

Crossing to Safety? Frontier Flight in Eighteenth-Century Belize and Yucatan

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One sweltering summer's night in 1756, a 20-year-old Afro-Jamaican named Cuacò stole a canoe on Belize's New River (see figure 1). With him were two other young black men, all enslaved to the local British loggers called Baymen; Prince ("Principe") had been born in Boston ("Baston"), Kofi ("Cofe") in West Africa ("Guinea"). In the dark, the three maroons paddled upriver until in the early light of dawn they came across another refugee hiding in the forest. Although he was a recent arrival from Africa and his native language unintelligible to the first three, he joined them. They decided, Cuacò later said, to flee "to the Spaniards, with the intention to be Christians" (*con el animo de ser xptianos*). They walked north through the forest (*monte*) for eight days, reaching the frontier fort town (*presidio*) of Bacalar exhausted and hungry. They told their story to the Spanish authorities there, and a few weeks later, in the provincial capital of Mérida (see figure 2), Prince and Kofi confirmed that they had all "desired to be Christian, and to live among Spaniards."¹

On another summer night, this one in 1800, a slave similarly slipped out of his master's logging camp in northern Belize. Stealing a canoe on the Río Hondo, the slave turned maroon, Richard Dobson, paddled downriver to meet up with three other black slaves. Together they worked their way by canoe into Spanish territory. Having reached Bacalar, they settled there for several months as free men. Soon joined by two more black slaves who had also escaped from logging camps in Belize, they found work as laborers, surviving as part of the town's small multiracial community of Spanish officials, black slaves and freemen, mixed-race (*pardo*) militiamen, and Maya corn farmers.

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1. Archivo General de Indias, Seville (hereafter cited as AGI), México 3099, fols. 859–65, quotes on fols. 860v, 862v.

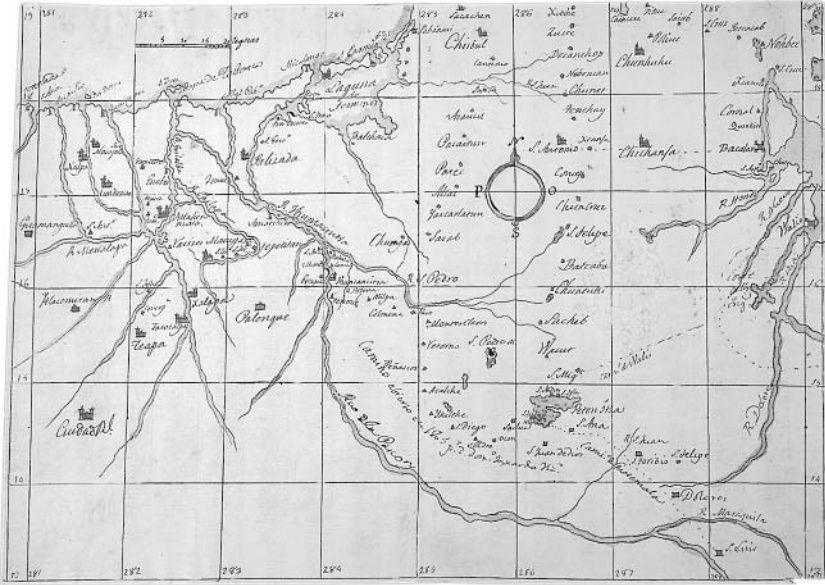


Figure 1. Tabasco, southern Yucatan, Petén, and Belize, drawn in 1806. Paired archivally with figure 2. Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Mapas y Planos-México 496.

But although there were over 200 people of African descent in Bacalar by this time, the 6 Afro-Belizeans stood out as English-speaking maroons. Everyone knew everyone in town, and soon they became acquainted with Ricardo Dopson—as he became known—and his five friends. Just a month after the second pair of fugitives arrived, all six were detained and sent to Mérida for questioning. There they freely confessed that their escape to Spanish Yucatan was no spontaneous flight but a well-considered plan based on their knowledge of the law of religious refuge.² Their wish, they said, was to become “true Christians” by converting to Catholicism; “I decided to make my way to Bacalar,” declared Dobson, “in order to become a Christian and be free of slavery.” Just as did Cuacò and his friends a half century earlier, Dobson and

2. Established by a royal decree of December 19, 1739, and terminated in 1790 and 1791, the law of refuge or religious sanctuary offered freedom to slaves who fled non-Catholic owners in rival colonies and requested baptism in Spanish colonies. Its application from the 1740s to the 1790s, however, was inconsistent and varied. See AGI, Indiferente General 2787; AGI, México 3167, exp. 3; Landers, “Gracia Real”; Landers, *Black Society*, 25, 28, 76, 79; Jones, *Guatemala*, 112; Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 272–78.

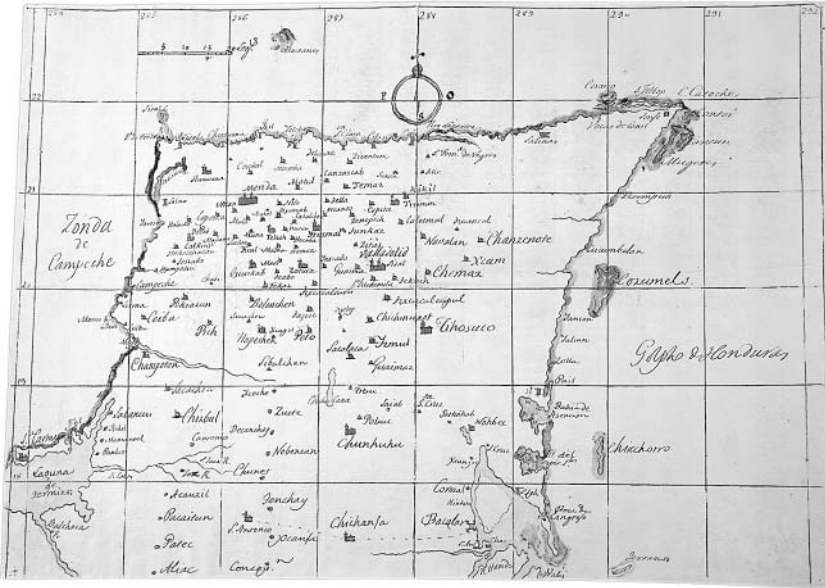


Figure 2. The Yucatan Peninsula, including the Laguna de Términos in the southwest and part of Belize in the southeast, drawn in 1806. Paired archivally with figure 1. Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Mapas y Planos-México 495.

his comrades all stated that they had fled their abusive, heretical English owners in order to claim the safety and salvation of life in the Spanish world.³

It is not clear what happened to Cuacò, Prince, Kofi, and their unnamed fellow traveler in 1756. They were probably released or reenslaved in Mérida or Havana; it is extremely unlikely that they were sent back across the frontier to the Baymen of Belize. Likewise, in 1800 Spain was at war with Britain, so the governor of Yucatan was not inclined to make the diplomatic—but costly and virtually unprecedented—gesture of sending the six fugitives back to Belize. Nor was he willing to let them go. The 1739 law of refuge had been revoked in 1790, leading to a decade of administrative correspondence and confusion over the issue in the American provinces. The governor asked his superiors in Mexico City for clarification, and in 1801 they responded: Dobson and his friends could not lay claim to the defunct law of refuge, but the governor was not to return escapees to the British, either. The Afro-Belizeans were now the

3. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter cited as AGN), Marina 156, exp. 5, fols. 172–95, quotes on fols. 172, 182; discussed in Restall, *Black Middle*, 178, 189–91, 235.

property of His Majesty and were sent “to serve the king” as slaves in the Havana arsenal. The senior British official in Belize, Superintendent Richard Basset, protested—in vain.⁴

One of the escapees was named Griglo (probably a Hispanization of Greenlough or Greenlow). He stated that it was common knowledge among Afro-Belizeans that the king of Spain freed slaves who fled to his lands. Another of the men, Julian Rechet, insisted that he had earned his freedom in Jamaica and traveled to Belize to enlist as a free militiaman. But the British settlers in Belize had put him to work as a slave, forcing him to claim his rightful liberty in Yucatan. These details make the fate of Dobson, Griglo, and Rechet all the more poignant. Stories of slavery in the Atlantic world seldom had happy endings, but the condemnation of these Afro-Belizeans to servitude in Cuba puts a human face on the complex and often cruel realities of colonialism in the Caribbean and its environs.

