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Runaway Freedom: Fugitive Black Slaves' Destinies in Late Colonial Chile (1760–1805)

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Abstract

This chapter is an applied study on fugitive black slaves in late colonial Chile (1760–1805). It is based on a selection of cases, displayed in a socioeconomic scene whose labor force, free and slave tends to circulation and vagrancy. The sources provide a rich material for a reflection focused mainly on the crossroad between labor systems, racialized groups, and the links with the territory. Based on the concept of fugitive freedom, we seek to express the diversity of aspirations in those who become runaways. Furthermore, understanding the conditions of oppression that usually drives a slave to escape, fugitive freedom allows us to think about an eventual destination hoped by fugitives that can be read in a historical way.

Keywords: runaway freedom, labor, racialized group

1. Introduction: Africans and afro-descendants in late colonial Chile

Economically speaking, the Kingdom of Chile (*Reyno de Chile*) always had a marginal role among the Hispanic domains in America, but it was primal in structuring the continental administration. One of its main functions was to protect the Pacific Ocean (*Mar del Sur*) against European vessels that crossed the Magellan's Strait, mostly from British and Dutch origin. Likewise, this colony historically shared the southern border with the Mapuche people, an independent indigenous group whose resistance circumscribed the Hispanic influence toward the center and north zones of the country.

Leaving aside the importance of the city of Santiago, capital of the Kingdom, colonial Chile had eminently a rural character. Encased between the Andes Mountains and the Pacific Ocean, between the Atacama Desert to the north and the Bío-Bío River frontier to the south, its territory was relatively isolated from the other South American regions in geographical terms.

This isolation is probably related to the Chilean demographic particularities. Apparently, the percentage of black population was comparatively lower here than in other colonies. However, it is not possible to establish an accurate demographic panorama based on the data provided by the censuses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. First of all, there are differences in the delimitation of the territory. For example, the census of 1778 is the only one that includes the province of Cuyo, located east of the Andes and the one of 1813 marginalized the most important cities, Santiago and Concepción [1]. Therefore, the numbers vary

greatly from one study to another. In addition, we cannot rely on the ways the information was collected or the ideologies behind the racial classifications used. In 1778, the population was divided into blacks, indians, half-breed (mestizos), and whites; while in 1813, there were two major groups: Spaniards-European foreigners and castes, the latter being divided into indians, half-Breed (mestizos), mulattos, and blacks [1].

However, using these same data, historians such as Domingo Amunategui Solar and Gonzalo Vial Correa counted the number of African and Afro-descendent population between 20,000 and 25,000 people for the eighteenth century in Chile [2, 3]. Both left the province of Cuyo out of their calculation, showing us that this nationalist historiography projects an idealized image of both the population and the territory. Indeed, this omission or denial has been an obstacle to knowing more about the participation of black population in the history of Chile and the way in which its presence was understood and represented. Let us clarify that it is not the African presence that traditional historiography has denied, but the variety of roles it fulfilled in society, its circumstances, its own diversity, and its intervention in the contingencies of the colonial world in which it was inserted.

Fortunately, historians such as Celia Cussen and Hugo Contreras have given new energies to the documentary study of black presence in Chile, influencing younger generations of researchers to continue exploring these subjects in all their diversities. Contreras has made important contributions to the knowledge of the black-militias (milicias de pardos), which were militia units commonly composed by free blacks between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Southern Cone. The author acknowledges that those who were part of these militias had a high degree of obedience to the Hispanic regime, because “their enlistment placed them under the eyes of the authorities as loyal to the monarchy, men of luster and good manners, distancing them away from the image of potential delinquents, bad living persons, or rebels, which were frequently expressed against them [4].” This description expresses the heterogeneity existing both in the historical experience of the African population and in the hegemonic speeches of the Hispanic colonial order, which is present in the sources preserved by the National Historical Archive of Chile, where lists of sale and transport of slaves, manumission demands, complaints of crimes and vagrancy, prohibitions, and regulations for the use of weapons and circulation in cities and in the countryside can be found. In reviewing some of these dossiers, we started thinking of several cases that could be considered opposed, in historical experience and in hegemonic discourses, to the black-militias cases: the fugitive black slaves in colonial Chile. Below, exploring some judicial sources, we will try to decipher who these fugitives were and propose an explanation of the possible relationships, interpretations, similarities, and differences between them.

