



Joseph C. Dorsey. *Slave Traffic in the Age of Abolition: Puerto Rico, West Africa, and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean, 1815-1859.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. 311 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2478-3.



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Published on H-LatAm (September, 2004)

Y se ponga a beriguay and start asking questions si soy cristiano, judo, as to whether I am a Christian, Jew tucio, mandinga o cang. Turk, Mandinga or Cang. Manuel A. Alonso, El Jbaro (1849)

In the 1830s, the Irish mercenary George D. Flinter argued that African/black slavery played an insignificant economic role in Puerto Rico. His apologia of slavery, *A View of the Present Condition of the Slave Population in the Island of Puerto Rico*, represents one of the earliest attempts to cover up the extent of Puerto Ricans involvement in the African slave trade. Although subsequent research proved Flinter wrong, with few exceptions Puerto Rico's ties to the African slave trade have drawn comparatively little systematic scholarly attention. Joseph C. Dorsey's *Slave Traffic in the Age of Abolition* reminds us that slave trafficking was an international affair that involved Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean at various levels of cooperation and conflict. He argues that much of the human cargoes destined to Puerto Rico during the Age of Abolition came underground or went un-recorded, as hinted in Alonsos verses cited above. Thus, as the author maintains, any attempt to understand Puerto Rico's role in the large-scale importation of African bonded labor must give due consideration to this global black marketing context.

The book builds around and beyond the path-

breaking studies on the African experience in Puerto Rico pioneered by Luis Manuel Daz Soler and Manuel Alvarez Nazario, and that later led to *Arturo Morales Carrins Auge y Decadencia de la Trata Negrera en Puerto Rico, 1820-1860* (1978). The earlier interpretations painted a partial portrait of this traffic based on limited sources, were influenced by the now exhausted Tannenbaum thesis, or focused on the institutional/diplomatic repercussions of the trade. Dorsey carefully scrutinizes some of their findings critically, pointing out areas where his inquiry converges with or differs from that of his predecessors in the field. More importantly, he sheds significant new light on the subject by piecing together fragmented and contradictory data scattered in Portuguese, English, French, and Dutch colonial archives.

The author prompts us to ask ourselves, why has Puerto Rico's role in the African slave trade been silenced or dismissed as negligible? Historically, one of the dominant explanations of Puerto Rico's seemingly marginal role in the African slave trade centers on Cuba's premier role as the Hispanic Caribbean's earliest and most successful slave-based plantation enclave. As Dorsey suggests, however, the fact that Cuba took the lion's share of African captives ferried to the Hispanic Caribbean does not necessarily mean that planters in Puerto Rico surrendered their slavocratic aspirations to their Cuban coun-

terparts. Even in the face of England's international campaign to end the African slave trade in the Americas, slaveowners in Puerto Rico went out of their way, often by partnering with Hispanic and international associates, to procure African bondsmen and women throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

As Dorsey shows, diehard, profit-minded, crafty Antillean, European, and African slave traders connected to Puerto Rico and Cuba foiled the British abolitionist crusade in the West coast of Africa and the Caribbean in a variety of ways. Some took advantage of loopholes in the Anglo-Spanish accords of 1817, 1820, and 1835, exploited Inter-European rivalries, attempted to refit their slavers to look like passenger and merchant vessels, and falsified log books, shipping manifestoes, and sale receipts to camouflage the African provenance of their captives. Others relied on bribes, dual citizenship, and neutral flags. In short, Dorsey shows that British abolitionism may have irked, slowed, or inconvenienced slave traders, but did not deter them from marketing their human merchandise to Cuba and Puerto Rico.

The author notes differences in the logistical mechanisms devised by slave traders servicing both islands. While Cuban slave traders financed major transatlantic expeditions directly with an assortment of suppliers in West Africa, counterparts in Puerto Rico favored purchases in Upper Guinea where they hoped to elude British surveillance. Not surprisingly, the Mandinga and Cang mentioned by Alonso in 1849 originated in various parts of Gambia/Senegal, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, all within Upper Guinea. The slavers frequently landed their human cargoes in the non-Hispanic Caribbean prior to reshipping them in smaller lots to Puerto Rico. To do so, they conveniently capitalized on the 1815 Cedula de Gracias, which authorized the importation of slaves into Puerto Rico from the West Indies. After the Cedula expired in 1830, the Spanish Crown legalized the acquisition of creole slaves from the eastern Caribbean. As Dorsey writes, "Be they African or Creole slaves—as long as bondsmen were not imported into Spanish dominions

from the British empire, as long as slaves were introduced from neighboring Caribbean islands where slavery still existed, and as long as the governments of these islands provided permission, support, and protection—Great Britain had no right to impede the slave trade" (pp. 68-69). Although slave traders frequently fabricated or altered documents to conceal their captives' African identity, Spanish officials in Puerto Rico rarely caught or punished them. According to Dorsey, the Spanish Crown issued the 1815 Cedula in anticipation of the upcoming 1817 Anglo-Spanish treaty. Its timing was designed to prevent England from interfering with Spain's long-sought goal of transforming Puerto Rico into a thriving agricultural colony. The author provides another example of Spain's duplicity and complicity in the continuation of the African slave trade: in the late 1830s England complained that nonwhite British subjects were illegally enslaved in Puerto Rico. As could be expected, the Spanish Crown acknowledged the problem but nevertheless thwarted British efforts to free them. The British countered by appointing a consular agent in San Juan to avert future kidnappings, but were not able to stop the much larger influx of African captives trans-shipped from the non-Hispanic Caribbean to the Spanish Antilles.

Dorsey's book is an important contribution both to Caribbean and African studies, as well as to the scholarship on slavery. It challenges official accounts of the Hispanic Caribbean—neglectful of the region's links to regional, hemispheric, or global forces. As such, Dorsey joins Christopher Schmidt-Nowara (*Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874*, 1999) and Birgit Sonesson (*Puerto Ricans Commerce, 1765-1865: From Regional to Worldwide Market Relations*, 2000) in highlighting key transnational nexuses between Puerto Rico and the wider world during the late Spanish colonial era. In addition, by probing sociopolitical developments in West Africa and the non-Hispanic Caribbean impacting on the outflow of enslaved Africans spirited to Puerto Rico, the work illuminates a largely uncharted area of the islands' connection to the African Diaspora.

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Citation: Jorge China. Review of Dorsey, Joseph C., *Slave Traffic in the Age of Abolition: Puerto Rico, West Africa, and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean, 1815-1859*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 2004.

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