African Diaspora in the Cultures of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States

Edited by Persephone Braham
Chapter 6

Pearl Fishing in the Caribbean

Early Images of Slavery and Forced Migration in the Americas

Mónica Domínguez-Torres

The phrase “African slavery in the Caribbean” conjures up images of black slaves working in sugar plantations, strenuously cutting down soaring canes in vast fields. However, years before the first productive sugar plantations of the New World were importing considerable numbers of Africans, images depicting a different form of colonial exploitation documented the presence of black slaves in the Americas. For instance, the painting The Treasures of the Sea, created by the Florentine artist Jacopo Zucchi around 1590 for Cardinal Ferdinando de’ Medici, records the participation of black divers in an often neglected chapter in the colonization of the New World: the pearl fisheries of the Caribbean (Figure 6.1).

In the painting, a group of Nereids, or sea nymphs, accompanied by Poseidon to the right, are perched in a rocky island surrounded by crystalline waters. They show off the treasures brought to them by a group of nude islanders, some of them of clear African descent. The presence of a monkey and a parrot—animals that at the time were usually associated with the newly discovered lands to the West—anchors this scene of abundance and wealth in the Americas. More importantly, the accouterments and methods used by the divers to gather pearls and other sea treasures echo textual details provided by some New World eyewitness accounts.¹

Yet, despite all its naturalistic elements, Zucchi’s peaceful depiction of luxury and enterprise could not be farther from reality. When in 1498 Christopher Columbus encountered bountiful supplies of pearls around the islands of Cubagua and Margarita off the east coast of what is now Venezuela, he not only provided Spain with its first steady source of wealth but also with a brutal industry. The intensive exploitation of pearls that followed Columbus’s discovery annihilated both the pearl-bearing oyster beds of the Caribbean and scores of enslaved local and foreign divers.² Abundant information about
Such activities appear in a number of sixteenth-century chronicles; thus far, though, the textual and visual information provided by these accounts have mostly been mined as documentary sources to reconstruct the early economic history of the Spanish empire, with very few studies exploring the ideological underpinnings of such narratives.

This essay discusses Zucchi’s painting against the textual and visual components of crucial pearl fishing narratives in an attempt to reveal both the divergent views that circulated in early modern Europe around this colonial activity, and the role that African slaves played in it. While some historical documents provide clear testimony of the exploitation that Amerindian and African workers suffered, Zucchi’s painting depicts the colonial enterprise as a harmonic exchange between deities and mortals. In doing so, it conceals under a veneer of acquiescence the brutal side of the pearl industry, and endorses what back then was considered a “natural” order.

**ASYMMETRICAL EXCHANGES**

Although Columbus himself tried to keep his find secret, the news about the existence of pearls in the newly discovered seas quickly spread out inside and outside Spain, giving rise to organized, and often conflict-ridden, ventures to harvest the Caribbean pearl beds. One of the first chroniclers to provide detailed information about these activities was Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, who published a summary of his *Historia General de las Indias* in 1524, and its first volume in 1535. In both publications, he devoted a number of pages to describing the islands of Cubagua and Margarita, as well as other pearl fisheries found in the New World. In his role as Official Royal Chronicler of the Indies (1532–1557), Oviedo attempted to provide not only textual and visual descriptions of the geography, flora, fauna, and indigenous peoples of the newly discovered territories, but also an epic story of the Spanish travels and settlements, emphasizing the beneficial effects that Charles V’s rule had over the world. Using a hyperbolical tone, thus, Oviedo describes the Caribbean Pearl Coast as an unprecedented marvel: “Something [noteworthy] is that until the present time is not known, or written about, in the whole world ... that in such a small space or amount of sea, such a multitude of pearls had been seen or found.”

Oviedo calculated the wealth that Cubagua’s pearl fisheries had provided to the Spanish Crown around 15,000 ducats per year, even though, he admits, many traders did not declare in full the riches obtained there, and smuggled out some of the best pearls without paying the royal *quinto*, or fifth. He even gives some advice to those buying pearls in the Caribbean, so that they do not become victims of fraud. And despite the fact that by the time Oviedo was publishing his *Historia* Cubagua’s pearl fisheries were showing clear signs of exhaustion, he declared that the wealth of the area seemed endless: “When a section is depleted, the fishers move to another plentiful section: ... when after a while they come back to the first place, they find it filled again with oysters.” The author inferred, thus, that oysters were migratory animals.