Yet there is surely more to the story than that. Certainly we can accept that slaves fled masters, even crossing imperial frontiers, in the hope of finding freedom, just because slavery was an intolerable condition. But, as Frank Proctor has argued with respect to seventeenth-century Mexico, slaves often sought to improve the system or their position within it rather than smash or flee it.⁵ In both cases above, maroons emphasized religious motivations over the desire to be free; the three interviewed in 1756 did not even mention freedom. What the maroons said, and what they did not say, suggest that their intentions, motives, and sense of what freedom meant—both to them and to the Spanish officials questioning them—were more sophisticated and strategic than a mere impulse to flee the bonds of slave status. Furthermore, the second case occurred just two years after Belize’s slaves allegedly flocked voluntarily to defend the settlement from Spanish attack—a phenomenon much celebrated in Belize ever since, but one that cannot be easily reconciled with a pattern of slave flight to those same Spaniards.

To what larger tale, therefore, do these cases of maroon flight lead? In the succeeding sections of this article I pursue the following sequence of questions. First, how typical were the flight stories of Cuacò, Dobson, and their comrades? Second, if their cases reflected a larger flight phenomenon, in what directions did flight move? If maroons moved mostly, or entirely, out of the Belizean

4. AGN, Marina 156, exp. 5, fols. 192–95; AGI, Estado 35, no. 46; The National Archives, Kew (hereafter cited as TNA), Colonial Office (hereafter cited as CO), 123/15. Sir Richard Basset’s (or Bassett’s) frustrations with his Spanish counterparts in Yucatan are evident in both the Spanish and British archives, as was true for the superintendents who preceded and followed him.

5. Proctor, *Damned Notions*.

logging settlements, rather than into them, how did Britons and Spaniards explain this at the time? Third, do maroon flight patterns reflect differences in slave experiences and systems between Belize and the Spanish territories around it, particularly Yucatan? Fourth, in what ways were Cuacò's and Dobson's stories *not* illustrative of flight patterns? That is, did nonslaves also flee across the frontier? (Not an obvious question, and one with a surprising answer.)

The answers proposed below suggest that the phenomenon of frontier flight in the southern Yucatan-Belize region might tell us something new about comparative colonialism, slavery, and identity. Specifically, patterns of flight show that the late colonial Spanish and British Atlantic world was not simply two separate spheres in conflict and competition but also a single, complex dynamo of labor exploitation—albeit one containing and encompassing contrasting colonial systems. Flight patterns have the potential to add to our understanding of the spectrum of intertwined developments that constitute the topic's larger contexts. The broadest of those contexts is the sweeping, omnipresent backdrop of the Atlantic slave trade, the Age of Revolution, and the Spanish-British-French wars, increasingly global in the eighteenth century but with a consistent Caribbean dimension.⁶ The closer contexts are the regional histories of slave flight and maroon communities,⁷ and life in and around colonial frontiers—including African-indigenous relations.⁸ As has been increasingly demonstrated in recent scholarship, colonial frontiers were not hollow or empty but were full of the “messy interconnectedness” of colonial actors whose lives need to be viewed from as many sides as possible.⁹ Such frontiers were avenues of human movement; borders between colonies were not obstacles but bridges, crossed by sailors and slaves in search of safety—sometimes with success, sometimes in vain.

6. The relevant historiography is, of course, vast, but the following were useful here and are good gateways to the literature: Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*; Gaspar and Geggus, *Turbulent Time*; Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*; Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*; Elliott, *Empires*; the articles in “AHR Forum: Entangled Empires”; Bell, *First Total War*; McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*; Cañizares-Esguerra and Breen, “Hybrid Atlantics.”

7. The comment that began the previous note also applies here: Price, *Maroon Societies*; Campbell, *Maroons of Jamaica*; Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border*; Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*; Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*.

8. I have used “frontier” rather than “border,” as the scholarship on colonial frontiers is more relevant here than that on modern borders and border theory. Again, the comment that began note 6 also applies here: Weber and Rausch, *Where Cultures Meet*; Guy and Sheridan, *Contested Ground*; Restall, *Beyond Black and Red*; Cromwell, “Life on the Margins”; Gudmundson and Wolfe, *Blacks and Blackness*, esp. 27–174; Prado, “Fringes of Empires.”

9. Prado, “Fringes of Empires,” 320; quoted phrase from Cromwell, “Life on the Margins,” 45.

**“Emigrated from Your Establishment”:
Slave Flight and the Yucatan-Belize Frontier**

How typical, then, were Cuacò's and Dobson's stories? They were certainly typical, in the sense that, from the early eighteenth into the early nineteenth century, thousands of African slaves labored for British owners in logging camps in Belize; hundreds of them planned or seized chances to escape, thereby crossing into Spanish territory. The majority fled north to Yucatan, as Cuacò, Dobson, and their comrades did, but many traveled west to Petén, and some went south to Omoa. The sources defy tabulation because they mix specific numbers with vague categories such as “many.” My survey of both British and Spanish archival sources produced an estimate of between 300 and 400 escapees between 1737 and 1825, but that survey by no means exhausted all potential relevant records, so the real figure was surely far greater. The survey's impression of an increase in flight, correlated with the increase in slave numbers in Belize, is likely accurate: specifically, a modest flight rate from the 1730s to 1763; then an increase in flight with the legalization of British logging by treaty in 1763 and the increase in mahogany cutting, through to the destruction of the settlement in 1779; a doubling, or more, of maroon numbers after the resettling of Belize in 1783, particularly after the arrival of the Mosquito Shore colonists and their slaves in 1787, with annual complaints about slave flight into the next century; and then a further increase in the 1820s as the neighboring Spanish colonies gradually became independent and abolished slavery.¹⁰

British logging activities on the Belize River—and then later on the New River and Río Hondo to the north and the Sibun River to the south (see figures 1 and 3)¹¹—had gradually expanded in the eighteenth century as the Atlantic

10. I surveyed sources in TNA, CO and AGI, mostly the México section of the latter, with some surveying in Belize Archive and Records Service, Belmopan (hereafter cited as BARS) and AGN. I suspect there are more cases and numbers to be found, particularly in the vast holdings of the European archives. A large number of slaves also crossed the frontier involuntarily, due to Spanish attacks on the British settlements; although those attacks and the fate of captured Afro-Belizean slaves are not my focus here, that parallel development is important context and is given some attention below. At the time of writing *The Black Middle*, I concluded that more Afro-Belizean slaves were brought into Yucatan by Spanish raiding parties than had crossed over voluntarily (see 9–36, 47–50, 62, 170, 229–32). Further research has convinced me that, if it were possible to tally numbers for the century before 1820, escapees would equal if not outnumber captives.

