led by French privateers was checked in Maracaibo in 1799.⁸⁸ In Venezuela, colonial authorities' fears of the French increased as Spain abandoned Santo Domingo to France in July 1795. In the following five years, no other major Spanish American region was more affected than Venezuela by the combined threat of French privateers, unrest among black troops, and British invasion, as well as slave and republican conspiracies.⁸⁹

French and then British invasions of Curaçao stopped slave traffic into Venezuela. Curaçao became a naval base for French privateers against United States' vessels during the undeclared maritime war of 1795-1800, and this drove U.S. slave traders away from the Caracas coast.⁹⁰ British slavers could not trade with Spanish territory during war, and the Spanish crown prohibited slaves from the French Caribbean in order to contain the spread of revolution. After Spain allied with Britain in 1808, commerce with both the U.S. and Britain absorbed two thirds of all trade from La Guaira. But both Britain and the U.S. ended their own slave trades in 1807-1808. Moreover, in 1806 the British had passed an act forbidding the supply of slaves to occupied foreign colonies, which precluded the renaissance of Curaçao as slave entrepôt. As Caracas lacked local merchants who were able to engage in such a long-distance trade as the slave traffic, the Spanish could not fill the resulting gap by the time that the war of independence engulfed Venezuela in 1810.⁹¹

A reference to Cuba and the Río de la Plata—two Spanish colonies that developed direct slave trade connections with Africa—underlines the significance of foreign slave traders, particularly from the U.S. and Brazil. Three quarters of all slaves disembarking in Cuba from Africa between 1791 and 1807 were carried on U.S. and British ships.⁹² On this island, U.S. merchants dominated the slave market by 1796, just seven years after the liberalisation of the traffic. The royal measures in 1797 allowing trade with neutral powers also turned U.S. merchants into the main slave suppliers of Cuba.⁹³ Cuban-located merchants—whether born in Cuba or Spain—expanded their slave trading operations across the Atlantic only after 1808, when the predominantly maritime warfare of the previous years receded. Havana's merchants began to master techniques of this traffic in the 1810s. In the following decade, they consolidated a domestic commercial apparatus around the slave trade.⁹⁴ Thus, it took three decades after the liberalisation of this traffic for the Cuban merchants to secure their position in the domestic slave trade. In the case of the Río de la Plata, Portuguese and U.S. vessels were the main slave traders in the direct routes from Africa from the liberalisation of this traffic to the beginning of the war of independence, also in 1810. But in both Montevideo and Buenos Aires, locally based merchants were able to organise slave voyages direct from Africa largely due to their connections with the Luso-Brazilian Atlantic.⁹⁵ Both in Cuba and the Río de la Plata, Spanish slavers were able to operate only during brief periods of peace with Britain before 1808. Thus, almost no intra-Caribbean slave traffic, much less transatlantic trade, occurred in Venezuela from 1795 to 1807.

Both the slave trade and slavery had expanded in the early 1790s, but Venezuelan commerce and credit collapsed in the second half of the decade. Slavery as a system was not in decline in cacao plantation areas by the end of the colonial rule. In the Tuy Valley, Barlovento, the Aragua Valley, Guarenas, and Guatire, the slave population doubled whereas free population increased by just over half from 1783 to 1809. This was the result of slave inflows in 1780s and early 1790s and a moderate natural increase.⁹⁶ But Atlantic warfare undermined the demand for cacao harvested with slave labour. Venezuela weathered British blockades by trading with neutral powers after 1796 as did other Spanish colonies. But cacao had to be shipped right after harvesting to avoid rotting, and any delays created enormous losses for planters as Spanish Atlantic trade fluctuated unpredictably from 1796 to 1808. Shortage of specie also affected Venezuela as the Spanish crown drained almost every silver *peso* sailing out of Mexico to finance naval war against Britain and to stave off an impending French invasion. Despite commerce with neutrals, Venezuelan exports fell.⁹⁷ Cacao prices dropped from eighteen *pesos* a *fanega* in 1800 to six *pesos* in 1812. Coffee in particular could not weather this crisis given that coffee trees needed five years before first harvest. While cacao prices plummeted, slave prices in the British Caribbean—the main supplier of captives for Venezuela—soared. The sterling cash price of slaves in Jamaica rose from fifty-four to eighty-six between 1790 and 1801.⁹⁸ Venezuelan elites were always land-rich rather than money-rich; thus, both capital and credit tumbled in the last fifteen years of colonial rule.⁹⁹ Economic factors stemming from the political crisis created an environment inimical to investment in slaves after 1795. When the rebel government banned the slave trade in 1810, Venezuelan elites had survived almost without access to new slaves for fifteen years.