2. Runaway freedom

Freedom is a broad concept in slavery studies and has a polysemous nature. It is usually used in a pragmatic sense, opposing freedom and slavery as legal conditions. Several lines of analysis can be examined through this point of view, such as social mobility, access to public offices, differences in tax contribution, among others. In this regard, freedom is usually conceived as the main goal of slaves who seek to get rid of their servile nature.

The chief strategy to achieve this goal is manumission [5]. By the end of eighteenth century, manumission was a usual practice in colonial Chile. As historian Guillermo Feliú Cruz expresses, “the slave could obtain his freedom when, with his own economies, he paid his master the value in which he had been acquired [6].”

Although these cases were in accordance with law, it rarely happened. Feliú Cruz shows that most common cases of manumission were those where the owner after his death, due to a “religious piety feeling” granted the emancipation by testament, and sometimes leave the slave “a small sum of money so that he could dedicate to some trade [6].” These types of manumission can be found all along Spanish Colonial America, and so in English North America. Research about the United States tends to be more revealing and undistorted on the motivation of masters who gave freedom to their slaves. We see that many owners freed those who were old or sick, so as not to support this burden anymore [7]. In these cases, freedom was not always something desirable.

Thus, if we keep thinking about freedom as slaves’ “main goal,” we must then expand its meaning both in an analytical way and, specially, as an historical concept. Freedom as a precious aim with no specific shape, as it can be deduced from Orlando Patterson’s “The meaning of freedom” [8]. Freedom is the ambition of a slave formed by lack of means and material abandonment. Freedom is an unspecified dream with an important mobilizing potential. In this sense, manumission is not the only strategy to gain freedom. In some cases, escape shows as a more viable and practicable path to access it.

In 1764, in a vineyard property of María del Carmen Daniel, near Santiago, a group of black slaves decided to runaway across the Andes Mountains. This association was denounced by an unknown stranger, leading to their imprisonment. The further trial starts explaining that seven blacks and one *sambo* (mixed individual of African and American Indigenous ancestry) who were found and arrested with no resistance, and no weapons but a gun, [the sambo] did not know the others wanted to rise or cause any havoc at the plantation house (*hacienda*), he only knew they wanted to escape to see themselves free of their masters [9].”

Following the source’s locution, manumission can be understood as a means to “be free,” escape as a means to “see oneself free” despite legal conditions. This kind of thought reveals a general reason to break away. On the one hand, broadly speaking, this reason may be called the horrors of slavery, characterized by the masters’ brutality and the shock suffered by the newcomers from Africa. Historian Marc Ferro judges that the trauma of travel was such that immediately after arriving in the Caribbean, the “new blacks” wanted to escape. The settlers who understood their situation tried to reduce the shock by adapting the slaves before putting them to work. But the anguish led them to mutilate themselves, to choke themselves, or attempt to kill their new masters. Thus, suicide or runaway were significant forms of resistance [10]. However, the horrors of slavery do not really describe possible ideas about a runaway life. And indeed, not all black slaves were mistreated. That is why, on the other hand, freedom could be seen not just as a change of status, but as an ambition of a social change, a possibility to bring destiny under control. Manumission is only one opportunity among others, and runaway could be a possibility toward it. What we are trying to say is that runaway explanations tend to think about push factors, rarely about pull factors. The slave could have had ideal reasons that forced him to leave, an imagined place where to escape. This is what we have called runaway freedom.

3. The *roads*, a fugitive way of life

Fugitive freedom always remains as an idea, an abstraction on the place (or conditions) of destiny. A conceptualization that sometimes could be very concrete, such as the fortified citadel (*quilombo*) of Palmares for the fugitive blacks of Pernambuco. The idealization and influence of this community was so great

that settlers “also wished to eliminate the lure of escape that Palmares constantly represented to the plantation slaves [11].” The slaves escaped by cause of mistreatment, but then they hit the roads toward Palmares because the quilombo appealed them. Even if colonial Chile has no particularity comparable to what is found in the northeastern Brazil, we can still try to understand what slaves were looking for in running away, especially what they envisioned as the destiny of their break. In the case of María del Carmen’s slaves, one of them called Salvador confessed “that his prison is attributable to the fact that he was breaking toward Mendoza, and that the runaway mode was following and accompanying the others with no intention of offending anyone. As it was verified when the Dragoons captain and his soldiers went to apprehend them, they surrendered without the slightest resistance, not having another circumstance or motivation but seeing that his fellows and beloved blacks were leaving [9].”