Despite such flawed “scientific” observations, Oviedo did offer thorough information about the methods used to extract pearls. The author explained:

> The Christians who attend to this industry have enslaved Indians [who are] great swimmers. Their master sends them in a canoe, and in each canoe, about six or seven swimmers go to where they think or know there is a [large] quantity of pearls. There, they anchor the boat, and all the fishermen dive to the bottom, while one Indian remains in the boat, keeping it as still as he can. After some time, an Indian returns to the surface and deposits in the boat the oysters in which the pearls are found. He brings those oysters in a string net bag made for this purpose, which the swimmer carries tied down around the waist or the neck. Once back in the canoe, he rests a while, takes a bite to eat, and once more he enters the water to stay as long as he can, finally returning with more oysters.7

This description clearly captured the imagination of sixteenth-century readers, since up until the late sixteenth century it appeared in the works of artists such as Jacopo Zucchi. In *The Treasures of the Sea*, the Florentine painter depicted teams of pearl fishers riding canoes very similar to the one illustrated in folio 61r of Oviedo’s *Historia* (Figure 6.2).8 What is more, some swimmers sport around their necks (or over their shoulders) the string net bags reported by Oviedo. More interesting, however, are the heavy stones that Zucchi’s divers carry on either side of their necks, which Oviedo describes as a strategy deployed by local divers to keep themselves immersed in the water. According to the Spanish chronicler,

> Sometimes when the sea is rougher than the fishers and officers would like—and also because naturally when a man is working underwater at a great depth, a diver’s feet want to rise—it is only with difficulty that the worker can remain on the bottom any length of time. Under such conditions, the Indians use two large stones tied together with a cord, which they place over their shoulders, one on each side, and enter the water. As the stones are heavy, they stay still in the [sea] floor, but when he wants to rise to the surface, he merely drops the stones.9

In Oviedo’s sober account and Zucchi’s skillful rendering, pearl diving may seem a safe and even resourceful adaptation of local practices. The colonial pearl fishing industry, however, brought about one of the worst forms of slavery in the New World. While at first Spaniards relied on trading with
local natives, as the pearl industry grew colonists started enslaving local natives from neighboring Margarita and Cumaná to work in Cubagua’s pearl fisheries. An account written by another Spanish eyewitness (and outspoken critic of Oviedo), the Dominican fray Bartolomé de las Casas, provides gruesome details of the exploitation that indigenous divers suffered. According to the priest—who himself attempted to establish a Spanish settlement in Cumaná—four to seven divers per canoe were forced to work long hours, diving to depths of up to 48 feet. Fishers were allowed little time to rest between dives, and if they delayed too long, the overseer threw them off the boat, and whipped them until they obeyed. Sharks killed many divers, while hemorrhages produced by water pressure and intestinal disorders caused by diving in cold water for too long also finished many others. When by 1508 most local swimmers had been annihilated, indigenous swimmers from as far as the Bahamas were brought to the Pearl Coast fisheries. Later on, even mainland natives were forcefully transported to the islands.

These treacherous working conditions prompted several indigenous uprisings, which were soon bloodily suffocated by the Spaniards. In several reports to Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain Charles V, Bartolomé de las Casas denounced the abuses committed by the Spaniards on the Pearl Coast; in response, in 1516 the Spanish king issued regulations to limit the number of hours and depth of diving per day, and to oblige diving bosses to provide food and lodging to the enslaved divers. These measures, however, were mostly ignored, forcing the Spanish monarch to impose in 1546 the death penalty on anyone who forced free Indians to become pearl divers. As a result, large numbers of African slaves were brought to the Caribbean to replace the lost labor force. A royal decree issued in 1558 stated that only African slaves could be used for pearl fishing.