Political turbulence and the inability to launch slave trading operations led the elites of Caracas to devise plans to expand coerced labour without additional slave arrivals. In 1799, the *Cabildo* and the guild of merchants suggested eliminating the tax on slave purchases within Venezuela to facilitate a shift of urban domestic slaves to plantations. They also suggested forcibly reallocating the freedmen from Caracas to agricultural estates, and as a last resort, to introduce slaves.¹⁰⁰ While authorities in Spain encouraged slave arrivals, local elites wanted to force free people of mixed ancestry to work in agriculture. Venezuelan elites saw the solution to the labour shortage in reallocating the *pardo* urban population, the locus of their political fears, in the countryside rather than increasing slave arrivals. As early as 1776, the municipal authorities wanted to curtail the migration of free people of color from the countryside to Caracas. When slave rebellions and urban conspiracies rose in 1795-96, both the municipal government and the merchants petitioned the crown to ban *pardo* militias in Caracas. They argued that free people of color should be working in plantations rather than bearing arms.¹⁰¹ When British blockades produced a major agricultural crisis in 1801, a leading merchant proposed to force free *pardos* to work in estates.¹⁰² In 1811, the revolutionary government that had replaced the colonial regime tried to use police to coerce free people of colour to work in agriculture. Rather than pointing to the profitability of free labour as leading to end the slave trade, I argue that declining slave arrivals led to a severe labour shortage.

Only a handful of records of slave arrivals in Venezuela survive for the period 1795 to 1811. In 1795, the former representative of Baker and Dawson in Venezuela, Edward Barry, contracted with the Spanish authorities to introduce slaves via Trinidad, but British occupation of the island scuppered this scheme. Barry renewed his plan when a brief peace with Britain was signed in 1803, but then died before completing the transaction. On the one hand, in 1803 the Captain General of Venezuela saw slaves as “a force that would become fearsome as times goes on.”¹⁰³ But, on the other, a German merchant Frederic Lenz brought in three hundred slaves from the Danish island of Saint Thomas in 1805. A new Intendant and Captain General encouraged the traffic once more in 1809 and the two last transatlantic slave voyages arrived in La Guaira, one from the Gold Coast in 1810 and the other from an unspecified African port in 1811, this despite the fact that the revolutionary government had prohibited the slave trade in 1810.

Atlantic warfare excluded the major transatlantic slave traders from Venezuela. Only neutral Danish ships—operated either by traders located in Saint Thomas or by U.S. merchants using the Danish flag to avoid French seizure—provided a handful of captives during this last phase of the traffic, even though the Danish abolition of the transatlantic slave trade was effective since 1803. Out of the known 1,343 slave arrivals to Venezuela in this period, 689 originated in the Danish Caribbean. Given the extreme paucity of records on this period I have added an additional estimate of 689 slave arrivals from the Danish Caribbean, which makes for a total figure of 2,032 slaves disembarked from 1795 to 1811. This was a minor share of the 24,821 total slave arrivals in the Danish Caribbean in this same period. Slaves passing through the Danish Caribbean came from West-Central Africa north of the Congo River, the Bight of Biafra, and the Gold Coast (Christianborg).¹⁰⁴ The vessels that came to Venezuela direct from Africa sailed from Cape Coast Castle and other

unspecified ports on the Gold Coast. Thus, the Gold Coast was probably the main source of captives arriving in Venezuela between 1795 and 1811, with West-Central Africa (Loango and other origins north from the Congo River) and the Bight of Biafra contributing significant shares as they had in the past.