Well-treated slaves wishing this kind of change in their life conditions may seem a paradox. In this particular case, the attraction exerted by fugitive freedom is not horror of slavery. Salvador makes the decision to leave after noting the collective nature of the escape. The experience of a sentimental link with a group identified as black awakens his desire to follow it. The escape resulting from a racial affinity, or from a specific affectivity with a group, opens a new perspective to understand the possibilities of a slave beyond social and spatial limits. Freedom is accordingly shaped by feelings, prejudices, beliefs, ambitions, and ideals awakened by the slave about the social and geographical situation he will find in fleeing. Normally, most slaves escaped without a plan behind them that is why they did not stay long as fugitives, either because they returned or because they were caught [12]. However, the lack of a runaway plan does not imply the absence of this ideal dimension bear by the slave when leaving his master.

Following a group of *fellows and beloved blacks* was probably not a substantial reason to escape. This collective runaway was arranged and requested by a *sambo* Balentin, who raised a kind of motto on the eventual injustices on the masters’ treatment. We may think his specific purpose was to put forward a background shared between black slaves. In her study of fugitive blacks in the region of Charcas, Gutiérrez Brockington wonders if this stimulation to escape is not a theft, or some form of shelter provided to the slave [13]. Matheo, one of the plotted, indicates that “a *sambo* Romero inquired him saying that he had been running away for a long time, that for this reason, he was practical on the roads and that they could escape to the other slope [9].”

The incitement to escape is an offer to leave the slave condition, if not materially, at least psychologically. The idea of a better life is represented in being a runaway, or more precisely, to share this condition with other fellows. Some slaves turned their runaway condition into a normal situation, a way of life that goes well with this situation described as “practical on the roads.” In fact, in other colonial sources, we find the term “practical on the roads” or sometimes only “practical” as a synonym of the word *baqueano*, or local guide, someone who knows the roads and acts as a guide to others. The roads are an image of an external form of life indicating circulation. For a fugitive, slave indicates relocation of habits and skills.

Yet, an important branch of Chilean historiography has devoted to study forms of displacement for Spanish Colonial times, usually under the conceptualization of vagrancy. In 1960s, Mario Góngora concluded his work *Vagabundaje y sociedad Fronteriza en Chile* asserting that in Chilean society, “born after an adventurous conquest, imbued with pastoral cattle ranching, with Indians uprooted from their land, the trend to displacement was not surprising [14].” Rural population was “not nomadic but was neither deeply rooted in the territory” observing a “intimate tendency to vagrancy in groups without statute, privileges, or organization within the

existing order such as marginal groups of half-breed, mulattos, sambos (*mestizos*, *mulatos*, *zambos*) and free blacks joined, for obvious reasons, by all kinds of criminals, slaves, and fugitive Indians [14].” Two decades later, historian Gabriel Salazar described the conformation of Chilean peasantry through the notion of *mass work*, i.e., the massification of production from an enlargement of the labor force, an historic process observed several times in the colonial period. “Colonial entrepreneurs discovered that they could quickly increase their quota of gain by massifying the exports of wheat to Peru [15],” Salazar asserts. In the eighteenth century, “a feverish logic of mass production-export reappeared again, and with it, not only the expectations of big profits and the usurious practices of great merchants, but also, and what was worse, the concept of work mass. The labor training process weakened. It was necessary an increasing number of workers with pure physical capacity [...]. From this moment, silent, gradual, but steadily, the wandering masses began to be recruited by the central economic system of the Colony. Neither the Church nor the King, nor local authorities tried to stop that recruitment, since neither their ideological schemes nor their sovereignty was designed to govern marginal groups and local labor forms [15].”

Salazar’s proposal is above all an explanatory scheme, an effort to provide a conceptual guide to the formation of peasantry in rural Chile.¹ This description serves us as contextual background to what we want to refer, the existence of a considerable portion of population in motion, integrating a socioeconomic logic that enables several profiles that share a permanent externality. However, vagrants and fugitives must not be confused and so quickly assimilated. The figure of the vagabond does not describe any essentialism; it was the word used to point out alternative ways of life marginal to colonial society. Among this heterogeneous and diffuse group, moving throughout the territory, black fugitives could be conceptually incorporated.

This large-scale scheme therefore suggests two organized labor areas, the slavery and the free one. Both impose functions and behaviors on individuals. Fugitive slaves, as well as freed slaves who led a vagrant life, were able to move from one side to another. Consequently, the fugitive deterritorializes the slave zone well as it simultaneously territorializes the free zone. The outside transformed into something useful, a field where a perpetual motion life can take place and where there is no goal but to remain there, nowhere. The *roads* would be then a sensible expression of what we have called fugitive freedom, watching how they are called upon to incorporate other slaves to escape.