11. As figure 3 illustrates, the British consistently called these rivers Río Hondo and New River; the Belize River was also called the River Wallis (a cognate to the Spanish *Río Wallix*), the Old River, and the Main River; the Sibun was also called Sherboon, Zebun, and Jabun. I use “British” in reference to the imperial power and as a shorthand reference to

world markets grew for first logwood and then mahogany. The Spanish never conceded that these rivers were anything other than sovereign territory of their crown, with the “Province of Yucatan” usually defined as extending to the Belize River (and occasionally to the Sibun). Yet the persistence of British loggers, and their later, periodic acquisition of logging rights in the region, contributed to a tacit Spanish acknowledgment of British Belize’s existence—an ambiguity reflected in the bishop of Yucatan’s report to the king on an 1803 tour (*visita*) of his episcopacy, which he said extended to “the Walix River” and “the English settlement of Walix.”¹² Consequently, a multifaceted frontier, little studied by historians, developed in southeastern Yucatan.¹³

In the sixteenth century, Spaniards visited what became Belize through various exploration, conquest, and missionizing campaigns. Their demographic and cultural impact was long-term, and Spanish officials insisted for three centuries that their empire included the entire region. But there was no permanent Spanish presence, nor was there any attempt to establish a Spanish colony there; the nearest Spanish settlement was Bacalar, abandoned in 1648. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, British loggers and privateers made seasonal appearances at the Belize River, but for almost a century, logging was focused more in Yucatan’s southwestern corner, centered on the Laguna de Términos (see figures 1 and 2).¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Spanish in Yucatan were preoccupied with pirate attacks all along the peninsula’s coasts and with rebellious and unconquered Maya polities.

Then, in the early decades of the eighteenth century, the Spanish succeeded in expelling foreign loggers from the Laguna de Términos area. From a

the loggers along these three rivers and at the settlement’s only town, located at the mouth of the Belize River, but note that “British” loggers were overwhelmingly English and Irish. On logging (of logwood and mahogany) in the greater Yucatan-Belize region, see Bolland, *Formation*, 21–34; Bolland and Shoman, *Land in Belize*; Offen, “British Logwood Extraction”; Cromwell, “Life on the Margins”; Campbell, *Becoming Belize*, 104–17, 217–23; Anderson, *Mahogany*, 104–24, 143–83; Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, *Economic History*, 41–63, 70–77. Two brief accounts of loggers and their activities on the Belize River in the 1720s are Uring, *Voyages and Travels*, 232–45; Atkins, *Voyage to Guinea*, 226–28.

12. “Rio de Walix” and “Establecimto. de Walix de los Ingleses.” AGI, México 2692; also see transcription in Castellanos, *La Intendencia*, 31–36. Significantly, the bishop never reached the Belize River, instead traveling from Bacalar southwest to Petén.

13. For sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish activities in Belize, see Jones, *Maya Resistance*; Graham, *Maya Christians*. On the Yucatan-Belize frontier from the perspective of Belize and the British sources, see Bolland, *Formation*, 21, 26–27, 30–32, 49–50; from the perspective of Yucatan and Spanish sources, see Restall, *Black Middle*, 21–26, 47–50, 178–82.

14. AGI, México 1010; AGI, México 1017; Joseph, “British Loggers”; Cromwell, “Life on the Margins.”

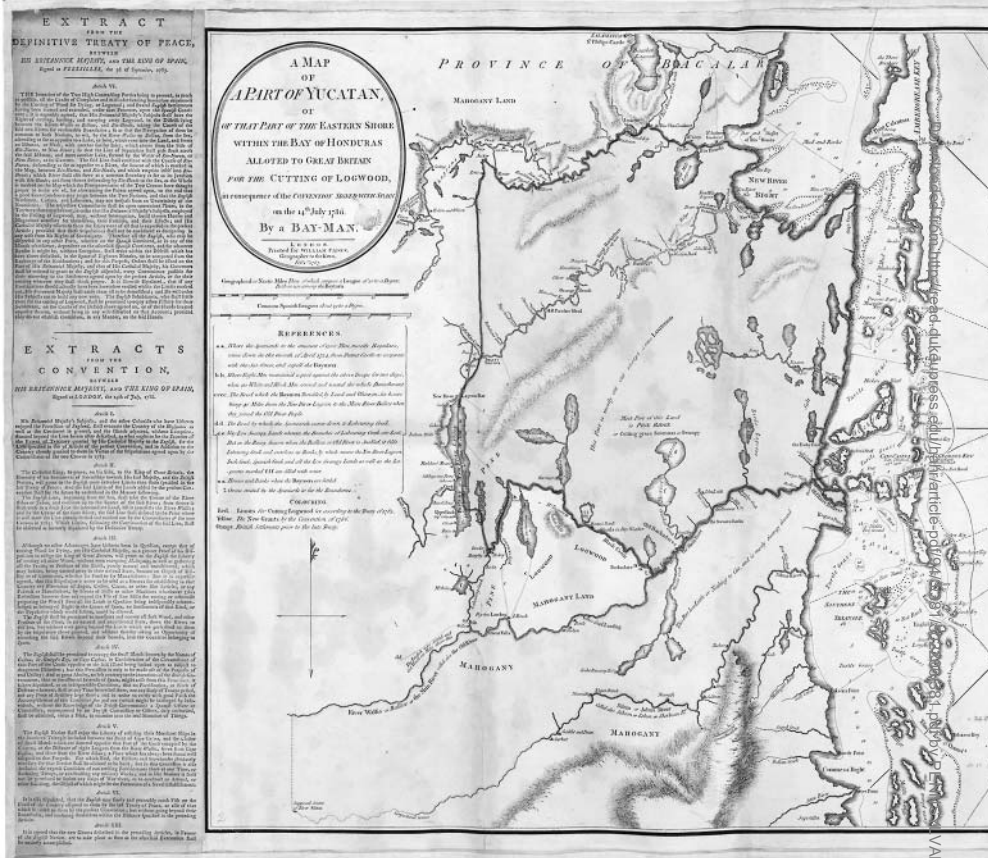
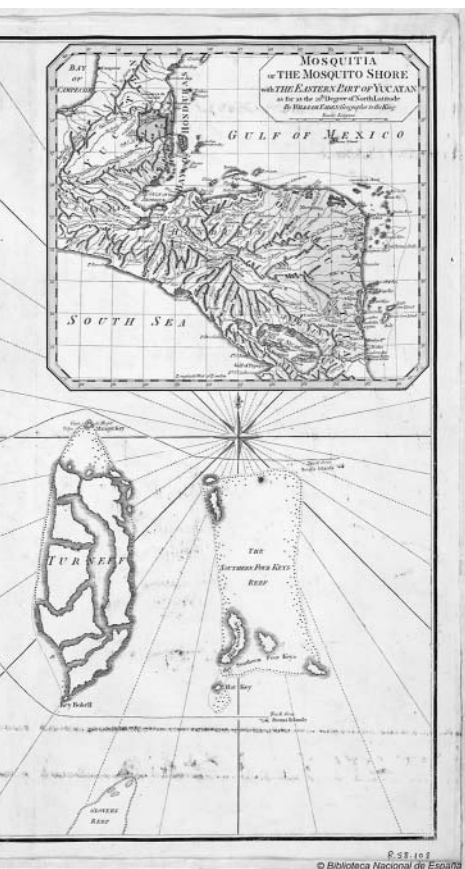


