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Abstract

The journal of Edward Bliss Emerson often mentions topics that piqued his curiosity because they were unusual or puzzling. Few subjects were as foreign to him as slavery. Writing in 1831-32, Emerson provides us a series of aural and visual vignettes rather than a coherent commentary on slavery as a way of life. Focusing on the everyday aspects of the institution instead of the politics and economics behind it, Emerson nevertheless suggests the different lenses through which slavery was viewed by a New England intellectual and others.

Keywords

Slavery, West Indies, St. Croix, Puerto Rico, Edward Bliss Emerson

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Encountering the Viper: Edward Bliss Emerson and Slavery¹

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The journal of Edward Bliss Emerson often mentions topics that piqued his curiosity because they were unusual or puzzling. Few subjects were as foreign to him as slavery. Writing in 1831-32, Emerson provides us a series of aural and visual vignettes rather than a coherent commentary on slavery as a way of life. Focusing on the everyday aspects of the institution instead of the politics and economics behind it, Emerson nevertheless suggests the different lenses through which slavery was viewed by a New England intellectual and others. Keywords: Slavery, West Indies, St. Croix, Puerto Rico, Edward Bliss Emerson

To tolerate slavery is like [...] sewing up the body politic
 [...] in a sack with a living viper.

Charles C. Emerson

The journal of Edward Bliss Emerson often mentions topics that piqued his curiosity because they were unusual or puzzling. Few subjects were as foreign to him as slavery. Although Massachusetts was a slave-holding colony until 1783 and Emerson's maternal great-grandfather was "a slave merchant on a large scale" (Harper, 2003), Edward's first-hand experience with slavery was limited to Virginia, where he had spent two months when he was 14-years-old. On that occasion, he wrote his mother from Alexandria expressing the opinion that only Blacks seemed to work there, the White population appearing to be mostly idle (Bosco & Myerson, 2006). In a letter to his brother Ralph Waldo, Edward reiterated the prevailing view that it was considered "quite ungenteeled for ladies to do the least work, even to put a stick of wood on the fire" and seemed surprised at the fact that so many Whites had slaves (letter of 17 January 1820, Houghton Library b MS Am 1280.226 (190)). Concerning the latter, he wrote the following:

They are a curious as well as an abused people. They call each other brothers & sisters and the children call their elders uncles & aunts. They always have a great aversion to having a negroe [sic] for an overseer for they are so much more cruel & hard hearted. [...]

Some families here have ten or a dozen Negroes, & hardly anyone however poor has *none*. There is a very poor woman directly opposite this house who has 2 (letter of 17 January 1820, Houghton Library b MS Am 1280.226 (190)).

Edward, like his siblings, was ideologically opposed to serfdom of any kind (Bosco & Myerson, 2006), but he was also intrigued by how slavery functioned in both St. Croix and

¹ Edward B. Emerson's Caribbean journal and letters can be accessed online at <http://bibliotecadigital.uprrp.edu/cdm/ref/collection/librosraros/id/1701>. Unless otherwise specified, his letters from that period can be found in that text. Permissions to quote from Edward Emerson's journal and letters have been granted by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association and Houghton Library, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Historical Society and are gratefully acknowledged.

Puerto Rico. He therefore described the enslaved population and its customs, and commented on those aspects of the institution that intrigued or puzzled him.

Shortly after his arrival in St. Croix, where he spent the first three months of his stay in the West Indies, he remarked that “the negroes [sic] [...] have appeared happy and well clad” although he also noted that those attached to the house where he was lodging were “excellent servants but ill at peace when by themselves” (Journal, 4 January 1831). The following day Edward went so far as to express satisfaction with the chattel bondage regime and with what he perceived to be the slaves’ acceptance of their fate:

I am pleased with the appearance of subordination and tranquility that prevails among the Blacks and have as yet felt no shudder at what of domestic government has come under my eye. (Journal, 5 January 1831)