4. Facing Jesuit void

It is well known that Jesuits had many black slaves in their properties (*haciendas*) all along the *kingdom of Chile*. The removal of the Company members in

¹ Salazar’s quotation explains one aspect of rural socioeconomics of Chile’s central valley. However, his text usually forces historical processes to fit into a structural and Marxist interpretation. Precisely, work mass is not always an explanatory concept regarding the work forms found in this context. In our point of view, he tries at all costs to find a historical endeavor leading to the proletarianization of workers, and afterward, he tries to find a widespread popular and solidary emotion, constituting a historical consciousness lost after the introduction of the military dictatorship in 1973 (as an accentuation of mass alienation). Nevertheless, the most thorough study on the subject is the Alejandra Araya’s work [25]. She undertakes an analysis of vagrancy as a historical product of a discourse, which associates wandering life with unproductivity and crime. We find at Araya not only a very good description of vagabond ways of life and the possible profiles, but also an interesting demonstration on how association of concepts in a discourse impact society.

1767 meant, for colonial authorities, the confiscation and occupation of their land properties and other assets, including black slaves. A secular board called *Junta de Temporalidades* was created to draw up inventories and to manage the transfers of all these possessions. In this context, the procurator (*fiscal de temporalidades*) complained to the Viceroy of the president of the Royal Court (*Real Audiencia*) of Santiago, Chile's main court at the time, for having sold a slave party to a private:

"In certain haciendas somehow distant from this Capital, there is a shortage of blacks and there are none for sale. The few that can be found are worth five hundred pesos. If VE had been warned or consulted to better say about the motives to alienate the Chilean blacks, the need for slaves that there would have determined your superior discretion to send those that are left over in Chile and use them in the haciendas that lack the competent number for work, would have multiplied their production [16]."

One of the judges (*oidor*) named Traslaviña answered "being these many [slaves] exposed not only to runaway but to death, as has already happened with these, it seems convenient to royal interests to sell and reduce to money some part of them as opportunities are provided. Because of this chance their existence is impossible despite the means taken to distribute them insured among the neighborhood, because several have been returned or because they are not suitable for the destinations gave to them or because they [neighbors] distrust and fright their runaway [16]."

The situation was not clear. Nobody had a well-defined idea about what to do with the slaves left by the Jesuits, many of whom wanted to appropriate them. The fear of escape was important among the temporal masters (the said neighbors) and administrators, chiefly because they were responsible for the slaves. This mind was almost the same held by the neighbors on the eastern side of the Andes Mountains, where, in the same year of 1768, a group of six black slaves, formerly belonging to the Company, escaped. The judge commissioned for the expulsion of the Jesuits installed in Mendoza, explained that "they fled from this city together, on the fifth day this month, and as it has been discovered by the trail, they are heading toward that city [San Juan], and because it is the duty of the royal service to restore them to their respective deposits, on the part of His Majesty (may God preserve) [...]. I request and order to be practiced and done the most lively and effective diligences to seek these slaves, giving all the necessary orders so wherever they are found, they be brought to this city, imprisoned and secured no matter what it may cost, that I will punctually satisfy for the respective depositaries everything that is impeded in these proceedings [17]."

The judge dispatched a lieutenant and 17 soldiers in search of the fugitives, who according to some neighbors, "are going straight ahead" [17]. It is interesting to examine the nimbleness of the actors aiming to recover the slaves, or even the importance of putting them under control of the colonial authorities. The civilian control of the old Jesuit belongings (*Temporalidades*) was severe and unwieldy. The Jesuit void left groups of slaves separated, and temporarily allocated among landowners, a new universe of relations and representations. The field was clear to escape.

As we said before, those runaways who declared themselves practical on the roads did not show any concrete idea about their destiny, but abstractions. However, if we look the course taken by these runaway slaves from Mendoza, we can accede to some original aspects about freedom. Six men distributed among three masters joining together to escape. More than a racial affinity, or social category, this can be seen as a shared lifetime experience. That is why the judges of *Temporalidades*

suspected that they were moving toward the site of the old Jesuit properties (*haciendas*) in San Juan.²

We see that escaping a temporary master is a trend. The scattered slaves of the banned Jesuits ran away on both sides of the Andes. Those who left the surrounding part of Mendoza took no great discretion so as not to get caught. Their apprehension was easy, near the city of San Juan, where the rural properties of the Jesuits were located.³ These evidences can illuminate some conjectures behind this runaway episode: did they head to the old Jesuits' haciendas? Was there a Jesuit space, not just a territory, but a system, where nothing pushed them to escape? Are we facing an attempt to go back to a certain state of things, to become a fugitive to push toward the previous circumstances? Can we speak about coming back? If there was no plan, would at least there be a local geographical concept leading them to San Juan? The bond between these slaves was more or less clear: living in a new context of scarcity, unaccustomed to serving a particular master, uprooted and separated from each other. The emotion is shared, they undergo the same troubles, and they seek to get rid of this new atmosphere. They do not escape from an assimilated environment, they rather seek it. This shared past time drives them to escape, to return to a territory that no longer exists.