Conclusions

While New World demand and trans-imperial trading networks shaped slave trading routes and broad embarkation areas, it was African internal developments that determined the specific origins of captives and the circumstances leading to their enslavement. The first Portuguese slave trading operations in Cape Verde Islands and São Tomé led to the earliest arrivals in Venezuela. The Portuguese *asiento* that followed drew heavily on Luanda, with a minority of captives continuing from the Cape Verde Islands, probably from the enclave of Bissau. From the mid-seventeenth century on, Dutch hegemony of this traffic brought to Venezuela slaves departing from Ardra and Ouidah in the Bight of Benin as well as from Loango in West-Central Africa. From this time on, Loango became an “umbrella term” in Venezuela applied to all who embarked north of the Congo River. The English *asiento* brought further diversity of captives to this colony as slaves embarked from Cape Coast Castle and Anomabu on the Gold Coast in the early eighteenth century. Captives departing from Ouidah and the region north of the Congo River (but Malembo instead of Loango) continued to arrive in Venezuela during this period. Some slaves coming in via the French Caribbean may have originated in Mozambique in the 1770s, but this is uncertain. While the slave-trading route from the Bight of Biafra to Venezuela via the British Caribbean was operational from the mid-eighteenth century, the contract of Baker and Dawson sent an unprecedented flow of slaves to this colony direct from Bonny and Old Calabar in the 1780s. This was the major direct slave-trading link from Africa to Venezuela. The short era of trade liberalisation (1789-1794) ensured that slave origins returned to the diversity characteristic of the earlier routes that brought captives to the colony. Under the combined British and French threats to Venezuela, only a tenuous traffic with the Danish Caribbean survived in the last and final phase of the slave trade to Venezuela. The Gold Coast was the main supplier but additional *loango* and *calabari* captives also arrived.

No vessel ever departed from Venezuela to embark slaves in Africa. Instead, the overlapping trading networks of Atlantic European empires ensured an intermittent supply of slaves to the colony. As Venezuela first drew on Portuguese, and then on Dutch and British slave traders, it received Africans from many different regions, a familiar pattern across Spanish America. Thus, the black population of Venezuela was formed by many of the same forces operating in other parts of the Spanish Americas.