Oviedo, of course, neglects to report this dark side of the story and the presence of African slaves on the Pearl Coast. Instead, non-Spanish chroniclers were the ones to testify about the prevalent presence of black pearl fishers. For example, Samuel de Champlain—a French explorer who traveled to the West Indies toward the end of the sixteenth century to make a complete report for the king of France—explained when describing the island of La Marguerite (Figures 6.3–6.4):

Every day more than three hundred canoes leave the harbour... which go about a league to sea to fish for pearls, in ten or twelve fathoms water. The said fishing is done by negroes, slaves of the king of Spain, who take a little basket under their arm, and with it plunge to the bottom of the sea, and fill it with ostrornes, which resemble oysters; they go up again into their canoes, and return to the port to discharge them, in a spot destined for that purpose, where the officers of the king of Spain receive them.

Moreover, the Dutch chronicler Pieter de Marees asserted that Gold Coast Africans were favored for this activity since they were “very fast swimmers and can keep themselves underwater for a long time. Because they are so good at swimming and diving, they are specially... employed in this capacity where there is need for them, such as the island of St Margaret in the West Indies.” As depicted by Zucchi, African slaves laboring as pearl divers were usually at the prime of their lives, between ten and twenty four years old.

FABRICATIONS OF WEALTH

By the mid-sixteenth century, Cubagua’s reality was very different from Oviedo’s picture of endless wealth; at least according to Girolamo Benzoni, a Milanese traveler who sojourned in the New World between 1541 and 1556. His *Historia del mondo nuovo*—first published in Venice in 1565 and later copiously translated into Latin, German, French, Dutch, and English—starts off by recounting Benzoni’s adventures on the Pearl Coast, to which, the author confesses, he arrived in an illusory search for riches. By the time of his travel, Cubagua’s pearl beds had been depleted and the fisheries abandoned—as described by the Milanese explorer, the island was mainly a slave trade post from which slaves were shipped to other areas of the New World.

In his book, Benzoni ignores the booming pearl industry that by that time was taking place in Santa Marta and Rio de Hacha, but takes time to describe Cubagua’s golden age, from its discovery by Columbus until the Spanish campaigns of “pacification” in 1521. Later translations of Benzoni’s account, such as the ones produced between 1594 and 1596 by the Frankfurt-based publisher Theodor de Bry as part of his *America* series, still illustrate this section with idyllic images of wealth and trade (Figure 6.5). In the narrative, however, Benzoni is highly critical of the enslavement of indigenous pearl fishers, remarking that Spaniards “by force seized them, by force made them fish for pearls, and were continually beating and sometimes wounding them.” For Benzoni, the indigenous rebels, although fierce and even cannibalistic, were actually responding to the harsh treatment given by the Spaniards. In contrast to Oviedo’s story, Benzoni’s account takes the side of the natives in their revolt against the greedy Spaniards. Spanish military intervention is, in Benzoni’s prose, cruel, and excessive. No mention is made, nonetheless, about the use (and abuse) of African slaves for the pearl industry.

More importantly, Benzoni uses a warning tone toward fellow adventurers seeking riches in the New World, adding an episode that is not found in any other sixteenth-century chronicle. According to the Milanese writer, at the
time when Cubagua’s pearl fishery was flourishing, a certain Luigi da Lampognano arrived there, carrying an imperial authorization to fish “any quantity of pearls he chose, without any hindrance.” He sailed from Spain with four caravels, laden with all the stores and ammunition required for the enterprise, including a rake to drag out oysters. The Spaniards residing in Cubagua, however, refused to obey the royal order, and Lampognano died miserably on the island five years later.

If we tie this episode to the introductory paragraphs describing Cubagua as a mere slave trade post, it becomes clear that Benzonzi attempted to use this part of his account as a warning against contemporary views of the Pearl Coast as a land of riches. Benzonzi may have been particularly interested in distilling erroneous views among his audiences in the Italian peninsula, since accounts about the wealth to be found in the Pearl Coast were prevalent in Florentine and Venetian circles. Thanks in great part to the publication of a series of letters that the Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci allegedly wrote to important contemporary figures—in particular, the letter that Vespucci supposedly sent to Piero Soderini, Gonfaloniere of the Florentine Republic, which was printed in 1504—the idea that European explorers could find in the Caribbean sea oysters “in which a hundred and thirty pearls were growing” became very popular. Oviedo’s Historia, which Giovanni Battista Ramusio translated into Italian and published in Venice in 1556, reinforced these ideas even further.