St. Croix was then a colony of Denmark and the Danes had entered the slave trade during the latter part of the 17th century. Then, it seemed a profitable enterprise and “a good idea to send Danish ships with merchandise to Guinea and from there with slaves to the West Indies and from there on home to Denmark with West Indian goods” (Paiewonsky, 1989, p. 6). Over time, the forced relocation of thousands of enslaved Africans, and the cruelty and violence they were subjected to during both the “middle passage” and their resettlement was well-known in their home countries. Not surprisingly, in the words of one eyewitness, those held captive were terrified at what awaited them:

...they do not believe what the Europeans say, that they are going to a wonderful country. They use any and every opportunity to run away or to kill themselves. They fear death less than slavery in the West Indies... (Isert, quoted in Paiewonsky, 1989, p. 21)

Toward the end of the 18th century, the Danish rulers were actively lobbied by a keen observer with a powerful pen. Paul Erdmann Isert, a physician of German descent who had studied in Denmark, had experienced the slave trade in both Guinea and the Danish West Indies. Having witnessed several slave rebellions during the crossing and been appalled by the conditions surrounding human trafficking, he wrote a series of letters to prominent persons in Denmark describing what he had seen. Isert was unsparing in his depiction of the slave trade: humans were crammed into ships designed to carry one-third the cargo; slaves were shackled in pairs, the hand of one chained to the foot of another; skippers were barbaric in their treatment of the slaves, whipping them until their flesh came apart; many of the slaves succumbed to illness or mistreatment, or chose suicide over a life of serfdom. Considering slavery to be a historical and moral blunder, Isert asked: “Why did we have to uproot vast numbers of people from their homelands, subject them to agony, torture, humiliation and death; transplant them to alien continents, Caribbean islands, big and small? Why?” (quoted in Paiewonsky, 1989, p. 31). The query was more than rhetorical; returning to Denmark in 1787, Isert enlisted the help of the Minister of the Treasury in the fight against slavery. The following year, his letters were published in Copenhagen, where they elicited much discussion. In 1792 Denmark passed a law prohibiting the traffic of slaves between Africa and the Danish West Indies. The law went into effect in 1803 (Paiewonsky, 1989).

This had limited impact on the society as a whole. There was no way to patrol the seas and ensure compliance with the law, and slaves continued to be smuggled into the Danish islands. By the early 19th century, the planter-slave economy was thriving in St. Croix, the wealth of the former being contingent upon the work of the latter. The result was an opulent lifestyle for the slaveowners, who indulged in the ostentatious display of wealth. Their homes

were “like small palaces in which interiors and exteriors alike showed the fine handiwork of skilled architects and decorators imported from Europe” (Dahlberg, quoted in Paiewonsky, 1989, p. 149).

In 1831 Peter von Scholten was Acting Governor-General of the Danish West Indies (Lewisohn, 1970). A patriarchal ruler, von Scholten was neither a committed advocate of slavery nor an abolitionist. Instead, he was an “ameliorist” who accepted the prevailing system but tried to make it more humane to thwart any attempts at revolt. Because the population of St. Croix comprised some 25,000 slaves and 1,110 Whites (Flinter, 1834/2010), von Scholten had reason to fear that any conflict would ultimately favor the Blacks. Troops were kept ready, Emerson stated, in case of

an insurrection [...] in the event of tidings conveyed from neighboring islands where a successful rising would be an example that would run hither like the flash and might excite the quiet Negroes. (Journal, 26 February 1831)

But von Scholten cushioned racial tensions and deflected potential rebellion by instituting measures to make the slaves’ lives more tolerable. He also improved the status of free Blacks, who were growing in number and had previously been denied citizenship, required to carry a “freedom-letter” to show they were not slaves, and been systematically excluded from most jobs (Paiewonsky, 1976).