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Notes

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- 1 By the treaty of Algaçovas (1479), Castile renounced exploration of Africa to the Portuguese in exchange of Portuguese recognition of Castilian occupation of the Canary Islands. This was confirmed by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494).
 - 2 See the foundational works of Acosta and Brito in the bibliography. For more recent research see Lombardi, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery in Venezuela, 1820-1854*; Ferry, "Encomienda, African Slavery, and Agriculture"; Aizpurúa "Esclavitud, navegación y fugas de esclavos en el Curazao del siglo XVIII"; Rupert, "Marronage, Manumission and Maritime Trade in the Early Modern Caribbean"; and Warsh, "Enslaved Pearl Divers in the Sixteenth Century Caribbean."
 - 3 Before British occupation of Trinidad in 1797, slaves arriving in this island were most likely reshipped to mainland Venezuela. In the late colonial period, Trinidad was part of the larger Captaincy of Venezuela before British occupation.
 - 4 Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela colonial*, 137.
 - 5 Aizpurúa, "Esclavitud, navegación y fugas de esclavos en el Curazao del siglo XVIII," 84; Rupert, "Marronage, Manumission and Maritime Trade."
 - 6 Minchin and Newson, *From Capture to Sale*.
 - 7 Warsh, "Enslaved Pearl Divers," 347; Almeida Mendes, "The Foundations of the System," 71.
 - 8 Lucena, *Vísperas de la independencia americana*, 58-60.
 - 9 *Encomienda* was a grant conferred by the Crown to the conquerors in order to extract labour and tribute from the Indian population in America. From 1529 to 1538, the Spanish enslaved at least 649 Amerindians in Venezuela, a third of whom were sent to Hispaniola in an attempt to offset depopulation in this island. Arcila, *El primer libro de la hacienda pública*, 21, Cuadro N°3.
 - 10 Warsh, "Enslaved Pearl Divers," 346; Otte, *Las Perlas del Caribe*, 49.
 - 11 Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, 44-63.
 - 12 Arcila, *El primer libro de la hacienda pública*, 21, Cuadro N°3; Acosta, *Historia de los portugueses en Venezuela*, 34; Acosta, "La Trata de Esclavos en Venezuela," 171-2.
 - 13 Arcila, *Hacienda y Comercio de Venezuela*, 19-21; Arcila, *Economía Colonial de Venezuela*, 126.
 - 14 Rojas, *La Rebelión del Negro Miguel*; Acosta, *Vida de los esclavos negros*, 146-7.
 - 15 *Actas del Cabildo de Caracas*, Vol. 1, 153 (June 2, 1590); Acosta, "La Trata de Esclavos en Venezuela," 5; Troconis, *Documentos para el estudio de los esclavos*, 35; Arcila, *El primer libro de la hacienda pública*, Cuadro N°12; Arcila, *Hacienda y Comercio de Venezuela en el Siglo XVI*, 149; Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela colonial*, 113; *Voyages Database*.
 - 16 Estimates are rounded. The exact estimate is 6,433, which comes from multiplying the 1,727 known slave arrivals—both from the Caribbean and Africa to Venezuela—by the ratio between the figure of 33,434 known slave arrivals and 126,950 estimated captives sent to Spanish America. The work of Antonio de Almeida Mendes further clarifies how these estimates were constructed. See Almeida Mendes, "The Foundations of the System." Note that his figures have been updated in the *Voyages Database* to take account of ongoing research. I have also updated the estimates from *Voyages* because the estimates section on the current web site is based on the 2008 version of the data set.
 - 17 Brito asserted that those 2,500 slaves were disembarked in Venezuela, but they seem to have been sent to all of Spanish America. Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela colonial*, 99; Acosta, *Vida de los esclavos*, 24; Saco *Historia de la Esclavitud*, Vol. 1, 235. Treasury records of Caracas show no levies on slave shipments for this period since the local administrator lumped together different accounts, which makes it impossible to