No explanation is required by the judges, although they gave much importance to this case. The punishment had to fit the great political change that meant the expulsion of the Company. That is why the official in charge, “in view of having manifested such slaves their perverse inclinations through the crime of flight, in addition to other background of uprising that influence others to equal excesses [...], I ordered to ship them with the necessary custody to the Capital of this Kingdom (*Reyno*) with their women and children those who had them [17].”

A punishment that reminds these black slaves of their new role: parts in an internal South American slave-trade detached from its Atlantic stage, where Jesuits emerge as suppliers. Black slaves are officially recognized as being under a new status, henceforth belonging to the civil control of the Hispanic colonies. As such, the only social bond that is not broken is the family. Their relocation in another region would be a means of enhancing reproduction and consolidating the slave system.

5. The return, a territorial dream

However, all the black slaves we have invoked were Spanish-speaking (*ladinos*), and from their position they were adapted to Hispanic colonial society. This situation is opposed to those of the *bozales* (recently arrived at the Americas from Africa, what Marc Ferro calls “new blacks” [10]), removed from their home and relocated at the crossroads of a new order. Before mentioning an important case of new blacks (*bozales*) runaway, it is necessary to give certain explanations about the disappearance of African traces in Chilean society. Apart from nationalist negation, the most accepted explanation is miscegenation between the lower classes. As we have already mentioned, eighteenth century economy favored the growth of a rural salaried and itinerant workforce.

² In 1767, there were four large Jesuit rural properties in San Juan: Puyuta, San Xavier, Guanacache, and Father Jofre's vineyard.

³ The capture is narrated as follows: “the day they were caught, the above-mentioned [commissioner] Chagaray made use of a man named Molina, with whom these blacks had spoken and asked for horses, on whose occasion this Molina caught up with them, and kept them, so that they could easily apprehend them [17].”

Historical overall frame holds that early colonial labor forms, especially African slavery and the various figures of Indian work, led to the formation of a crude metis free laborers force. Yet, Africans continued to arrive as this group of 72 people from Senegal who crossed the Cordillera brought by a trader called Alejandro de Aranda. On their way from Mendoza, they arrived in Valparaíso to meet the *Tryal*'s captain Benito Cerreño, and to ship under his orders toward Callao on December 20th, 1804.⁴ The slaves formed the biggest part of the crew. According to the declaration of Cerreño (collected by the journal of the *Perseverance*'s captain Amasa Delano).

"The crew of the ship consisted of thirty-six men, besides the persons who went as passengers. The negroes numbered twenty from 12 to 16 years; one of about 18 or 19 years old named Jose who was the man that waited upon his master Don Alexandro and who spoke Spanish well; a mulatto named Francisco, native of the province of Buenos Aires, aged about thirty-five; a smart negro named Joaquin, who had been for many years among the Spaniards, aged twenty-six, and a caulker by trade; twelve full-grown negroes, aged from 25 to 50 years, all raw and born on the coast of Senegal-whose names are as follows: Babo, and he was killed; Mure son of Babo; Matinqui, Yola, Yau, Atufal, who was killed; Diamelo, also killed; Lecbe and Nantu, both killed; and he could not recollect the names of the others (Ceren reported that at least half of the above named were killed in the battle aboard ship.) There were twenty-eight women of all ages, and nine sucking infants. All the negroes slept upon deck, as is customary in this navigation, and none wore fetters because the owner, Aranda, told him that they were all tractable [18]."

After a week of sailing, the 72 blacks released their moorings with the assistance of three Afro-descendant servants. A revolt broke out under Babo's orders. Eighteen Spaniards were killed, smashed, stabbed, their hands tied and thrown overboard.

