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A Research Note: Race, Slavery, and the Ambiguity of Corporate Consciousness

HERMAN L. BENNETT

In 1769, as he languished in Córdoba's prison, Diego Antonio Macute seethed. He was not alone. Fifteen of his compatriots shared his sentiments as they confronted their re-enslavement. Recent events painfully reminded them that racial consciousness had limits: their maroon allies, after all, had returned them to their former masters.¹

The rigors of mountain life and periodic pursuits by the militia strained the patience of the fugitive slaves known as maroons. The psychic price extracted for their precarious freedom eventually sapped some of their resilience and they began to question the viability of maroonage. Their leader, Diego Antonio Macute, did not take kindly to such sentiments, since he perceived a change in attitude as an injudicious threat to his leadership. Fernando Manuel, a former creole slave, represented those who desired peace and a permanent settlement. In the ensuing battle his forces gravely wounded Macute and soundly defeated his followers. Fernando Manuel emerged as the new leader, and his first act was to return the vanquished to a life of slavery.²

This case illustrates the ambivalent and contradictory nature of consciousness and behavior. In highly stratified societies, neither the consciousness nor the behavior of the dominant or dominated is entirely predictable. Despite the risks involved, individuals defied prevailing codes of conduct and transgressed established boundaries on a daily basis. This defiance, some suggest, threatened the existing order "since merging or boundary-crossing of any kind might contribute eventually to the erosion of the principles upon which the whole colonial

¹ Archivo General de la Nación, México, Tierras (hereinafter cited as AGN, T), tomo 3543, exp. 1, 1769.

² Ibid.

undertaking rested."³ But this formulation ignores the terms and circumstances under which boundaries were crossed.⁴

Personal ties tempered and sometimes transcended the asymmetrical relationships of power, yet this phenomenon did not give them equality. In fact, some societies prospered because their elastic hierarchies enabled them to accommodate change. These same societies usually suffered little or no physical coercion or rebellion. Nonetheless, domination was woven into the social fabric—a state which naked force rarely achieved. The dominated themselves had an active, although not the primary, role in abetting their own oppression. The maroons' decision to deliver Diego Antonio Macute and his allies to the Spaniards occurred in this context.

Though they viewed their former Spanish masters as "enemies," Fernando Manuel and his associates still handed Diego Antonio Macute and his followers over to these Spaniards. They did not believe

³ Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past: A Caribbean Perspective* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976), 3. Anthony P. Cohen has suggested that "as the structural bases of the boundary become undermined or weakened as a consequence of social change, so people resort increasingly to symbolic behavior to reconstitute the boundary." *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 70. In New Spain, for instance, Spaniards, especially elites, relied increasingly on honor—a phenomenon that they denied the descendants of Africans on the basis of their slave heritage—since miscegenation threatened to obscure their status in the social structure. See, for instance, Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Patricia Seed, *To Love, Honor, and Obey in Colonial Mexico: Conflicts over Marriage Choice, 1574-1821* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁴ See, for instance, the following works which overlook the political context in which boundaries were crossed: T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, *"Myne Owne Ground:" Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640-1676* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Vincent Carpanzano, *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* (New York: Random House, 1985); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975); Charles Van Onselen, "Race and Class in the South African Countryside: Cultural Osmosis and Social Relations in the Sharecropping Economy of the South-Western Transvaal, 1900-1950," *American Historical Review* 95 (1990):99-123; Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

that their actions were contradictory nor that they compromised their racial consciousness. Fernando Manuel noted that Macute and his supporters "are all our enemies."⁵ Only if one views racial boundaries and consciousness as immutable can such behavior be labeled as contradictory. As members of distinct communities, individuals constantly redefine themselves in relation to others and keep boundaries in a state of flux.