Figure 3. “A Map of a Part of Yucatan”: the Faden Map of Belize, 1787, Biblioteca Nacional de España. An upper zone (pink in the original) shows the region between the Belize and Hondo rivers where British logging was permitted in the 1783 treaty; a lower zone (yellow in the original) shows the region down to the Sibun River that was added in 1786.

larger regional perspective, this was a pyrrhic victory; the British loggers simply popped up elsewhere, primarily on the Belize River and then on the adjacent rivers, the Hondo and the New.¹⁵ As a result, the peninsula’s southeast became

15. In July 1756, King Ferdinand listened in Aranjuez to a report sent from Mexico City describing how the expulsion of the British from corners of Spanish territory like Belize was regular but always temporary, “like the last time [the attack of 1754], which cost a great deal of money, its triumph trumpeted by its leaders, and with those expelled returning very shortly afterward.” AGI, México 3099, fol. 752.



the site of a protracted and complex interaction between Spanish and British settlers, African slaves and free people of African descent, and various Maya groups. That frontier continually shifted and frequently witnessed violence. British-Miskito forces had attacked Yucatan at least three times in the dozen years leading up to 1729, reaching as far as Chunchuhub (see figures 1 and 2);¹⁶ but in that year, largely in response to these invasions, the Spanish refounded Bacalar, and for the next 80 years they repeatedly attempted to stamp out the British presence in the southeast. Attacks ranged from small-scale raids for slaves to full-scale assaults in times of war between Britain and Spain. The Baymen were completely expelled in 1730, 1737, 1747–1748, 1754–1755, and 1779–1783; the only major assault that failed utterly was in 1798, and it was to be the last.

Yet despite the regularity and disruption of frontier violence, there was also constant diplomatic communication, trade, and migration across the border. British merchants operated in Yucatan's Spanish cities of Mérida and Campeche. Baymen came up the coast to Bacalar to trade, and Spanish trading ships

sailed, when seasonal winds permitted, down to the Belizean cays; most of this trade was illegal, and occasional arrests of smugglers hint at the extensive and complex networks of illicit commerce across the frontier.¹⁷ After the Baymen were allowed to log in Belize under treaty in the late 1760s and 1770s and then again after 1783, a Spanish commissioner regularly visited and sometimes resided for a season on the rivers or at the British settlement at the Belize River mouth (at first on Cayo Cosina, also called Kitchen Caye or St. George's Caye, and later where Belize City now sits). Much of Yucatan-Belize interaction

16. A summary of these 1716–1729 attacks is in AGI, México 3099, fols. 1361–69.

17. See smuggling cases, for example, in the Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Consejo de Indias 20.740–20.742 (1760s–1790s); and in AGI, México 3111, cuaderno 1 (1800).

centered on African slavery, both in the form of trade and migration. As the logging industry grew, so did Belize's slaves, and by 1800 they were the overwhelming majority (as detailed below).¹⁸

Evidence of slave flight out of Belize into Spanish territory can be found in both the British and Spanish archives. The earliest evidence is from the 1730s; for example, two black slaves took advantage of a 1737 Spanish attack on the loggers on the New River to flee to Bacalar, along with "a Spaniard whom [the British] had enslaved five years earlier."¹⁹ No doubt slaves had occasionally fled in previous decades, and others sought escape under the cover of Spanish attacks in 1748, 1751, 1752, 1754, and so on, although Spanish records of those attacks only list numbers of slaves captured.²⁰ The earliest record found so far of a formal British complaint regarding slave seizure by Spaniards comes from 1755,²¹ but the paucity of pre-1763 complaints probably stems more from the illegal status of the British loggers, not from the absence of slave seizure and flight. Furthermore, the first record found thus far of the interrogation of slave refugees in Mérida is from 1756—the above-mentioned four young maroons who canoed and walked from Belize to Bacalar with "the intention to be Christians."²²

Thus while there was frontier flight for many years before the 1750s, that decade seems to be when the phenomenon of endemic frontier movement—voluntary and involuntary—became established. Such flight was not limited to

18. My summary of frontier conflict is drawn from various documents, cited elsewhere in this article, from AGI, México; AGI, Estado; TNA, CO; Burdon, *Archives*. Also see Bolland, *Formation*; Restall, *Black Middle*; Campbell, *Becoming Belize*.

19. AGI, México 3099, fols. 49–63, quote on fol. 52r.

20. A dozen or so slaves were taken in the attack of 1748, although most fled their Spanish captors—to where is not indicated—before they could be taken to Bacalar. A major Spanish attack in 1751 netted 23 slaves, along with 160 English prisoners, but they were all loaded onto a boat and told to leave Bacalar because the town could not afford to feed them. Another 17 were seized the following year, as well as 23 (three of whom were *negras*) in the coordinated Spanish attack of 1754. AGI, México 3099, fols. 49–63, 97–98, 194–98, 277–78, 507–13.

21. A demand by Governor Robert Hodgson at Black River (on the Mosquito Shore) that black slaves taken from British ships off the Belizean coast be returned. The Spanish responded that as the British presence was illicit ("un intruso furtivo"), there could be no British governor and thus no legitimate complaint. AGI, México 3099, fols. 27–30. Presumably there were incidents of slave seizure going back to when loggers brought Africans to the region; for example, Grant Jones briefly summarizes a 1710s example of the Spanish governor of Petén raiding an English logging camp ("probably" on the Mopán) and taking ten captured black slaves back to the presidio. Jones, *Conquest*, 411–12, citing AGI, Guatemala 186.

22. AGI, México 3099, fols. 859–65.

escape northward into Yucatan, as there was a parallel flow westward into Petén. In 1756, for example, a group of 19 black slave men, 5 black women, 2 children, and an “Indian” couple (possibly Mayas but probably Miskitos) made it from the Belize River to the presidio of Petén, “with the goal of becoming Catholics.” The Spanish response was to accept that claim on face value and distribute the refugees among the convents and “pious people” (*personas piadosas*) of the town for a year of religious instruction.²³ Taking Afro-Belizean refugees into local homes for baptism and catechism may have been a long-term practice in Petén. For instance, a Spaniard wrote to Guatemala’s captain general in 1778 that he had taken in four maroons for that purpose, and he was told in response that he had done the right thing—and that the refugees should be treated as free men.²⁴

After logging by the Baymen was legalized—with strict limitations—in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, slave numbers rose, along with complaints of rebellion and escape to the Spaniards. For example, it was alleged that from 1763 to 1769 Spanish boats sat at the river mouths waiting for escapees and that Spaniards systematically seduced away from Belize the slaves they found in fishing and turtling vessels. Baymen complained that the lookout post of San Antonio, south of Bacalar, acted as a welcome point for maroons. In 1765 Admiral William Burnaby protested to Yucatan’s governor that “the blacks are encouraged by the Spaniards to go to Bacalar, under the pretext of following the Catholic religion and becoming free” (*con el pretexto de seguir la Religion Catolica y quedar libres*), and he demanded that they “be returned to their owners.” The governor replied that he would return such slaves to Cayo Cosina if the owners would pay all the costs, but he also pointed out that “as soon as [the maroons] arrive here, they are freed, according to the orders I have from my king.”²⁵ In frustration, Baymen went to the lookouts and even to Bacalar to demand slaves be returned, according to Governor Cristóbal de Zayas in 1768—although

23. AGI, México 3099, fols. 953–56, quotes on fol. 953v. This same report, sent to Madrid by the president of Guatemala’s *audiencia*, also stated that 22 leagues east of the Petén presidio was a rancho called San Felipe, inhabited by a dozen English and a number of black refugees from a logging settlement on the Laguna de Coba, sacked in the Spanish attack on Belize of 1754. San Felipe seems to have been surviving in a liminal frontier space between British and Spanish colonial worlds but connected through migration and trade to both of them. A new study of maroons in Petén, using some of the sources cited here as well as additional ones, most significantly from the Archivo General de Centro América, Guatemala City (hereafter cited as AGCA), is Lentz, “Black Belizeans.”