"Ceren said that [...] they threw, in his presence, three men, alive and tied, overboard; that they told the deponent to come up, and that they would not kill him. They asked him whether there were in these seas any negro countries where they might be carried, and they answered them, no. Then they told him to carry them to Senegal, or to the neighboring islands of St. Nicholas. Ceren answered that this was impossible, on account of the great distance, the bad condition of the vessel, the want of provisions, sails and water. They told him he must carry them in any way possible that they would do and conform themselves to everything the deponent should require as to eating and drinking. After a long conference, Ceren was absolutely compelled to please them, for they threatened to kill them all if they were not, at all events, carried to Senegal [18]."

The ship continued northward. In front of the heights of Nazca, the captain was forced to change direction, "because the negroes had intimated to him that they would kill them all the moment they should perceive any city, town, or settlement on the shores [18]." The situation was gradually rising tension and despair was affecting everyone. The episodes continued "the negro Mure [...] said that his comrades had determined to kill his master, Don Alexandro Aranda, because they said could not otherwise obtain their liberty, and that he should call the mate who was sleeping, before they executed it.

"[...] Ceren said that a short time after killing Aranda, they got upon deck his German-cousin, Don Francisco Masa; and the other clerk, Don Hermenegildo, a native of Spain; the boatswain, Juan Robles; and several others; all of whom were wounded, and having stabbed them again, they threw them alive into the sea. [...] Mure told him that they had now done all, and that he might pursue his destination,

⁴ In 1869, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna devoted a few pages of his *Historia de Valparaíso* to this affair, the story of the Africans on the *Tryal*, traveling the Chilean coast between 1804 and 1805. This is also the plot that inspired Herman Melville to write his famous novel entitled *Benito Cereno* (1855).

warning him that they would kill all the Spaniards if they saw them speak, or plot anything against them.

“Before the last occurrence, they had tied the cook to throw him overboard for something he had said, and finally they spared his life at the request of the deponent. A few days afterward, the deponent agreed to draw up a paper, signed by himself and the sailors who could write, and also by the negroes Babo and Atufal, who could do it in their language, in which we obliged himself to carry them to Senegal and they agreed not to kill any more, and to return the Spaniards the ship with the cargo, once the negroes reached safety [18].”

A few days later, the American ship *Perseverance* saw the *Tryal* around Santa María Island, opposite to Talcahuano Bay. Amasa Delano, the North American captain, noticed that the *Tryal* was making suspicious maneuvers. He decided to approach the ship, while a plan was already prepared on board. He was welcomed with great happiness, greeted by the food and the water he brought with him. His account explains that “The Spanish captain, Don Bonito Cereno, had evidently lost much of his authority over the slaves, whom he appeared to fear, and whom he was unwilling in any case to oppose [...].”

“Several [...] instances of unruly conduct which, to my manner of thinking, demanded immediate resistance and punishment, were thus easily winked at, and passed over. I felt willing however to make some allowance even for conduct so gross when I considered them to have been broken down with fatigue and long suffering.”

“The act of the negro, who kept constantly at the elbows of Don Bonito and myself, I should, at any other time, have immediately resented; and although it excited my wonder that his commander should allow this extraordinary liberty, I did not remonstrate against it until it became troublesome to myself. I wished to have some private conversation with the captain alone, and the negro was as usual following us into the cabin, I requested the captain to send him on deck. I spoke in Spanish and the negro understood me. The captain assured me that his remaining with us would be of no disservice, that he had made him his confident and companion since he had lost so many of his officers and men. He had introduced him to me before as captain of the slaves and told me he kept them in good order.

“[...] After I had ordered my boat to be hauled up and manned, and as I was going to the side of the vessel in order to get into her, Don Bonito came to me, gave my hand a hearty squeeze, and as I thought, seemed to feel the weight of the cool treatment with which I had retaliated. He continued to hold my hand fast till I stepped off the gunwale down the side, when he let it go, and stood making me compliments. When I had seated myself in the boat, and ordered her to be shoved off, the people having their oars up on end, she fell off at the sufficient distance to leave room for the oars to drop. After they were down, the Spanish captain, to my great astonishment, leaped from the gunwale of the ship into the middle of our boat.

“As soon as he had recovered a little, he called out in so alarming manner that I could not understand him; and the Spanish sailors were then seen jumping overboard and making for our boat. These proceedings excited the wonders of us all. At this moment, one of my Portuguese sailors in the boat spoke to me and gave me to understand what Don Bonito had said. I desired the captain to come after and sit by my side, and in a calm deliberate manner relate the whole affair [18].”

Cerreño explained the set of circumstances, and he added that it was useless to take his ship with launches, because the bravery and anguish of the slaves would not have allowed it so. A battle broke out.