Sounds and Sights in the Virgin Islands

Emerson noted that “the free Blacks have been admitted to the governor’s levees of late” and suggested that such concessions were designed to secure the goodwill of this particular population as a precaution against insurrection (Journal, 18 March 1831). Months later, writing from Puerto Rico, Edward stated the following:

... the effect of the laws conferring a sort of privilege of equality on the free colored inhabitants of St. Croix and St. Thomas is reported to have led to instances of considerable arrogance and impertinence on the part of some of the said class. (Journal, 29 November 1831)

Interestingly, his reference to equality as a “privilege” rather than an intrinsic birthright suggests that Edward had come to accept the race-based caste system in his new environment. Indeed, rather than commenting on the specific practices of the institution of slavery in the Danish Virgin Islands, Emerson focused primarily on what he saw and heard. He was particularly sensitive to the slaves’ speech and songs, his remarks reflecting the observer’s eyes and ears more than the behavior of the observed. While in St. Croix and St. Thomas, Edward repeatedly described the slaves’ talk as “chatter,” a characterization most likely indicating his inability to understand their words. Whether deliberate or not, Emerson’s description of the Blacks’ speech perpetuated the stereotype of subservience and primitiveness among the slaves (see Simounet, 2014). He thus wrote from St. Croix:

high words have been ringing about the window. (Journal, 4 January 1831)

Dialect of Negro servants a complete English patois with a droll voluble singsong manner. (Journal, 5 January 1831)

Note voluble chattering of Negroes precisely like that of lower orders in

Marseilles or Italy. (Journal, 22 January 1831)

Bought some ban-bush at house of a free Negro woman whose talk was as far from English as any other, except when she strove to be intelligible... (Journal, 2 March 1831)

One of Edward's few appraisals of slavery as an institution refers to the relationship between master and slave, which he considered detrimental to both. He thus described a conversation in which the topic was brought up by a Mrs. Derby, a fellow American:

Yesterday Mrs. D. was considering how slavery affects the parties --- master & slave --- & we agreed that here [St. Croix] it did not produce a cruel and haughty character in [the] former, but rather a laziness & dependence while it transferred to the latter when industrious & skilful that influence & sway which more or less directly belongs to industry & skill. Nay, more: the slave seems to have gotten an advantage over his owner by the mere involuntary nature of his relations to him, by the slaves' consciousness of its impropriety, so that if the master be not disposed to use his prerogative & procure the whipping of the slave, the latter will take advantage of this clemency & I remember to have heard a mistress use language of entreaty when that of command was lost on an idle servant. (Journal, 10 March 1831)

When Edward visited sugar estates in St. Croix, he wrote about the "civility of the Negroes" as well as that of the managers (Journal, 12 and 14 January 1831). But he also mentioned details that suggest the slaves' limited diet and the back-breaking labor to which they were subjected:

their principal food cornmeal, 6 quarts each per week & 6 herrings. (Journal, 12 January 1831)

Negroes eat twice a day. (Journal, 20 January 1831)

Negro women carrying staves 70 lbs on head... (Journal, 14 January 1831)

While stopping in St. Thomas en route to Puerto Rico, Emerson reverted to commenting dismissively on the slaves' speech, comparing it to that of Italians: "It reminded me of the Italian cities by constant chatter of Negroes, which is as unintelligible as a strange tongue" (Journal, 5 April 1831). Again, the remark is revealing of both Emerson's naiveté (i.e., an expectation that he would be able to understand the language) and his condescending ethnocentrism: it was he, after all, who was the stranger in those latitudes.

Slavery in Puerto Rico

In Puerto Rico, Emerson faced a very different social structure and racial dynamics. By 1831, Africans and their descendants had lived on the island for more than three centuries, and the population reflected the results of racial intermarriage (Díaz Soler, 1994). The production of sugar, which was the mainstay of the Puerto Rican economy, was highly labor-intensive, and slaves were an important source of manpower. The number of slaves rose from 17,000 in 1812 to 28,418 in 1827 and to 34,336 in 1835 (Mintz, 1974). Because this growth

occurred at the same time that the official importation of labor from Africa had slowed down (Mintz), the rise can be attributed to the smuggling of slaves more than to the natural growth of the enslaved population. By the time Edward arrived in Puerto Rico, slaves had become a fungible commodity. Whether purchased or acquired through trade or inheritance, slaves were exchanged, used to pay debts, served as collateral, and supplemented transactions in real estate and commerce (Picó, 2012).