Despite Benzonzi’s warnings, Florentine interest in the New World treasures did not wane during the sixteenth century. On the contrary, there exists clear evidence that the first three Grand Dukes of Tuscany, Cosimo, Francesco, and Ferdinando de’ Medici were highly interested in the riches that Spain was extracting overseas. Ferdinando, in particular, deserves special attention because of his keen interest in pearls and other sea treasures. As Lia Markey has discussed, pearls were the first items among the New World objects that in 1567 Ferdinando de’ Medici, still a young cardinal, requested of his agent in Spain. An inventory dated 1563 lists among rubies, diamonds, and other jewels, two large pearls and three smaller pearls. Later inventories specify the provenance of some of his treasures, as “mother of pearl pieces that came from the Indies.” Furthermore, through several secretaries and agents in Spain, Ferdinando obtained abundant information not only about the goods coming from the Americas, but also about the expeditions carried out by Spanish, English, and Italian explorers.

The small copper painting representing a sort of allegorical rendition of New World sea treasures that Ferdinando commissioned from Jacopo Zucchi was destined for his studiolo. And, unlike the Pearl Fishing scene that his brother Francesco had secured from Alessandro Allori some years earlier (Figure 6.6), Ferdinando’s painting does not attempt to situate the prosperous industry in the ancient past. Zucchi’s painting purposely obliterates fabulous creatures, such as the fish-tailed Tritons and Nereids of Allori’s rendering, and replaces them instead with enough naturalistic references as to place the scene in the Americas—as we have seen, New World animals, but more importantly, details coming from eyewitness accounts.

The jewels depicted in the painting, moreover, seem to reproduce some of the actual treasures Ferdinand received from the West Indies. At the center of the composition, a sort of queen of the seas—according to some authors, the Greek sea-goddess Amphitrite, wife of Poseidon, depicted to the right—blatantly displays some of them. Several scholars believe that this figure was in fact a portrait of Clelia, Ferdinand’s mistress and the recipient of some of Ferdinand’s New World jewels. Indeed this painting was repeated three more times with slight variations, and given as presents to other courts, revealing thus Ferdinand’s serious desire to be associated with the wealth available in the Americas. Later as a Grand Duke, Ferdinando sought to take part in the European colonization projects, creating political and commercial ties with the New World. Thanks in great part to his efforts, the port of Livorno developed from virtually nothing into an international trading center, and in the early seventeenth century Ferdinando attempted to establish a Tuscan colony in the New World.

Thus, the keen interest of the future Grand Duke of Tuscany in the Caribbean sea treasures does not seem to be a mere coincidence, neither does the presence of African swimmers. By that time, as we have seen, African slaves were a necessity for those entrepreneurs who wanted to harvest the treasures of the Caribbean. Given their valuable swimming skills, black divers even ranked as commodities. Paradoxically, and in contrast to the almost pervasive silence about the African presence encountered in contemporary chronicles, images like Zucchi’s provide visual testimony of the crucial African presence in the early modern Caribbean.

In the Florentine depiction, nonetheless, the imported workers are presented as in harmony and even naturalized to their Caribbean surroundings, in contrast to accounts of forced labor and treacherous working conditions that some textual accounts provided. Moreover, if indigenous slavery was still a controversial issue for some authors, African slavery was considered unproblematic and even a natural occurrence of the times. Under the supervision of sea deities, African and indigenous divers willingly secured the riches that the European nobility was meant to enjoy. Thus, Ferdinando’s painting was not only a wishful thought, but also a visual articulation of the premises that, according to European imperialist discourses, sustained the brutal exploitation of human and natural resources in Africa and the Americas.
NOTES


3. For modern editions of these works, see: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, Historia general y natural de las Indias (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1959), v. 117–21; and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias (Madrid: Historia 16, 1986).

4. In his preface, Oviedo makes explicit that his intended audience was the “whole world,” a feat at which he partially succeeded since in a matter of 20 years this work became widely available in Europe. The first part of his Historia was reprinted in 1547 by Juan de Junta in Salamanca, while French and Italian translations appeared in 1555 and 1556, respectively. Cf. Kathleen Ann Myers and Nina M. Scott, Fernández de Oviedo’s Chronicle of America: A New History for a New World (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 3–4.