This kind of sociodrama serves to amplify the problems mentioned before. The experiences of Africans and Afro-descendant were diverse in the Americas, even

if they are normally immersed in atmospheres of servitude, discrimination, and alienation. On the brink, we can speak of a black condition, a forced experience, a repetitive epistemological precedent on a continental scale. These aspects help to plot a trend line and to trace the general aspects of social hierarchies in Colonial Hispanic America. Movements and associations arise and develop based on race categories, even though we must not confuse a “racial category” with a “racialized social group” [19]. In other words, it should not be confused with a label with an experience.

Escape could erase some distinctions between slaves and nonslaves, by privileging what they had in common: an origin, despite the degree of distance, and a transgressive social position. It is possible that Jesuit slaves conceived race as a principle of grouping, but their context was so particular that we must think their links to the company as a strong identity substance. So strong should have these links been that after the expulsion of the priests, the choice of the escaping was sought by the slaves. The context of the *Tryal*'s is quite different. First, the 72 Senegalese had traumatic experiences that could bound them together. Race was something in common like so many others, not necessarily more important than geographical origin, cultural traces, language, captivity, feelings of injustice, misery. However, these conditions change when they meet three blacks in the service of Spaniards, three Spanish-speaking (*ladinos*) impregnated with colonial life. In a way, this is a face-to-face of merchandise men with servant men. Why Senegalese did not think of killing these three *ladinos* if they were assimilated to black slaves-oppressors? Vicuña Mackenna reports that José, Francisco, and Joaquín were aware of the conspiracy that they helped to release the captives and that the latter even stabbed a member of the crew [20].

How can this affinity be explained? Discrimination existed for some centuries in Spain in legal form, due to the charters of racial purity (*limpieza de sangre*). Although at the beginning it was a mechanism of religious verification, in Iberian American colonies, this tradition becomes a system to stratify the population. Races and castes were the main object of social classification, although their definitions were rather arbitrary. The functioning of societies was determined by this doctrine. We could therefore call this complex a racial system whose axes and functions, real and abstract, were internalized by all the agents involved. These ordinary assumptions could easily be accentuated in a vessel, a limited space reproducing all kinds of differences and oppositions. In this situation, the distinctions were not so great between slaves and servants. The facts ended up in an antagonist lineup between black and Spaniard. There was no possibility to think oneself outside these categories on board. It was a specific context where race became the central element of association between different individuals. It was an ephemeral overthrow of colonial power relations.

Is the *Tryal*'s affair on escape properly speaking? Some historians of the Caribbean have studied similar dynamics arguing that in the islands of Central America “the most viable of alternatives to servitude was grand marronage—the permanent desertion of slave owners—and that in those circumstances grand marronage tended to mean maritime marronage [21].” We have the story of “Richard Haagensen, who lived in St. Croix in the 1750s, noted in an account of that island that planter families were being ruined by the running away of slaves in groups of as many as 20–25 in a single night. He instanced occasions when slaves seized boats by surprise attack and forced their crews to sail to Puerto Rico. Slaves secretly built canoes large enough to accommodate whole families, commandeered when they could not build, forced sailors to take them to Puerto Rico, and when all else failed, bravely swam out to the sea in hope of accomplishing the same objective [21].” This concept was also defined by Hilary Beckles as “the rebellious activities of those slaves who took sea in flight attempting to escape fully the geographical confines of their plantation bondage [22].” However, we know that the Senegalese on board, the *Tryal* took the decision to revolt while navigating, when the balance of forces

avored them. Inevitably, they conceived the ship as a breakout horizon. Once they have assumed control of the ship, they declare to have a geographical objective in mind, and this is when they are no longer insurgent slaves, but more specifically runaways.

6. Conclusions

In summary, it is a group of fugitive slaves who gathered around a racial category due to a particular context [22]. This case offers some aspects we will like to highlight in order to backtrack to the idea of fugitive freedom. First of all, for the first time, we see women involved within an escape. Certainly, fugitive women were less numerous than men. A study of “black women” in eighteenth century Chile states that they were basically intended for domestic service, tied to home labor as cooks, breastfeeding and child care [23]. Many of them would have sought manumission after years of work, and probably this connection to the master’s house is what kept the escape as a small possibility of freedom. The Senegalese of the *Tryal*, men and women, were not quite slaves. Despite their legal status, in our point of view, they would still be captives. Trapped and deported, they are goods in transit that do not yet have a fixed destination. These fugitive women were new blacks (*bozales*) and had not yet assimilated to Hispanic American society. According to Cerreño, “The negresses of age were knowing of the revolt, and influenced the death of their master, used their influence to kill the deponent, and that during the acts of murder and before the battle aboard ship, they began to sing, and were singing a very melancholy song during the action to excite the courage of the men [18].”