The land devoted to sugarcane increased threefold between 1823 and 1833 and slaves were highly prized as labor in the sugar mills (Díaz Soler, 1994). A landowner's economic power was measured by the number of slaves in his plantation. But the increased demand for sugar required a growing labor force, and this expanded beyond what could be provided by slaves. Slave labor was therefore supplemented by free laborers. By the early 19th century the number of plantations in Puerto Rico relying solely on slaves was decreasing. Free wage-earners and slaves worked side-by-side, a situation that accelerated the process of acculturation among the imported population and promoted the mixture of races (Díaz Soler, 1994). In 1830 the island's population numbered approximately 324,000 of which 50 percent were White, 39 percent were free Blacks or persons of mixed race, and 11 percent were slaves (Vázquez Calzada, 1988). (Unlike in St. Croix or Cuba, slaves never accounted for more than 12 percent of the population of Puerto Rico) (Vázquez Calzada).

At the same time, violent change was occurring nearby: Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) had overthrown the French and emancipated its slaves early in the century, and this had put other European powers on notice. The revolt in Saint-Domingue had resulted in the massacre of 2,000 Europeans, the destruction of hundreds of plantations, and the decimation of the sugar output (Mathieson, 1926). Between 1810 and 1826 most of Spain's possessions in Central and South America had fought for and won their independence, and only Cuba and Puerto Rico remained as colonies of Spain. The combined effect of the pauperization of Saint-Domingue and the dwindling empire enhanced the relative importance of the Spanish West Indies, which were better placed to expand their production and command a greater share of the world's sugar exports. Spain was intent on taking advantage of this juncture to promote its colonies' agricultural prosperity, and recognized that the sugar boom required adjusting its existing policies. Like von Scholten, the Spanish crown acknowledged the need to improve the lot of the slaves in Puerto Rico and Cuba if these islands were to avoid the upheavals that had occurred elsewhere (Cubano, ca. 2011).

In Puerto Rico, new laws to regulate and improve the condition of the slaves were introduced by Governor Miguel de la Torre, whose policies were summarized in the glib maxim that "A people who is amused does not conspire" (Figueroa, 1969, p. 89). Like others versed in the art of governance, de la Torre believed that entertainment---dance, drink, and dice---would defuse any discontent among those who sought freedom from the colonial yoke of Spain, as well as those who advocated for the abolition of slavery. His administration therefore sponsored games, masquerades, lotteries, contests, festivals, plays, and concerts which, together with the ceremonies and pageantry of the Catholic Church, kept the population engaged and entertained.

Legislation and other measures enacted during de la Torre's regime were particularly relevant to the slaves and their owners. One of the new laws required a Registry of Slaves: after 1826, all slaveholders were required to report the number of slaves in their households or plantations. The authorities therefore had a detailed record of births, deaths, and marriages, as well as reports on runaways. More important were laws that imposed a number of responsibilities on all slaveholders. These included an obligation to care for their slaves: feeding and clothing them, housing them, providing them with health care, and rearing their children (Cubano, ca. 2011). The same laws established that owners should temper their

punishments to inflict the least harm possible, and prescribed the work day: slaves were to work 9 hours a day during most of the year, and 13 hours during the *zafra* or harvest, which began in January and ended in June. They were to have Sundays and religious and national holidays off from work; those with greater years of service were entitled to a shorter work week or more days off. The law also included mechanisms to encourage slaves to work towards purchasing their freedom, at the same time that it restricted slaveholders from unilaterally granting freedom to minors and those incapacitated by age or illness (Díaz Soler, 1994). But de la Torre also believed in stern repressive measures, stronger surveillance, and the rewarding of whistleblowers who reported potential slave rebellions. The combination of concessions and punishments had the intended effect: of the 22 slave conspiracies that took place between 1795 and 1848, only 5 took place during de la Torre's 17-year rule (Picó, 1988).