- track these slave arrivals, Arcila, *El primer libro de la hacienda*, 22. Enrique Otte follows the figure marked by the license since he asserts that more than four thousand slaves arrived in Spanish America. Otte, *Von Bankiers und Kaufleuten*, 229-30.
- 18 For the term "Angolan wave," see Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans*, 39. While Almeida Mendes sees this wave occurring in the years 1576-1600, David Wheat sees ships from Angola first arriving in Cartagena in the late 1580s, but not overtaking vessels departing from Upper Guinea until around 1620. Almeida Mendes, "The Foundations of the System," 83-6; Wheat, "The First Great Waves."
 - 19 Arcila, *Hacienda y Comercio de Venezuela*, 197; Arcila, *Régimen de la encomienda en Venezuela*, 214-6; Acosta, *Vida de los esclavos*, 149.
 - 20 Ferry, "Encomienda, African Slavery," 609-11.
 - 21 University of California Los Angeles, Young Research Library, Special Collections, Col. 691 (JCLA-YRL, SC-Col. 691) Box 9, Folder AGI Santo Domingo, 193. Governor García de Girón to Real Audiencia, August 5, 1614.
 - 22 In 1578, the Spanish Crown ordered the expulsion of the Portuguese from Venezuela for engaging in illegal trade. Because the Spanish authorities in Caracas protested, Portuguese merchants remained untouched, probably because theirs were the *only* ships arriving in Venezuela. Slave vessels brought Portuguese crew members, some of whom chose to live in Venezuela. Forty Portuguese men were listed in Caracas in 1607, among them the representative of the slave trade contract. The Portuguese were attractive newcomers for the traditional families of Caracas given their commercial links with Mexico and Europe as well as their ability to introduce slaves. A new class of merchant-planters rose in Caracas as the slave trade increased throughout this period. Acosta, *Historia de los portugueses en Venezuela*, 38, 41-2, 51-2, 55; Ferry, "Encomienda, African Slavery," 622.
 - 23 Ferry, "Encomienda, African Slavery," 618-32.
 - 24 Acosta, *Vida de los esclavos*, 151-70; Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela*, 86-9. Sugar production had an early start in Venezuela, but supplied local rather than Atlantic markets. Sugar was first cultivated by Amerindian coerced labour, but then by enslaved Africans. Ferry, "Encomienda, African Slavery"; McKinley, *Pre-Revolutionary Caracas*, 55-7.
 - 25 Estimates are rounded. The exact estimate is 6,362, which comes from multiplying the 4,871 known slave arrivals by the ratio between the figure of 161,903 known slave arrivals and 211,453 estimated captives sent to Spanish America. See the *Voyages Database*.
 - 26 See the sources for Table 1.
 - 27 *Voyages Database*.
 - 28 Hoberman, *Mexico's Merchant Elite*.
 - 29 Ferry, "Encomienda, African Slavery," 625.
 - 30 JCLA-YRL, SC-Col. 691, Box 9, Folder AGI Santo Domingo 187, Governor of Venezuela to Real Audiencia, 1681.
 - 31 JCLA-YRL, SC-Col. 691, Box 12, Folder BN Paris Clarambault 1016 (2), Undated letter, c. 1680, f. 522v.
 - 32 Mexico and Spain continued importing Venezuela cacao, but their combined share was similar to the illegal market at Curaçao in the first half of the eighteenth century. See comparisons by Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, 219-20.
 - 33 Rupert, "Contraband Trade."
 - 34 Dutch Guiana was the other major region of slave disembarkation for the Dutch slave trade. See the *Voyages Database*.
 - 35 Vega, *El tráfico de esclavos con América*; Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, 22-7; Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 27, 32-9; Jordaan, "The Curaçao Slave Market," 223.
 - 36 Emmanuel and Emmanuel, *History of the Jews*, 76-8; Escobar *Inquisición y judaizantes*, 275; Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, 135. While the Spanish expelled the Dutch from Tucacas in 1721-2, this site continued as a rendezvous for smugglers during the next decades.
 - 37 Email communication with Linda Rupert, August 2, 2011 and emails with Ramón Aizpurúa, March-November 2011.
 - 38 Jordaan indicates that slightly more than one per cent of slaves died on board in the Curaçao harbour before disembarkation, but this ratio fell over time. After disembarkation, an average eight per cent of slaves were classified as *manqueros*—impaired or elderly people. Nearly a quarter was ill and approximately two thirds were considered *piezas* to be sold to the *asiento*. Jordaan, "The Curaçao Slave Market," 234-5; see also Klooster, "Curaçao and the Caribbean Transit Trade." This percentage of slaves sold to the