They had a full role in the affair, not with weapons, not with a physically aggressive participation, but by creating an atmosphere of tension, reinforcing men through the awakening of sorrow. Thus, women motivated revolt and killings.⁵ In Amasa Delano’s account, gender differences did not arouse from nature but from the activities undertaken, more visible and physical in men, more immaterial and symbolic in women.

Aranda’s assassination corresponds to a political action, even though hate and antipathy remained in the background. The captives had already taken command of the ship, and the master did not have any power to interfere at this point. They no longer needed him, nobody was subject to his orders anymore. Aranda represented a node, as long as he was still alive, the slaves would not have a real option to be free. The Senegalese saw no way of achieving freedom: they could be sold and thus maintain their slave condition, or maybe manumitted after years of fears and miseries. The master meant subjection, commodification, alienation, notions that faded out with his death. His murder was vital in the thoughts and strategic operations of the slaves: killing the master “to obtain liberty,” and then signing a contract with the depositor of the ship to ensure a successful escape. In exchange, they guaranteed the life of the Spaniards. Cultural and linguistic differences did not matter, because no colonial legal apparatus was effective on board.

The desired destination was a place already known, the slaves’ original territory, Senegal. Unlike the pan-Africanist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth

⁵ The death of the master reminds us of a crime committed in Santiago in 1767, when a slave (Antonio) from Guinea killed his master. According to the analysis made by Carolina González, the responsibility also fell on the slave women who lived in the house, because they convinced Antonio to perpetrate the crime. One of them, the “negra Juana,” is represented by the authorities as the rational body of this conspiracy “By contrast, Antonio as drunk and irascible, that is to say, as a person outside himself, is constituted as an irrational other [26].” These differences do not emerge during the judgment of the *Tryal*’s blacks.

centuries, where Africa was thought of as a promised land by those who were born elsewhere [24]; in this case, the 72 slaves were indeed born in Africa. In both situations, people think of a return, one toward a complete idealism and the other toward an already built territoriality. This is the clearest expression of runaway freedom, a tangible place beyond, a clear idea of what to do breaking away. Despite this, they knew that such a thing was impossible. The only alternative they could consider was to move to “any negro country.” Here is a beautiful Utopia, the mere fact of being conceived as such expresses a lot of meanings. First, these slaves are aware of a reality quite different from the colonial cosmos. They know that another society is possible. They have personally experienced the Atlantic world context, so a nonwhite country would be the only way out of its transoceanic constraints. Even if it is an inexistent country, they imagine an organization favorable to them. In a certain way, the biggest aversion for them is race, the cornerstone of the system they are currently involved in. In this territory they will no longer belong to a minority in the sense of a dominated group, where they will have the same status as the others, where they will approach well-being. A “negro country” expresses a rather concrete representation of the ideal that they wish to arrive, a space where they will finally be able to achieve their dream of freedom.

The *Tryal* affair ended in the worst way possible for the Africans on board. In the port of Talcahuano, the African survivors of the sea battle were judged by the Government (*Intendencia*). The verdict condemned “the negroes, Mure, Matinqui, Alazase, Yola, Joaguin, Luis, Yau, Mapenda, and Yambaio to the common penalty of death, which shall be executed by taking them out and dragging them from the prison, at the tail of a beast of burden, as far as the gibbet, where they shall be hung until they are dead, and to the forfeiture of all their property, if they should have any, to be applied to the Royal Treasury, that the heads of the five first be cut off after they are dead, and be fixed on a pole in the square of the port of Talcahuano, and the corpses of all be burnt to ashes. The negresses shall be present at the execution if they should be in that city at the time thereof that he ought and did condemn likewise the negro Jose, servant to said Don Alexandro, and Yambaio, Francisco, Rodriguez to 10 years confinement in the place of Valdivia, to work chained, on allowance and without pay, in the work of the King, and also to attend the execution of the other criminals [18].”

It is said that Mure, son of Babo, the main leader of the revolt, uttered a few words before being hung. Terms that serve as a basis for concluding, as Vicuña Mackenna quotes “he spoke in Spanish from the docks, recognizing the sentence that condemned him to the last punishment, but alleging that what had happened was only the inevitable result of the inhuman cruelty of their captors and their absolute lack of right to go and steal free men at their homes [20].”


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