24. Jones, *Guatemala*, 111–12, citing a source in AGCA.

25. AGI, México 3099, fols. 1291–92. Burnaby was the admiral stationed in Jamaica. I have translated back to English the Spanish translation of his letter.

tellingly, the governor seemed more concerned by the “illicit commerce” that such Baymen conducted at the same time.²⁶

Loggers doggedly protested. For example, two slaves named Dick and Granby fled their “works” (logging camps) on the Río Hondo in 1766 for Bacalar. The commander there refused to send them back, despite diplomatic complaints and lawsuits that reached Madrid and London demanding £100 in compensation.²⁷ During the 1768 logging season, at least 23 slaves fled works on the New River for Spanish territory.²⁸ The Baymen’s agent in London complained in 1769 to the secretary of state for the colonies that the annual loss of slaves to the Spaniards not only threatened the entire British logwood trade but also was based on religious fraud, as “many of them are New Negroes, that can’t speak a single word of any European language, and [are] Consequently not very solicitous about any religion.”²⁹ In 1771 a British navy captain named John Botham suggested he would sail to Campeche to reclaim Belizean “fugitive blacks” or restitution for their loss; a Spanish spy on Cayo Cosina (“a German Catholic resident in Belize”) confirmed that Botham was threatening to take such payment by force.³⁰ The post-1763 period culminated in a major slave revolt lasting six months of 1773, with dozens of rebels given friendly protection in Bacalar (according to the British), followed in 1779 by a sweeping Spanish assault on Belize that led to the capture and transportation to Mérida of hundreds of Baymen and their slaves.³¹

26. AGI, México 3099, fols. 1317–36.

27. Memorial of 1783, TNA, CO 123/2; Burdon, *Archives*, 111, 114, 117–19, 136, summarizing State Papers, Foreign, Spain 177; and Admiralty 1/238. (Note that this compilation of summaries and transcriptions of documents now in the TNA, CO, supervised by Burdon when he was governor of British Honduras, is a useful but unreliable resource. The original documents have been consulted whenever possible. On the politics behind Burdon’s *Archives* project, see Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation*, 85–86.)

28. TNA, CO 137/63; Bolland, *Formation*, 74. Spanish records corroborated this story, with Yucatan’s governor reporting that Spaniards stopping in for supplies in Belize learned that “two hundred armed men had left from Cayo Cosina, one hundred for the Río Hondo, one hundred for the New River” in order “to catch twenty-one blacks that had fled from their owners into the hills [*la Montaña*].” AGI, México 3099, fol. 1337.

29. “Memorial” by the Baymen to Lord Hillsborough, TNA, CO 139/65; also quoted by Bolland, *Formation*, 50. Also see Burdon, *Archives*, 112.

30. AGI, México 3099, fols. 1395–409.

31. On the 1779 attack, see TNA, CO 123/2 (e.g., fols. 132–40); TNA, CO 137/75; Burdon, *Archives*, 127–41; Bolland, *Formation*, 27, 30; Restall, *Black Middle*, 23, 26, 46, 62, 232; Campbell, *Becoming Belize*, 196–98. See my brief comment below on whether the 1773 revolt was really such or just a mass escape.

After the British and their slaves returned in 1783, incidents of rebellion were relatively minor for decades (the only uprising comparable in size to that of 1773 came in 1820). But that pattern was more than offset by a persistent epidemic of slave flight to the three nearest fortified Spanish settlements in each direction (north to Bacalar, west to Petén, south to Omoa). Slaves suspected of plotting to flee or helping others to do so were flogged, mutilated, and sometimes deported to be sold off in Jamaica; the court in Belize confirmed in 1790 a law that sentenced slaves to 13 lashes and the loss of an ear if caught “inveigling slaves to run to the Spaniards.”³² British complaints were ceaseless, both through administrative channels and through lawyers hired by the Baymen or committees created by them (one was set up for this purpose in 1793, for example). The Baymen alleged that the Spaniards “seduced” and “decoyed” their slaves, then “gave them protection, under the pretext of religion” in places like Bacalar.³³ When one night in 1792 “a whole Gang, about Twelve in number” fled by canoe to the lookout post south of Bacalar, they were “as usual joyfully received” (according to one of the furious Baymen, Thomas Potts). Another group of 24 fled to Bacalar the following year.³⁴ At the same time, slaves fled south, and there were a sufficient number in Omoa by 1790 to constitute a colony of “English blacks” in the fort.³⁵

Their reception in Spanish provinces was not necessarily as “joyful” as the Baymen claimed. By 1800, dozens of Afro-Belizeans had fled to a village in the Petén called San Joseph (32 in 1795 alone), and although they were baptized upon arrival and none were apparently sent back east, the authorities in the town of Petén viewed the “Negros de Walix” as nothing but trouble. In order to avoid having the black refugees in the presidio town itself, they allowed them to settle in San Joseph, but this created tensions with local Maya communities. According to the captain general of the presidio, in a letter to the viceroy in 1796, “Those blacks are accustomed to marrying Indian women from the

32. Burdon, *Archives*, 188, 213, summarizing Grand Courts, F: Transient Court; and Meetings of Magistrates, A: Quarterly Court.

33. Memorial of 1785, TNA, CO 123/3; London to Jamaica, 1792, TNA, CO, 137/90; Burdon, *Archives*, 151, 201, 215.

34. TNA, CO 123/13 (28 May 1792; 11 June 1793); quoted in Bolland, *Formation*, 77–78.

35. The initial group of 100 slaves brought to Omoa in 1756 came from Jamaica, with subsequent purchases in Kingston through the same British agents in 1759 and 1770, so Afro-Belizeans fleeing to Omoa may have found ties of language and kinship to the black population in the fort. A case of eight Omoan slaves fleeing to Belize, with half ending up in Spain, Yucatan, Jamaica, and back in Omoa, hints at more complex Omoa-Belize ties (and is thus a case begging for closer study). See Cáceres Gómez, “Slavery and Social Differentiation,” 130, 132; Jones, *Guatemala*, 111–15.

pueblos, and the caciques and village magistrates are disgusted by [*repugnant*] those marriages, saying that they don't want their blood mixed [*interpolar su sangre*] with that of black men recently Christianized and arrived from Belize."³⁶

The flow of escapees continued after the failed Spanish attack of 1798, despite the triumphalist British claims—discussed further below—that loyal slaves had voluntarily and enthusiastically defended the settlement. In 1800, the authorities at Omoa asked the audiencia in Guatemala whether to return the slaves that continued to escape down the coast from Belize. Orders to return escapees were very rare, and this was no exception.³⁷ Similarly, in 1802, the crown granted the request by the chaplain and ecclesiastical judge in Petén that “the Blacks emigrated from Belize [*Walix*] and settled in the Province of Petén Itzá” not be “returned to the English” and be left “unmolested and at liberty in their homes” (*libres en sus ogares*).³⁸ That same year, Superintendent Basset bemoaned the “desertion of Negros” to Yucatan during the recent war, asking Governor Benito Pérez to return them to their owners. Among the maroons were two black soldiers wanted for deserting from the Fifth West India Regiment. The commander in Bacalar refused to turn them over, and Pérez backed him up, despite the superintendent's promise that the deserters would be pardoned. As in years past, the Spanish governor and British superintendent barely managed to maintain their diplomatic cool. Escapees would be returned, quipped Pérez, when the Baymen started to respect the logging limits set in the treaty of two decades earlier.³⁹ Meanwhile, endemic flight into Spanish territory continued. In 1813, Thomas Paslow lost 15 of his slaves in one day; they left his works on the Río Hondo because of “ill-treatment and starvation.”⁴⁰

36. AGI, Estado 49, no. 74, cuaderno 2, quote on fol. 4v.

37. AGI, Estado 49, no. 74, cuadernos 1, 5. My thanks to Caroline Williams for drawing my attention to this document. It is also discussed in some detail in Lentz, “Black Belizeans,” 645–48, 671–75.