6. Ibid., 206.

7. Oviedo, Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias, 172.

8. Central to Oviedo’s historiographic project were the 32 woodcuts that illustrate his book, and that more likely derived from Oviedo’s own field drawings. See in this regard Daymond Turner, “Forgotten Treasure from the Indies: The Illustrations and Drawings of Fernández de Oviedo,” The Huntington Library Quarterly 48, no. 1 (1985), 1–46; and chap. 4 of Myers and Scott, Fernández de Oviedo’s Chronicle of America.


17. When in the late 1530s Cubagua showed unequivocal signs of depletion, pearl fishing activities intensified in the coast of Rio de Hacha and Santa Marta (in today Colombia), and in the Pacific coast of Panama, where in 1513 Vasco Núñez de Balboa after crossing the Isthmus of Panama found abundant reserves of pearl oysters in what today are known as the Pearl Islands. Cf. Romero, Chilbert and Eisenhart, “Cubagua’s Pearl-Oyster Beds,” 64; and Tardieu, “Perlas y piel azabache,” 95–97.

18. Benzoni, History of the New World, 45. In general, Benzoni’s complaints are similar to those of Las Casas, whose Brevisíma relación de la destrucción de las Indias had been published thirteen years earlier (although the Milanese also incorporates the actions of the Spanish friar on the Pearl Coast).

19. Ibid., 51–52. For information on royal documents referring to this episode, see Perri, “Ruined and Lost,” 137.


21. Oviedo’s Historia was included in Giovanni Battista Ramusio, Terzo volume delle navigazioni et viaggi (Venice: Giunti, 1556).


25. This is Lia Markey’s argument in “The New World in Renaissance Italy,” 180–86.

Jazz scholars have repeatedly lamented the lack of historical data describing the emergence of early jazz repertoire in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{1} Not only do no recordings of jazz exist prior to 1917, but few written sources from the turn of the twentieth century make any mention of the emergent musical style. As a result of this lack of data, historians have had difficulty discussing the development of jazz with any degree of specificity.

Researchers may have created unnecessary obstacles for themselves by choosing not to analyze the jazz tradition as part of a broader hemispheric phenomenon. Music from the Caribbean represents a fundamental component of New Orleans music, of course, and offers many potential insights into its development. A growing body of literature since the 1950s has re-situated French- and Spanish-Caribbean influences, especially, as more central to jazz.\textsuperscript{2} Literature of this sort has taken various approaches to establishing such ties including discussion of history, migration, and demographic patterns; visits by Latin American performers to the New Orleans region; and the presence of Afro-Caribbean rhythmic cells in US repertoire. The quantity of such data is substantial, and makes a convincing argument for the sustained nature of the contact between early jazzers and Caribbean performers and repertoire.

It is curious, however, that the danzón has not featured more prominently in existing scholarship of this nature. Perhaps the difficulty of conducting research on partially improvised dance music has been a prohibitive factor. Perhaps the relative marginalization of the danzón in present-day Cuba (indeed, all of Latin America with the exception of Mexico) has obscured its earlier popularity. Perhaps the danzón’s shift to flute and violin orchestration in Cuba of the 1910s has similarly obscured its earlier wind band format. Whatever the case, the similarity of both styles merits further attention.
Figure 6.1 Jacopo Zucchi, *The Treasures of the Sea*, c. 1580. Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy. Source: Photo courtesy of Scala; Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali; Art Resource, NY.

Figure 6.2 Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia general de las Indias*, 1535, fol. 61r. Source: Photo courtesy of the Jay I. Kislak Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Figure 6.3 “Pescherie de perles,” illumination of Samuel de Champlain, *Brief discours des choses plus remarquables que Samuel Champlain de Brouage à reconnues aux Indes occidentales*, c. 1602, fol. 7v. Source: Photo courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.
Figure 6.4 “La Marguerite” illumination of Samuel de Champlain, Brief discours des choses plus remarquables que Samuel Champlain de Brouage à reconnues aux Indes occidentales, c. 1602, fol. 8r. Source: Photo courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Providence, RI.

Figure 6.5 Theodor de Bry, “Perlarum insula ob unionum copiam sic dicta,” illustration of Americae pars quarta, 1594, plate XII (derived from Girolamo Benzoni’s Historia del mondo nuovo, Venice, 1565). Source: Photo courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Providence, RI.
Part III

AFRICA IN THE ARTS: MIGRATION, IMPROVISATION, EXCHANGE