Slavery in Puerto Rico through a New Englander's eyes

As in St. Croix, Edward's descriptions of the slave population in Puerto Rico center primarily on what he deems to be the culture of the slaves and the behavior of discrete groups of individuals. Although he mentions the illicit trade and some aspects of the labor carried out by those enslaved (Journal, 29 June 1831), Emerson provides us a series of aural and visual vignettes rather than a coherent commentary on slavery as a way of life.

Living in the city, Edward was primarily in contact with slaves who worked in private homes and businesses. But his frequent trips outside the city walls also exposed him to those engaged in agriculture and other enterprises. When he visited the country home of a Mr. McCormick, he described his host's slaves as "assembling in front of his house every evening repeating their rosary" (a practice required by law) and also indicated, without further comment, that McCormick spoke of the slaves' "want of all just sense of morality" (Journal, 19 April 1831).

In San Juan, where most of the slaves were employed in domestic chores (Negrón Portillo & Mayo-Santana, 1992), Emerson focused particularly on the music and dancing of the Blacks:

Saw collection of Negroes assembled on the ramparts for a dance, with the instruments of music peculiar to their nations --- two large and long buoy-shaped drums of which the one end rests on the ground while the other is covered with parchment & is beaten with rapid strokes. On the side I observed the word Congo painted; --- and I hear that the Congos consider themselves as the most eminent here [...] Others of the Negroes had rattles made of calabash and called in English "shake shake," a name excellently descriptive of the music; there are two other instruments in use among the Blacks, & [in] their dances, they separate themselves into the four or five nations to which they pretend to belong. A boisterous singing & violent jumping joined to the clatter make out the merry ball. (Journal, 5 June 1831)

A few weeks later, on the eve of the feast of St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of the city, Emerson wrote that

The noise of the Negroes with their jingling instruments & songs & laughter aroused me very early long before light this morning. They continued to make pretty good music also by merely clapping the hand in accordance with the drum or congo. (Journal, 23 June 1831)

The following Sunday he noted the vigor of the continuing celebrations, pointedly underlining what he perceived as the repetitive monotony of both the rhythms and the dances:

Walked tonight, saw a band of Negroes dancing to drum & shake shake & congo upon the ramparts, singing a simple tune with I should think not more than three different notes, & perhaps no meaning --- & moving backwards and forwards from within a circle with a step as uniform as the song, & such as it needs no *Monsieur* to teach; I noticed three or four houses also on the way where similar music & jumping was going on within doors. Labouring as they do perform they seem indefatigable in their diversions. (Journal, 26 June 1831)

Six months later, Emerson was less tolerant of the Blacks' music and merriment. On the feast of the Three Kings (Epiphany) he noted, "the clatter of congos & rattles by which the Negroes enliven their dances is very annoying to those who love quiet nights, on the recurrence of these festal seasons" (Journal, 6 January 1832).

The journal-writer also commented, not without a tinge of mockery, on the slaves' reaction to the distribution of clothes:

After breakfast saw the Negroes receive their clothing of a stuff called bamboo [...] The men received theirs with apparent contentment. When the woman [sic] came in, one who was quite tall & with the exception of that single advantage, remarkably ugly, walked directly to a large looking glass before which she stood with signs of gratified curiosity or vanity, beckoning to her companions to join her in the survey of her figure, before she entered the room where their master distributed the clothing. (Journal, 1 November 1831)