38. In the words of the chaplain, thanking the king in an 1806 petition for further favors. AGI, México 3167 (quote appears on fourth page of this unpaginated document).

39. AGI, Estado 35, no. 46.

40. According to a Spanish source in the manuscript collections of the Latin American Library, Tulane University, quoted by Bolland, *Formation*, 78. Paslow was one of the British settlers that had evacuated from the Mosquito Shore to Belize in 1787, and by 1820 he was one of the five biggest slave owners in Belize. Despite his claim that his slaves had built, manned, and fought in gunboats with “devotion and zeal” to defend the settlement from the Spanish attack of 1798, pre-1798 patterns of slave ill-treatment, lack of manumission, and endemic flight persisted, while Paslow grew old and prosperous (an interpretation in line with Bolland, *Formation*, 78, 164, but contrary to Campbell, *Becoming Belize*, 270–73).

When the Spanish provinces became independent in 1821, Afro-Belizean slaves escaped in increasing numbers, especially to Petén and Omoa after slavery was abolished in Central America in 1824.⁴¹ In 1823, 39 fled to Petén; another 19 went there, along with 13 to Omoa, in 1825, when Superintendent Edward Codd estimated the annual desertion rate “as near as can be ascertained [to be] about 120.”⁴² Codd complained to the Spanish authorities in Petén, but they responded that there had long been “a Town of Black People” in the region that received those who have “emigrated from your Establishment”—presumably a reference to San Joseph, although by this point Afro-Belizean refugees had been settling in Petén’s ranches and villages for at least 70 years.⁴³ All told, in the decade leading up to abolition in the British colonies in 1833, hundreds of slaves fled Belize. They escaped almost as quickly as the British could bring them in from Jamaica.

The official Spanish response was to stall, dissemble, and pass the buck to fellow authorities. At times, a firm response was returned. More often the matter was deferred, as in a 1796 letter from Yucatan’s governor Arturo (Arthur) O’Neill claiming that maroons would be returned to Belize from Bacalar if claims were made within a year of the original escape; O’Neill was meanwhile planning the full-scale attack on Belize that he led less than two years later.⁴⁴ When Spanish officials noted that detaining and returning escapees was costly, British officials offered to pay such expenses, as did Superintendent Codd when he asked the Spanish governor at Omoa in 1823 to seize and return three of Thomas Paslow’s slaves—named January, Nelson, and Davey—who had fled south down the coast to the fort. The case generated years of paperwork in the administrative systems of both empires, but there is no evidence that January and his friends were ever returned to Belize.⁴⁵

41. Abolition reached Yucatan, as part of Mexico, five years later. Restall, *Black Middle*, 68. The existence of a community of Afro-Belizeans in Omoa since at least the 1780s, combined with the freeing of the fort’s royal slaves in 1812 and general abolition in 1824, helps explain the increased flow of slaves to the fort town. Cáceres Gómez, “Slavery and Social Differentiation,” 132–33, 147; Jones, *Guatemala*, 111–15.

42. TNA, CO 123/36 (18 Feb. 1825); Campbell, *Becoming Belize*, 309.

43. TNA, CO 123/34; presidio commander, Petén, as translated by Superintendent Codd, 1825, “Letters and Dispatches Outwards 1821–1829,” BARS, R4D, pp. 2–13.

44. Burdon, *Archives*, 205, 218, summarizing Meetings of Magistrates, A: Quarterly Court; and Magistrates Letters, A. Spain declared war against Britain in August 1796.

45. “Letters and Dispatches Outwards 1821–1829,” BARS, R4B, p. 75; AGI, Estado 49, no. 74, cuaderno 5.

“By Choice Only”:

Slavery among the British and the Spanish

The evidence for slave flight is extensive, therefore, and overwhelmingly one-sided; it details escape from Belize into Spanish provinces, not the other way round. How did Britons and Spaniards explain the one-way nature of this phenomenon at the time? For Spaniards, the explanation was obvious: their “system” was better than the British one. For example, Joseph Domás, the commander of the fort at Omoa, wrote in an 1800 letter to the Real Audiencia de Guatemala that “in proof of a most interesting truth, one only needs to look at the depopulation of these provinces, caused primarily by there being no worth to the system [*por no adactar la sistema*] of the English in Belize, whereas the experience among us is credited well by the flow of blacks to Omoa.”⁴⁶

Unsurprisingly, this was not a point the British would concede, arguing that Spanish territory offered false promise to gullible Belizean slaves. Allan Auld, a British merchant who traded in the Belize-Honduras-Jamaica triangle, complained in 1768 that maroons were taken to Mérida “under the false and purloining pretence of religion,” where “they are forever detained without any satisfaction whatever being made to His Majesty’s subjects.”⁴⁷ For Auld, the issue was not the will of the slaves or the relative attraction of each empire but the illegality of economic warfare. As Captain John Botham put it to the governor of Yucatan in 1771, “blacks” were as necessary to Belize as “the Indians, vassals of the King,” were to Yucatan, and the Spaniards would be rightfully outraged if the British encouraged those “Indians” to flee to Belize.⁴⁸ In other words, slaves fled Belize because Spaniards duplicitously fooled them into doing so.

British officials even turned the flight phenomenon on its head, arguing that the fact that so many stayed in Belize, when fleeing the logging camps was easy, showed how benign the Belizean slave system really was. As Superintendent Peter Hunter put it in 1790, shortly after his arrival, “Slaves, in this Settlement, being so by choice only; for the Vicinage of the Spanish Out Posts and the encouragement held out to seek freedom, by embracing the Roman Catholic Religion, afford them temptations to elope from their Owners. Many of the Settlers of this Country have been entirely ruined by these circumstances,

46. AGI, Estado 49, no. 74a, fols. 1v–2r. This interpretation was a common refrain in nineteenth-century Latin America; for example, see its appearance in Colombia in the 1860s, discussed in Lasso, *Myths of Harmony*, 158.

47. Letter excerpted in Burdon, *Archives*, 115, and quoted by Campbell, *Becoming Belize*, 191.

48. Botham’s letters, translated into Spanish, are in AGI, México 3099, fols. 1395–404.

and all experience frequent and heavy losses.”⁴⁹ In a sense, Hunter was right: in various ways, Spanish colonists and officials encouraged and connived in the phenomenon of Afro-Belizean flight. The frontier context, which Hunter and others often blamed too, provided opportunities for escape; logging work was seasonal, unpleasant, isolated, and relatively unsupervised. But Hunter’s paradoxical argument, leading to the conclusion that slaves lived in Belize “by choice only,” was not only highly misleading, as we shall see shortly, but also reflected a common trope in commentary on Belize by Baymen and some of the superintendents that slavery in the settlement was benign. The trope’s purpose was to defend the system and mask its brutal realities.

