

Book Review: Slave Traffic in the Age of Abolition: Puerto Rico, West Africa and non-Hispanic Caribbeans, 1815–1859

A.B. Assensoh and Y.M. Alex-Assensoh

Department of African American & African Diaspora Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405

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

As an expert and college-level teacher of Caribbean, African and African American studies, Professor Joseph C. Dorsey has unlimited expertise to delve into the comparative study of the continuing slave trafficking in the age of abolition. As underscored eloquently, his 311-page book emanates from his “interest in the history of the Spanish seaborne empire and the variety of syncretic cultures deriving from it” (preface). His very useful study spans almost half a century, specifically between 1815 and 1859.

Any scholar, who is familiar with the story of the Amistad slave ship (which became an international spectacle in slave studies, also during the period of abolition) would agree with Dorsey’s prompt and exciting description of Havana’s international reputation in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially about the colorful and lucrative excitement of the city’s urban decadence and, in the words of Abbe Raynal, as “the boulevard of the New World.” Additionally, it is very important to note that, as far back as the 1700s and 1800s, Cuba was held in much significance, as compared to Puerto Rico that, as Dorsey pointed out, “played second fiddle to Cuba throughout the nineteenth century.”

Continuing slave trafficking, in the age of the trade’s abolition, brings what Dorsey pursues in his book into the realm of illegal commerce; as Dorsey cites, with gratitude, the Puerto Rico version is well covered in its legal and illegal commerce terms in Arturo Morales Carrion’s seminal work, *Puerto Rico and the Non-Hispanic Caribbean* (1952). Although Dorsey’s excellent work has slavery as its main thesis, it is very significant to point out here that it dwells a lot more on “the structures of its form as an illegal traffic and less on the structures of its content as a legal institution” (p. xii).

To make sure that his book creeps out of its original California dissertation mode, Dorsey brilliantly removed varied typical or specific thesis norms and requirements, which earlier included case studies of respective slaves. Instead, he dwells on several fundamental issues about un-researched (or unexplored) Puerto Rican involvement in the illegal trafficking of slaves, work that should benefit the teeming students and scholars of both history and culture of mainstream Caribbean, African and Latin American studies.

The introduction to the study (pp. 1-20), which deals with approaches, directions and concerns, begins with an eloquent quote from the introduction to Herbert Klen’s *Middle Passage*. Invariably, Dorsey utilizes the three parts (Parts I-III) of nine chapters of his work to provide his readers with what he describes as a “miscellany of themes that center on the clandestine slave trade to Puerto Rico.” In the publication, he further examines “the extent to which forces of doubt, disunity, and incoherence served a single branch of an outlawed enterprise described then and now as small” (p. 1).

Part I is a sub-title, “Strategies and Strategems”, under which Dorsey discusses the colony’s obscurity; early Anglo-Spanish diplomacy”; and “Friendly Fire, Enemy Fire..”. Part II deals with “New Routes, Old remedies,” whereby Dorsey discusses French, Dutch and Danish presence and how African rivers became the structures for the transportation of the illegal cargo; Part III, sub-titled “Mare Liberum,” provides readers and researchers with occurrences from the South Atlantic East; South Atlantic West, coupled with the Inter-Caribbean influx of 1847. The epilogue (with a French sub-title) is “Cette Fin Qui N’en Est Pas Une” (pp. 210-219), which sums up Dorsey’s scholarly contentions, including the assertion that “Puerto Rico was a small Spanish colony with a nucleus of planter and non-planter elites who continued to buy slaves and consume their labor in an age that heralded the end of slavery” (p. 210).

In dealing with the illegal slave commerce between 1815 and 1859, Dorsey unambiguously pinpoints the fact that the illegal Puerto Rican slave trade had a different cloak between 1817 and 1859, whereby it operated in the shadow of larger and wealthier competitors, adding that, despite several patterns of European occupation, settlement, and exploitation in the Caribbean, “slave labor and sugar production shaped the same colonial discourse” (Introduction).

Slave trading existed for over 300 years in these areas but, as Dorsey documents, legal cessation marked the end of pertinent government documentation and bureaucratic minutiae. Yet, the study is about the Puerto Rican slave trade “from the internationalization of the anti-slave campaign in 1815 to the arrival of the island’s last slave ship in 1859,” (p.3). According to Dorsey, the shift from legal to illegal slave trading in human cargo “rendered the 1820s a period of trial and error” (p. 3).