But Emerson's exposure to the enslaved population was not limited to witnessing their celebrations and customs; he also commented on several incidents of tension and punishment. The first is a brief mention of a "Negro coming with sword & pistol & giving disturbance [...] Result may be the death of Negro but is uncertain" (Journal, 29 July 1831). The second refers to an altercation in which his employer, Sidney Mason, had to intervene. The incident underscores the writer's bafflement at a practice that allowed the Blacks to be armed at the same time that the law severely punished certain uses of the weapons:

I saw a violent battle between a Negro on a canoe and a cook of a vessel close by, who taking offence from words went to blows, & availed himself of the utensils of his profession, throwing the same even to the teakettle against his dusky antagonist. Mr. Mason & others succeeded in parting the combatants, before the arrival of some other Negroes who were hastening to aid their countryman, & might have done harm with their short swords. These latter instruments are strangely enough allowed to be put in the hands of the Blacks & are very commonly seen, especially in the country where they seem to be worn as jackknives are by sailors for all sorts of uses. Yet the law makes the Negro lose his hand if he raise it against a White man. (Journal, 29 September 1831)

On Holy Thursday, 1832, Emerson mentioned the physical brutality of the punishments meted out to the slaves:

Today I have seen 3 Negroes with fetters & a huge log on their shoulders attached to them to prevent them from running away & to punish the repeated attempt to do so; --- two others I saw in the stocks, sitting easily but with one foot made fast. (Journal, 19 April 1832)

Emerson also noted that in Puerto Rico there was no physical separation between the races, and that slaves and masters took part in the same religious observances. During a celebration on the eve of the feast of St. Francis, he noticed the array of skin colors among those attending mass, “hundreds of ladies & girls & Negroes kneeling from the altar all the way to the opposite door:”

It was not an unpleasant circumstance that the dark face of an African or the yellow features of a mulatto were seen frequently intermingled with the whitest of the fair, & not the slightest symptom of uneasiness exhibited on account of the proximity. (Journal, 3 October 1831)

Apparently, Emerson did not realize that propinquity did not necessarily imply community; in fact, race-consciousness continued to shape social relations, although in more subtle ways than would be readily apparent to a New Englander. He makes no mention of the many labels for skin color used in Puerto Rico to sift and sort people into different racial categories, and hence into a hierarchical social system based on color.

When Edward addressed the institutional aspects of slavery, it was the master-slave relationship that concerned him. Stopping once more in the Danish West Indies (this time in St. Thomas) en route from the United States to Puerto Rico, he commented on the relationship between slave owners and those they considered chattel. As in his previous conversation with Mrs. Derby in St. Croix, Emerson focused again on the effects of slavery, suggesting that it was the slaves, by virtue of their labor, who had the upper hand in the relationship:

I am struck even more forcibly now than in my former visit to the W. Indies with the very great freedom which the colored people enjoy here, being far greater in fact than that exercised by the majority of the same color in N. England. Perhaps it is the law of nature that he who works, he whose physical power & industry really carry on the operations of the social machine [...] shall by the very gravity of his character possess an influence & hold a station superior to that of the less industrious whom birth & fortune may have made their apparent masters... (Journal, 29 October 1832)

While he admitted that his opinion might be contradicted by instances in which “the whole power is claimed & used by the proprietor & the slave is almost a mute machine in his hands,” he nevertheless concluded that the institution of slavery in the West Indies was

distinctly marked by a force of character in the working part of the community which shows itself [...] a license of tongue & gesture that indicate a consciousness of influence & capacity in the slave beyond what is manifested by men of the same color in a free country. (Journal, 29 October 1832)

Of course, his views were conditioned by the fact that he was comparing slaves in the West Indies to Blacks in the United States at a time when the latter, whether enslaved or free, were

victims of severe prejudice, segregation, and a myriad humiliations regardless of their legal status. Given this measuring stick, it is not surprising that Edward considered the situation of Blacks in Puerto Rico and in the Danish islands to be relatively humane.