British officials asserted that Afro-Belizeans had “affection for their Owners” and were “much attached” to their servitude, due to “the good treatment” and “the extraordinary good Provision” they received.⁵⁰ This refrain increased after 1798, encouraged by the successful defense of Belize from Spanish attack that year. Slave owners like Thomas Paslow thus planted the seeds of a dual myth about Belize: that slavery there was more benign than elsewhere, and that 1798 was a foundational moment of master-slave, proto-nationalist unity. The myth of benign Belizean slavery was further stimulated by the anxiety surrounding the rise of the abolition movement. A typical comment was this one sent to London by the superintendent in 1822: “When compared with the slaves in Jamaica, the Honduras [i.e., Belize] Negro population may boast of great compassion, comfort & good treatment from their owners.”⁵¹ The related myth—the Battle of St. George’s Caye as a glorious, nation-founding victory made possible through master-slave harmony—persisted during the nineteenth century, to be fully developed in the 1890s (as Anne Macpherson has shown) and then perpetuated until the present day as a contested, but deeply rooted, foundation stone of Belizean national identity.⁵²

49. Hunter’s “Plan of Police,” 18 May 1790, TNA, CO 123/9; also quoted by Bolland, *Formation*, 77. See also BARS, R2, pp. 93–103.

50. Quoted by Bolland, *Formation*, 70, 72, from TNA, CO 123/17 (22 Oct. 1806); TNA, CO 123/18 (1 May 1809).

51. Superintendent Pye to Lord Bathurst, 26 July 1822, “Miscellaneous Inward & Outwards 1820–1834,” BARS, R2, p. 95.

52. Macpherson, “Imagining the Colonial Nation”; Macpherson, *From Colony to Nation*, 16–17, 82–87, 144. In fact, the Battle of St. George’s Caye was barely a battle at all; Spanish casualties came not from Belizean defenders, who remained too far away for fatal engagement, but from an outbreak of disease, possibly yellow fever, on board ships too large to navigate between the cays and reach the settlements on St. George’s and at the Belize river mouth (see figure 3). Archival sources on the 1798 battle are in the Archivo General de Simancas, Spain, in AGI, and in TNA, CO. In a parallel study in progress, I use Spanish

The use of the two myths as mutually supportive has proved enduring. As a leading Bayman put it in 1898, at the founding meeting of the Centenary Committee celebrating the battle's anniversary, "the most distinguishing feature of that remarkable event was the gallantry and true nobleness of nature displayed by the slaves, who, regardless of the bondage in which they were held and remembering only the kindness they had received from their masters . . . rushed to the assistance of their masters."⁵³ Since 1898, there has been continual debate and dispute over the meaning of the 1798 battle and its relationship to the history of race in Belize. Yet the core ideas outlined above—slaves voluntarily saved Belize in 1798 from the Spaniards, slavery was relatively benign in the settlement, slaves fled because they were stolen, lured, or deceived by Spaniards—all persist to this day.

The survival of that misleading myth-history has influenced the understanding of slave and labor conditions in early Belize. In a recent monograph, for example, Mavis Campbell asserted that the battle "certainly deserves to be celebrated," largely for "the heroic part played by the slaves," which was "probably unprecedented in the history of slavery." Her study concluded that the master-slave bond was "a sacred tie" in Belize, "an extraordinary relationship." Campbell saw in sources written by Baymen and British officials strong evidence that Belizean slaves enjoyed "better working conditions" and "a lighter workload than anywhere else in the region," concluding that "there is no doubt that the treatment meted out to them and their general pattern of life were far better than anywhere else in the Caribbean region."⁵⁴

and British sources to compare the events of 1798 with the mythical accounts and their deployment in the construction of Belizean national identity. On the "transatlantic yellow fever pandemic of 1791–1805," see Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar, and Seapower*, 326–67; McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, 235–67, quote on 266.

53. Henry Charles Usher, quoted in Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation," 122.

54. Campbell, *Becoming Belize*, 267–77 (on the battle of 1798), 283–314 (on slavery in Belize, drawing upon the kinds of British archival sources mentioned and cited above); quotes above, in sequence, on 267, 270, 300, 272, 299. Also see Campbell, "St. George's Cay." Campbell's perspective follows that of the rash of British scholarship on Belize of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Belizean slavery was, "as has always been claimed, much less oppressive than elsewhere" (Waddell, *British Honduras*, 14), and "the institution of slavery there loses much of its horror," as "negro slaves were mostly content with their work and their condition" (Gregg, *British Honduras*, 16–17). Nigel Bolland and Assad Shoman have for decades argued against that position. See Bolland, *Formation*, 49–124; Bolland, "Slavery in Belize"; Bolland, *Belize*, 15; Bolland and Shoman, *Land in Belize*; Shoman, *13 Chapters*, 27–53. A brief, balanced summary is Thomson, *Belize*, 53–64; a longer balanced one is Anderson, *Mahogany*, 156–83. Also see Murray, *Family and People*.

“The Pivot”: A Slave Society or a Society with Slaves

In light of these interpretations—and the thread of an apologia that runs from the late eighteenth century to today—Belizean slave flight begs for some comparative discussion of slave systems. Specifically, and in response to the claims of contemporaries such as Domás and Hunter, did maroon flight patterns reflect differences in slave experiences in Belize as opposed to neighboring Spanish territories such as Yucatan?

When viewed from the larger perspective of the Atlantic slave trade as a whole, the role played by participants in Yucatan and Belize may seem obscure. After all, during the period when African slavery was legally practiced in Spanish Yucatan (1540s–1829), the colony received (approximately) a mere 0.1 percent of all the Africans who survived the Middle Passage and were sold in the Americas as slaves. Furthermore, Yucatan was known then and now for its indigenous history, typically seen as a marginal province of Spaniards and Mayas. As for Belize, from the years when English loggers first used slave labor there (in the late seventeenth century) until abolition in 1833, the settlement received a similarly tiny percentage of all slaves brought to the Americas.⁵⁵

But when viewed at the local level, the institution of slavery and the presence of Africans and their descendants become crucial to understanding the colonial societies that developed in these two regions. The socioracial dynamics of Yucatan and Belize, their similarities and differences, reflected the larger dynamics of the Atlantic world and the contrasting ways in which Europeans interacted in the Americas with native peoples, enslaved Africans, and each other. On the one hand, Yucatan and Belize were part of a single, larger, cohesive slave system. On the other hand, there was a categorical difference between the two societies, one that influenced the frontier dynamic between them.