Even in a slave society racial boundaries were subject to constant modifications. From the initial Spanish invasion, Veracruz was the quintessential slave society whose urban centers—Córdoba, Jalapa, and Orizaba—were inextricably tied to the plantation complex. By the end of the sixteenth century, this complex was firmly in place as the Spaniards controlled nearly fifty percent of the most fertile land and imported African laborers in significant numbers.⁶ Fifty years later the Spaniards' virtual monopoly over land and labor manifested itself in the great estates which dotted the region's landscape and shaped its social ethos—rooted in race and slavery.⁷

Conventional interpretations suggest that this racial ethos imposed a rigidity on Veracruz's social structure and social relations which, in turn, led masters and slaves to subordinate their respective

⁵ AGN, T, tomo 3543, exp. 1, 1769.

⁶ Between 1590-1610, Jalapa's planters imported nearly 70 percent of their entire African labor force. Patrick J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 12, 28-39.

⁷ Adriana Naveda Chávez-Hita, *Esclavos negros en las haciendas azucareras de Córdoba. Veracruz: 1690-1830* (Jalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1987), 69. Though the plantation complex was firmly in place, it did not rely exclusively on slave labor. From its inception, Veracruz's plantation complex was variegated, since owners of estates simultaneously employed enslaved Africans, indigenous tributaries, and wage-laborers of various racial categories. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*, 61-78, 95-117. For comparisons with other regions in New Spain see Lolita Gutiérrez Brockington, *The Leverage of Labor: Managing the Cortés Haciendas in Tehuantepec, 1588-1688* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989) and Cheryl English Martin, *Rural Society in Colonial Morelos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985). Even the mature plantation complex in the Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds was noted for its diverse labor force. See Philip D. Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3-28, 46-110.

internal differences.⁸ This formulation obscures the complex relationships between Spaniards and Africans. Africans and their descendants, for example, did not simply rely on race and slavery to construct their communities. Despite shared and similar circumstances, persons of African descent distinguished themselves on the basis of real and symbolic differences. They constructed and redefined their identities around categories meaningful to themselves. To outsiders, such distinctions were perhaps less obvious than those linked to race and slavery, but they were nonetheless real to individuals who lived, experienced, and valued them.

When Diego Antonio Macute, Fernando Manuel, and other eighteenth-century maroons fled to the Mazatiopa mountains bordering Veracruz and Oaxaca, they acted in a tradition initiated by Africans in the sixteenth century. They were simply the most recent in a long line of runaways and rebels who had done the same thing. In fact, the maroon elders informed Fernando Manuel that his symbolic lineage was traceable to the initial African presence, "for they had always been there after the Conquest of this Kingdom."⁹

Initially, individuals like Diego Antonio Macute and Fernando Manuel transcended their differences, since their precarious freedom depended on it, but the potential sources of conflict still remained. Differences often lingered but were temporarily subordinated in light of strategic concerns. In time, Amapa's residents became less and less likely to define themselves on the basis of a shared racial heritage, maroon experience, or common residence. Maroons increasingly united around particular leaders, alliances with generational peers, and most

⁸ Throughout the Atlantic world, the plantation complex defined the social texture of the masters' and the slaves' disparate but interconnected worlds. The classic and still useful perspective on the plantation's omnipresence in the lives of the dominant and dominated is Edgar T. Thompson's essay, "The Plantation: Background and Definition," in *Plantation Societies, Race Relations, and the South: The Regimentation of Populations, Selected Papers of Edgar T. Thompson* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 3-40.

⁹ AGN, T, tomo 3543, exp. 1, 1769. Despite this historic presence, eighteenth-century Amapa was not sustained by natural reproduction, but by fugitive slaves and rebels.

importantly, family and friends.¹⁰ In some instances these ties preceded their maroonage, but generally they were forged during and after flight and sustained Amapa's maroons. Despite the presence of a distinct physical community, eighteenth-century Amapa was comprised of various physical and symbolic communities which shaped consciousness and behavior.¹¹