Divided into periods, the book offers readers and researchers (including teachers) varied scenarios and paradoxes, although in the end Dorsey would make it clear that

such work “is more than a study of paradox” (p. 219). For example, apart from the active illegal trading between 1815 and 1830, Dorsey explains that between the period of 1834 and 1840, Britain protested against the export of newly emancipated English slaves to Spanish dominions. There was a second period (1840–44), which was fraught with internal uncertainty, although the discovery of English slaves, by Great Britain, in Puerto Rico, embarrassed and angered the Spanish government in Spain.

In the midst of its embarrassment, it is significant that Dorsey takes the time to provide his readers with an excellent discussion of how the period was characterized by slave revolts and conspiracies in Cuba and Puerto Rico; in 1848, an abolitionist governor was appointed for Puerto Rico to show that Madrid was serious about the abolition of slavery. Apart from the extensive volume of information that scholars of Latin American and Caribbean studies gain from *Slaver Traffic in the Age of Abolition*, the publication that has a lot to offer scholars of African studies. As the epilogue confirms, West Africa was a great source of the illegal human cargo that was exported after abolition laws were put in place; in terms of the sources of the slaves, Dorsey clearly pointed out, *inter alia*:

It is certain, nonetheless, that the majority of captives who landed on Puerto Rico shores came from the interiors of Upper Guinea in present-day Guinea-Conakry, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. While many were polytheists from small states, acephalous societies, and client polities not far [from] the coast—such as the Pongo Susu and the Ganga of Sierra Leone and Liberia—some, such as the Fula and the Manding[o], were Muslims from larger and often newly centralized states between Futa Jallon and the Sahel at the Niger Bend...(p. 211).

Above all, several mitigating factors would help diminish the slave trading in of the period. Dorsey explains also that “fluctuations in the Puerto Rican slave trade were not centered on Euro-American politics alone” (p. 211). He further underscored that social, political, and economic forces or factors endemic to West African affairs did contribute to what he saw as the dictates of the traffic. Toward the end, Dorsey sought to provide lucid and beneficial answers to some of the cogent queries about the limited numbers of Senegalese and Gold Coast nationals as part of the slaves being sent to Puerto Rico; and the extent of Spanish involvement. In the end, relations were predicated on anti-slave trade treaties between Great Britain and Spain, all of which,

in Dorsey’s estimation, “constituted a series of unending maneuvers between diplomatic rupture and repair” (p. 212). Above all, Dorsey made it clear that international abolitionism was, indeed, not a monolithic crusade, and that its movement was fractured at the internal level.

In providing additional details about earlier British and Puerto Rican relations, Dorsey narrates details about how, on 16 June 1598, George Clifford, who has been knighted as the third earl of Cumberland, attached Puerto Rico and controlled it for two months. Also, the Dutch and the French had coveted the island in aggressive terms. In the midst of the abolitionist fervor, Puerto Rican economic fortunes were fading, hence in January 1852, Mayaguez customs chief Blas Ginart gave an 18-point plan to Spain-appointed interim governor Enrique Espana Taberner to reverse Puerto Rico’s troubled economy. Instead, he expected his replacement to be an official, who would “endorse the revival of African slave commerce,” as the seventh recommendation had asked for (p. 217).

Dorsey, above all, shows how abolitionism became associated with such various 18th century buzzwords as enlightenment, benevolent despotism, anti-clericalism, revolution, progress and several others; also, that the Age of Abolition functioned as a conductor for new ideas and practices. To help speed up the emancipation (or freedom) of Africans kept against their will, in the midst of abolitionism, Dorsey shows how, as “recently” as in August 1862—and less than five decades from the dawn of the 20th century—23 Africans signed a letter to be sent to the British imperial capital (London) seeking relief and freedom, the tail-end of which, *inter alia*, read: “We also wish your Excellency to send us away as soon as possible, and we shall ever remember this service and pray that God may preserve you many years” (p. 218).

According to Dorsey, in the end, “many Africans in Cuba and Brazil returned to the African continent,” and that some of them did also reach their homelands or lands nearby, while a vast majority remained, including the 23 Puerto Rico-based writers of the petition. One wonders if racism played any role in the fact that, although the British Royal Navy, Foreign Office and even the Spanish colonial administration facilitated measures for these Blacks to return their native homes, Foreign Minister Russell “declined to act on this request, despite Cowper’s urgent recommendations” (p. 219). In Dorsey’s very astute and brilliant conclusions, the history of slave commerce in the Age of Abolition is more than (i) the study of false constructions of human biology of inherent deceptions as well as race-based ideologies that are protected by the forces of politics and society; and (ii) paradoxes. To understand it better and in clearer terms, it is worth perusing Dorsey’s study.