The Everyday vs. the Institutional

Emerson was not loath to criticize Puerto Rican society. Although his journal or memory book consists primarily of brief jottings on a wide range of topics, he occasionally included longer disquisitions on those aspects of nature with which he was particularly impressed as well as those features of civic and social life to which he objected (see essays by Mayo-Santana & Simounet, 2014). A captious writer, he criticized what he considered the inefficiency of the work force; the lack of intellectual stimulation; the apathy, indolence and frivolity of certain segments of the population; and the perfunctory observation of religious rituals. Nevertheless, there are some subjects which he did not fully address. Just as he is silent concerning Puerto Rico's colonial situation and what that meant for the island's people, he is decidedly guarded on the subject of slavery. Indeed, the institution is not a target of his pointed comments and criticism. Why this silence on a topic that affected so many aspects of Puerto Rican life at that time?

We can only speculate, because Emerson offers few clues in his writings; indeed, he maintained an unusual detachment from the subject of slavery, and refrained from editorializing even when pointing out the obvious injustices of the system. One reason is that he did not distinguish between race and labor status. As a result, he tended to equate being Black with being a slave, although, at least in Puerto Rico, the number of free Blacks was rising and they accounted for almost two-fifths of the population at the time of Emerson's sojourn on the island. Another explanation may be that Emerson's employer, Sidney Mason, had a financial stake in at least two plantations that depended on slave labor (Baralt, 1992). Edward may therefore have been reluctant to criticize the behavior of someone on whom he depended for his livelihood and companionship. Finally, he may have been muzzled by two contemporaneous witnesses to whom he was close: his brother Charles and George D. Flinter. Each of these wrote unambiguous though contradictory views of slavery as an institution, views that they communicated to Edward and later made public.

When Charles Emerson visited his brother in Puerto Rico in 1831-32, he wrote letters and an essay that left no doubt as to his opinions on slavery. Charles was on the island for 3½ months, during which he spent several weeks at Mason's largest estate, "riding about morning & evening, through sugar plantations, rivers, ponds, dingles, and bosky dells" (Charles C. Emerson to Mary Moody Emerson, 4 February 1832, in Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 165). This extended stay in the country provided him a close exposure to slavery. He therefore expressed opinions on both the institution's everydayness and its broad policy effects:

The slaves enjoy a good deal, & are humanely treated on this island, as I am told they are generally through the West Indies [sic] --- more so than in the U.S. But I am too lately come from the cheerful abodes of free labourers, to look at them with any satisfaction --- I feel grieved, & at the same time humiliated, as we do when we see the monkey. They do not work nearly so hard as does the Yankee farmer --- but they work without the consciousness of liberty & property, which makes toil honorable and sweet. [...] to tolerate slavery is like nothing so much as sewing up the body politic [...] in a sack with a living viper. (Charles C. Emerson to Ezra Ripley, 15-17 January 1832, in Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 163)

Writing to his brother William, Charles again used the image of the viper and the body politic, stressing the incompatibility of the two and the urgency of addressing “the great question of Slavery” and “healing this great breach of divine & human law.” But Charles also admitted that he was ignorant on the cure for the “deadly evil --- whether it admits of salves & palliatives, & dieting, & gradual remedies --- or must have knife at once, & at all costs & all hazards” (Charles C. Emerson to William Emerson, 5 February 1832, in Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 166). It would take three years for him to opt for the surgical approach and declare himself an abolitionist (Charles C. Emerson to William Emerson, 29 April 1835, in Bosco & Myerson, 2006).