- asiento roughly coincides with the figures provided by Vega on slaves arriving in Spanish America shown in Table 2. Vega, *El tráfico de esclavos con América*, 186-7, 194-201. Note that both *manquerons* and ill slaves were sold at auctions.
- 39 Vega, *El tráfico de esclavos con América*, 186-187, 194-201. A few slaves were sent to Saint Marten instead of Curaçao, too.
 - 40 Major Dutch contraband occurred where the Spanish were not able to control the coast as in colonial Venezuela. See Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, 116.
 - 41 An additional 1,985 slaves arrived legally in Venezuela via the contract of Grillo and Lomelín. I do not apply my estimate of illegal departures from Curaçao to Venezuela in 1679 given that this year the Dutch ship *Goude Voet* brought 750 slaves, a figure that surpasses my annual estimate of twenty-five per cent. Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, Appendix I.
 - 42 Rupert, "Inter-colonial networks," 80.
 - 43 For Dutch slave arrivals to Spanish America between 1652 and 1711 see <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1652&yearTo=1711&natinimp=8&mjslptimp=31100.31200.31300.31400.40000>. For other slave traders disembarking captives in the same region and period see <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1652&yearTo=1711&natinimp=3.6.7.9.10.15.30&mjslptimp=31100.31200.31300.31400.40000>.
 - 44 Goslinga, "Curaçao as a Slave-trading Center."
 - 45 Jordaan, "The Curaçao Slave Market," 225; Goslinga, "Curaçao as a Slave-trading Center," 25-7.
 - 46 *Voyages Database*.
 - 47 Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 97; Law, *Ouidah: The Social History*.
 - 48 Klooster, "The Rising Expectations," 69.
 - 49 Donoso, *El Asiento de Esclavos*.
 - 50 Palmer, *Human Cargoes*, 107-10.
 - 51 Goslinga, "Curaçao as a Slave-trading Center," 34.
 - 52 *Voyages Database*.
 - 53 Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, 228-9. For tobacco and hides, see 232-4.
 - 54 Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela*, 135.
 - 55 Tamaro, "A New World Plantation Region," 232.
 - 56 Hussey, *The Caracas Company*; Garate, *La Real Compañía*, 580-2.
 - 57 *Voyages Database*.
 - 58 Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, 228-9.
 - 59 *Voyages Database*.
 - 60 Archivo General de Indias, Indiferente 2819, 1746-1765.
 - 61 UCLA-YRL, SC-Col. 691, Box 4, Folder BM Egerton 1756, Letters on the slave trade by the Ricardos' brothers, Sept.-Dec., 1754, and Caracas, Sept. 16, 1754; Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela*, 134.
 - 62 Garate, *La Real Compañía*, 580-2; Acosta, "La Trata de Esclavos en Venezuela," 17, 19-24.
 - 63 García-Baquero, "El comercio de neutrales."
 - 64 Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela*, 137. In 1778-81, the French Caribbean received twenty-four thousand slaves direct from Africa. See the *Voyages Database*. Nearly eight thousand mules were traded legally from Venezuela to foreign colonies in 1794. Aizpurúa, "Las mulas venezolanas," note 33.
 - 65 Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela*, 134.
 - 66 Detailed data on slave disembarkations survives for 29,902 captives in this period, which represents eighty-four per cent of my estimate of 35,617 captives. The rest is comprised of the estimate of the slave traffic from Curaçao to Venezuela. Out of the figure of slaves who sailed from Curaçao to Spanish America from 1715 to 1783 (19,510), my estimate of the percentage of the slaves sent to Venezuela breaks down in this way: twenty-five per cent during the first years of the British *Asiento* (1715-29); five per cent during the first years of the Caracas Company (1730-41); fifty per cent during the last years of the Wars of Jenkins' Ear (1742-48); back to twenty-five per cent in 1749-55, when Klooster shows ongoing Venezuelan-Curaçao traffic; fifty per cent during the Seven Years War (1756-63); and thirty-three per cent from then to 1783, given that the 1760s saw Venezuelan planters increasingly selling mules and agricultural products to purchase slaves in the Caribbean. Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela*, 122; Aizpurúa, "Las mulas venezolanas." When evidence of legalised contraband is provided for specific years, I do not apply the estimates of the slave traffic between Curaçao and Venezuela in order to avoid duplication of slave arrivals.
 - 67 Apart from Caribbean departure, there is no additional data of origins for half of all slaves arriving in this period.
 - 68 This despite the fact that Dahomey's con-