Despite the fascination surrounding armed conflict among Amapa's maroons, the symbolic interpretation of their actions is of immediate interest.¹² Their behavior highlights the fluidity of collective racial consciousness and the malleability of boundaries. Thus, when Fernando Manuel delivered Diego Antonio Macute and his allies to the Spaniards, he was not simply expelling individuals with whom he had serious disagreements. His actions, and by implication those of his followers, illustrate the ambiguity of colonial relationships: longstanding alliances were renegotiated, collective consciousness reformulated, and community boundaries repositioned. As members of a newly reconstituted community, the victorious maroons turned Diego Antonio Macute and his followers over to the Spaniards precisely because they had redefined the vanquished as outsiders. Perceiving the

¹⁰ Ibid. Maroons invariably established a highly authoritarian political culture that governed their lives and community. This phenomenon reflected the precariousness of their freedom. In light of the planters' persistent campaigns to reenslave them, Amapa's maroons were constantly in a state of siege. This may explain why they subjected themselves to a military hierarchy and its regimentation. Apparently, most community members valued military prowess in their leaders, which was usually but not always perceived as a male trait. Diego Antonio Macute undoubtedly offered this characteristic to his compatriots. His prowess was also in all likelihood the basis of a patron-client relationship since he, as the patron, was skilled at preserving his clients' freedom. In turn, they extended their loyalty and assistance until such time as different options were available.

¹¹ Cohen correctly concludes that "Community can no longer be adequately described in terms of institutions and components, for now we recognize it as symbols to which its various adherents impute their own meanings. They can all use the word, all express their co-membership of the same community, yet assimilate it to the idiosyncrasies of their own experiences and personalities." *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 74.

¹² The writer will explore this case in much greater detail in a forthcoming essay. See also Patrick J. Carroll, "Mandinga: The Evolution of a Mexican Runaway Slave Community, 1735-1827," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19 (1977):488-505; William B. Taylor, "The Foundation of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Morenos de Amapa," *The Americas* 26 (1970):439-46.

vanquished group as distinct from themselves, the victorious faction returned their former allies to slavery without viewing their behavior as contradictory.¹³

In this instance, community reconstitution involved more than a simple repositioning of boundaries. Amapa's residents, both consciously and unconsciously, scrutinized the ties and symbols that united them. This led to the discarding of old mores, values, and signs as well as the creation of new ones. Friendship and kinship ties were severely tested, alliances among peers were re-evaluated, and patron and client relationships questioned. Although Africans and their descendants throughout New Spain formed and reconstituted their communities in a less dramatic manner, like Amapa's maroons they did so on the basis of categories meaningful to them.

Although many scholars seriously question imperial dominion as a force in shaping social interaction, others still view policymakers as the principal architects of social identities and racial attitudes.¹⁴ Such a perspective ignores how individuals relied on their own perceived and socially constructed differences—racial, sexual, political, and material—to distinguish themselves from others, and the ways in which these differences guided their behavior. Thus, the descendants of Africans, like the Nahuas and Spaniards, defined themselves in ways that invariably diverged from the imperial ideal; their community boundaries and social stratification simply were not one and the same.

Africans and their descendants were not undifferentiated social groups distinguished only by nationality, race, or class. Although they valued or contested these categories, ethnic Africans, black creoles, and mulattoes also defined themselves on the basis of ethnolinguistic

¹³ In short, differences had become irreconcilable and the familiar "other" had become the distant "other" whose presence could not be accommodated within existing community boundaries; hence the schism. Cohen has perceptively stated that "the triumph of community is to so contain this variety that its inherent discordance does not subvert the apparent coherence which is expressed by its boundaries." *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 20.

¹⁴ John K. Chance, *Race & Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978); R. Douglas Cope, "The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987); Seed, *To Love, Honor, and Obey*; Dennis Noldin Valdes, "The Decline of the Sociedad de Castas in Mexico City" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1978).

similarities, real and symbolic kinship ties, and friendships forged within but also across existing boundaries. Despite the colonial context, the descendants of Africans relied on these as primary identities while they constructed their disparate communities. This indicates the limits of an imposed corporate consciousness and simultaneously the multi-dimensional texture of their identities.

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