Summing up the experience of slavery in Puerto Rico, Charles described the situation as follows:

The condition of the slaves here is, physically considered, very tolerable. Self-interest prevails with the master to treat them well, when justice or mercy would plead in vain. They are in general neither over-worked, nor ill-fed. They have their patch of ground & sell to their masters on fair terms the products of their land, or of their skill & labor [in] holiday hours. Any one may buy himself free for the price his master bought him with --- and the master can demand no more, whatever handicraft he may have taught him. [...] Still, a slave is a slave, and is made to feel it --- If he raise his hand against a White man, it is death by the Law--- He is called to work by the crack of a whip --- And the theory is that if he is not soundly flogged now & then, he will grow unmanageable. (Charles C. Emerson to William Emerson, 5 February 1832, in Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 166)

Charles’s views contrasted with those of George D. Flinter, whom Edward befriended in Puerto Rico. Flinter, an Irishman who had served for 21 years as a British military officer in the Caribbean, spent three years (1829-1832) in Puerto Rico, overlapping Edward’s residence on the island. During his stay, Flinter penned two books on Puerto Rico. While conceding that “slavery, in every form and shape, is an evil of great magnitude,” he felt that slaves under the colonial administration of Spain enjoyed “greater comforts than many of the peasantry of Europe” and that the bitterness of slavery was “very much mitigated by the humanity of the Spanish laws” (Flinter, 1834/2010, pp. 233-235). Flinter also stated that the manumission of slaves was more frequent in the Spanish dominions than everywhere else, and described instances of slaves choosing slavery over the possibility of purchasing their freedom. Because he saw the slave owner as humane and caring and the slave as docile and childlike but with “savage manners” in need of correction, he depicted the relationship between the two as that between parent and child:

The humane and praiseworthy custom among the Spaniards, of treating the numerous slaves they employ in domestic service with the same kindness and familiarity as if they were their own children, accounts for the reciprocal attachment that is generally observed between the master and the slave in the Spanish colonies. (p. 237)

Given his vision of slaves in need of guidance, and of masters as paternal and humane, Flinter expressed his approval of the existing Spanish code. This, he felt, “breathes mildness and humanity; ...affords protection to the slave; and infuses the balm of hope and consolation into his bosom” (Flinter, 1834/2010, p. 238).

As his account makes clear, Flinter was an apologist for the existing regime, saw the laws and decrees governing slavery as “monuments of humanity and wisdom,” and did not advocate change. Edward visited Flinter on several occasions, heard him read his text, and helped him find a printer for its publication. Nevertheless, Emerson distanced himself from Flinter’s opinions, subtly questioning not only his conclusions but also his motives. Writing to Charles, Edward characterized Flinter as “saccharine” and described his writing as lacking the impartiality that he, Edward, “should wish to see employed in the description of Porto Rico.” He attributed the Irishman’s sugar-coating of the issue to a desire to curry favor with the Spanish crown, then asked, “Who knows how much it is fault & how much it is misfortune & blindness in the favored to praise the hand that holds out to them patronage & support?” (Letter from Edward B. Emerson to Charles C. Emerson, 30 November 1831, emphasis in the original).

These accounts of the practice of slavery in St. Croix and Puerto Rico suggest the different lenses through which the institution, and hence its fate, was viewed. Similar discrepancies and diverging opinions would inform much of the political discussion on the topic over the following decades. Even committed abolitionists differed concerning when, how, and at what cost slavery should end. As a result, the debate over the issue would not be settled in the Danish West Indies until 1848, following a slave rebellion and von Scholten’s declaration of emancipation. In Puerto Rico, slavery was not so much overturned as chipped away or eroded over time. The clash between moral values and economic self-interest led to protracted battles that overlapped in part with the debate over Puerto Rico’s governance. But intermittent slave rebellions and the activities of a small group of committed abolitionists eventually succeeded in calling attention to the evils of slavery and bringing it to an end. It was not until 1873, when slaves accounted for 4.2 percent of the population, that the Spanish legislature finally abolished the practice of slavery on the island. In time, most of the sounds and sights that Edward B. Emerson found foreign and picturesque would lose their association with slavery and become part of a rich West Indian culture. Other aspects of the institution, however, including racial prejudice and a disdain for manual labor, remained embedded in the islands’ social and economic structure and left traces that are felt to this day (Picó, 1988, p. 190).

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