- quest of Ouidah in 1727 actually led slave shipments to decrease in this port. See Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas*, 121.
- 69 *Voyages Database*.
- 70 On the Bight of Benin and the Gold Coast see the works of Robin Law: *The Oyo Empire, The Slave Coast of West Africa and Ouidah*. See also St. Clair, *The Grand Slave Emporium*.
- 71 *Voyages Database*.
- 72 Ortega, *La esclavitud en el contexto*, 80.
- 73 King, "Evolution of Free Slave Trade"; Behrendt, "The British Slave Trade, 1785-1807"; Murray, *Odious Commerce*.
- 74 McKinley, *Pre-Revolutionary Caracas*, 35-62. This evolution is based on legal trade. Data on illegal trade via Curaçao shows early diversification. See Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, 230-3 and Aizpurúa, *Curacao y la costa de Caracas*.
- 75 Himmelstein, "A Relaxed System," 39 and 90.
- 76 Tamaro, "A New World Plantation," 235. These figures are not adjusted by inflation; thus, the difference may be less than shown.
- 77 Acosta, "La Trata de Esclavos en Venezuela," 25.
- 78 The Bight of Biafra had the highest mortality rates in the history of the transatlantic slave trade: an average of nineteen per cent of captives sailing outside of this region died before disembarkation. See *Voyages Database*.
- 79 Northrup, *Trade without Rulers*; Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra*.
- 80 Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers*, 18, 32; Behrendt, Latham, and Northrup, *The Diary of Antera Duke*.
- 81 Brito, *Estructura económica de Venezuela Colonial*, 304-5, 351-3, 366-8, and 375-401; Pollak-Eltz, *La esclavitud en Venezuela*, 44.
- 82 Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*.
- 83 Detailed data exists only for 1,343 slave arrivals, but I estimate that nearly two thousand slaves arrived during this period.
- 84 In 1790, a pamphlet purportedly authored by the slaves of Caracas complained about the lax application of royal measures of 1789 on slavery. Archivo General de Indias, MP-Pasquines, 4; Andreo, *La intendencia en Venezuela*, 187-8.
- 85 Aizpurúa, "Revolution and Politics in Venezuela and Curaçao," 98-100.
- 86 News of these events reached Venezuela promptly as almost half of all ships entering Curaçao from September 1796 to May 1798 hoisted the Spanish colours. Oostindie, "Slave Resistance," 2-6.
- 87 Aizpurúa, "Revolution and Politics in Venezuela and Curaçao," 106.
- 88 *Idem*; Geggus, "Slavery, War and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean," 46-9.
- 89 Cuba experienced Atlantic warfare and slave uprisings and was heavily fortified after the British occupation in 1762; thus Cuba had better military defense and fortifications than Venezuela. The Río de la Plata lacked slave uprisings and was far from the French Caribbean, although it did experience British invasions in 1806-7.
- 90 Klooster and Oostindie, "Preface," ix.
- 91 Merchants were not abundant in Venezuela, except in Caracas and La Guaira. Lucena, *Visperas de la independencia americana*, 179, 197, 380.
- 92 Marques, "A participação norte-americana no tráfico transatlântico de escravos," 102.
- 93 Johnson, "The Rise and Fall of Creole Participation in the Cuban Slave Trade," 66-7.
- 94 Ortega, "Cuban Merchants, Slave Trade Knowledge, and the Atlantic World," 235, 246.
- 95 *Voyages Database*; Borucki, "The Slave Trade to the Río de la Plata."
- 96 Tamaro, "A New World Plantation Region," 258. Yet the largest population group was free people of mixed origins. Out of the nearly 430,000 people who lived in Venezuela by 1809, 38.22 per cent were free *pardos*, 25.5 per cent were people of full European origin, 15.09 per cent were slaves, 8.07 per cent were free blacks, and 13.13 per cent were Amerindians. But *pardos* as well as free and enslaved blacks comprised seventy-five per cent of the coastal populations such as in Coro. Lombardi, *The Decline and Abolition of Negro Slavery*, 132.
- 97 García-Baquero, "El comercio de neutrales."
- 98 *Voyages Database*.
- 99 Lucena, *Visperas de la independencia americana*, 70-1, 341.
- 100 Biblioteca de la Real Academia de Historia, Madrid, Colección Manuscritos sobre América, *Plan de comercio para la provincia de Caracas, puntos del Ayuntamiento y Consulado*, 1799, T. IV, ff. 344-6.
- 101 It was not only poor *pardos* who troubled Venezuelan elites, but also those who had achieved enough economic success to

claim the same rights as people of full Spanish ancestry. Venezuelan elites produced the loudest opposition in the empire against the 1795 edict allowing *pardos* to purchase whiteness. Twinam, "Purchasing Whiteness," 151.

- 102 Lucena, *Vísperas de la independencia*, 43-4, 80-7.
- 103 *Ibid.*, 55-60.
- 104 *Voyages Database*.