One way to view that categorical difference is to classify Belize as a slave society, in comparison with Yucatan as a society with slaves. The simplicity of that binary model means it does not work well for every region of the Americas, but it is arguably useful for this one, at least as a starting point. Yucatan’s African slaves were auxiliaries, mostly urban dwellers, not mass slaves or plantation workers, and this formed the basis of the colony’s development as a society with

55. On Yucatan, see Restall, *Black Middle*. On Belize, see Bolland, *Formation*, 49–124; Bolland, “Slavery in Belize”; Shoman, *13 Chapters*, 27–53. For a synthetic treatment of African slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean up to ca. 1800, see Klein and Vinson, *African Slavery*, 17–83. For a brief discussion of the Middle Passage, see Palmer, “Middle Passage.” Fuller ones are Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*; Rediker, *Slave Ship*.

slaves. The Belize classification is more complex. African and African-descended slaves there tended to come from Jamaica, which was unambiguously a slave society, and some had worked on sugar plantations. But not all Afro-Belizeans had begun their working lives in the Americas as mass laborers, and the nature of logging work in Belize made it more akin to auxiliary slavery.⁵⁶ Belize was closely tied to Jamaica in many ways formal and informal, but it was not a plantation colony like Jamaica—indeed, not much of a colony at all (and not technically one before 1862).⁵⁷

The remainder of this section will further compare slavery in Belize and Yucatan using the following criteria: demographic differences, the relative importance of slaves to economic production, the role played by the master-slave relationship in the larger colonial social order, the treatment of slaves by owners and the judicial treatment of them by colonial authorities, and, finally, how that ties back into the article's core topic of flight.

First, demographically, Yucatan and Belize were very different. Yucatan was more populous: at the end of the eighteenth century, there were perhaps 400,000 people in the colony, three-quarters of whom were free Mayas, and roughly 12 percent were of African descent, with just 0.5 percent of the total population being enslaved. The remainder (roughly 13 percent) were Spanish and mestizo.⁵⁸ Belize's population was far smaller: less than 1,000 for most of the eighteenth century, and still barely 3,000 around 1800. The three-quarters majority, however, consisted of black slaves, with over 80 percent of the total population being of African descent.⁵⁹ There were anything from a handful to a few score of indigenous men and women, but they were mostly Miskitos (called Mosquitos by British and Spanish at the time) from the British settlements on

56. For a more detailed, but still introductory, typology of African slaves in the Americas as “auxiliary” and “mass,” see Restall and Lane, *Latin America*, 153–57. For a clear definition of the “slave society” and “society with slaves” distinction, as well as the origins of this use of the phrase “slave society” in the work of Frank Tannenbaum, see Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 8–10.

57. Belize was administratively subject to Jamaica, with the superintendents appointed by Jamaica's governor, and was linked to the island economically and socially—by trade, mail, taxes, and currency (the Jamaican pound); by slavery; and by the family ties of the Baymen. Evidence is found scattered through numerous documents in TNA, CO and TNA, Probate (abbreviated in the archive as PROB) 11, but also see Bolland, *Formation*, 4, 25, 42, 49–53, 70, 82, 103; Campbell, *Becoming Belize*, 253–54.

58. On Yucatan's demography, see Restall, *Black Middle*, 12–14, 25–33.

59. For Belize's demography, see Bolland, *Formation*, 32, 50–52. Demographic estimates for Belize in 1803, 1806, and 1809 are in TNA, CO 123/15, 123/17, 123/18.

the Mosquito Shore.⁶⁰ Belize's Mayas lived outside the logging camps and the Baymen's single coastal town; officially, the British denied they existed at all.

Second—and closely tied to the first point—slave labor was central and crucial to economic production in Belize. The settlement imported everything and exported only wood (in 1800, primarily mahogany), all of which was cut by black slaves. Most of the slaves were adult men (black men outnumbered black women in the settlement by two or three to one), almost all of whom labored at locating, cutting, and transporting wood. The settlement could and would not have existed without such slaves, hence the persistent British concern over slave flight (and the anxiety over abolition).⁶¹

Whereas the rationale underpinning slavery in Belize was fundamentally economic, in Yucatan it was as much social as it was economic. The Maya majority performed both unpaid and wage labor. Black slaves and free colored servants were more a source of specialized and skilled labor, acting as intermediaries, middle managers, and supervisors between Spaniards and Mayas.⁶² But although Afro-Yucatecans played interstitial social and economic roles, Spaniards still conceived of African slaves as property. Masters saw slaves as investments from whom (or which) they hoped to benefit and profit. Slaves were relatively expensive in both Yucatan and Belize. But owning slaves in Belize was elemental to being a Bayman; most Baymen owned Africans and lived off their labor. In Yucatan, however, slave owning was synonymous not with whiteness but rather with elite status, similar to carrying the title of *don* or *doña* and a privilege that most Yucatecans of Spanish descent could not

60. The history of the Mosquito Shore (the Caribbean coast of what is today eastern Honduras and Nicaragua) is closely intertwined with that of early Belize, both in terms of the parallel themes of interaction between Spaniards and Britons as well as between indigenous groups (mostly the Miskitos) and African slaves, and in terms of the movements within the Jamaica–Belize–Mosquito Shore triangle of British officials and settlers, enslaved and free black migrants, and Miskitos. See Naylor, *Penny Ante Imperialism*; Offen, “British Logwood Extraction”; Offen, “Race and Place”; Lohse, “Cacao and Slavery,” 67; Anderson, *Mahogany*, 111–24; Williams, “If You Want Slaves”; Williams, “Living between Empires.”

61. Specifically, the gradual transition from abolition of the trade in 1807 to the abolition of slavery in 1833 and the pseudoslavery of the apprenticeship system in the 1830s. See TNA, CO 123/44, 123/45; “Dispatches Outwards 1825–1827,” BARS, R6; Bolland, *Formation*, 106–24. On the early economy, see Murray, *Family and People*; Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, *Economic History*.

62. Restall, *Black Middle*, is a full-length development of this argument. Certainly there were skilled Maya workers, but far fewer as a percentage of the total than Afro-Yucatecans. Colonists accessed Maya workers in rotating groups from native communities in a way that did not motivate Spanish employers to train specialists among them. On how Spaniards extracted Maya labor, see Patch, *Maya and Spaniard*; Solís Robleda, *Bajo el signo*.

afford.⁶³ Thus in Yucatan the cost of slaves and the limited profitability of their work reflect the fact that Africans as property were also viewed as luxury goods to be consumed through display; they were prestigious commodities that projected the status of their owners.

Illustrative of this is the frequent buying of slaves at Mérida auctions by the province's governor, to be sold later on at a profit. Large-scale, public purchases, followed by the public baptism and naming of the slaves, underscored the governor's status at the top of Yucatan's small social pyramid. The most profitable place for the Yucatec governor to acquire such slaves was often Belize, underscoring how African slavery linked these two areas, how the two functioned as part of a single, complex system despite (and, in some ways, because of) their contrasting labor structures. The haul of hundreds of Afro-Belizeans in the 1779 attack on the settlement, for example, benefited the governor (don Roberto de Rivas Betancourt), the largest slave owner in the colony (don Juan Esteban Quijano), and the local royal treasury, having a major impact on the Yucatec slave market for years.⁶⁴

This leads us to the third comparative criterion: the master-slave relationship. In Yucatan this relationship was not the foundation of the entire colonial social order; in Belize, it was. The contrast stems from the two criteria summarized above. In Yucatan, the master-slave relationship was a subset of broader elite-subordinate relations. The status and treatment of slaves were modified and determined in part by local norms for how elite Spaniards interacted with their dependents, with the model being that between Spanish *encomendero* and Maya villager. Aspects of that relationship were thus reflected in the slave experience in Yucatan. For example, *encomenderos* and other elites had access to part—but not all—of a Maya laborer's working days. Similarly, while slaves in theory worked full-time for their masters, and some surely did in reality, it was common for enslaved Africans to spend part of their time pursuing their own enterprises. Mayas had the right to marry and live with

63. On slaves' values in Yucatan, see Restall, *Black Middle*, 37–43. In Belize, see Bolland, *Formation*, 114; Bolland, "Slavery in Belize," 59. Slaves in Yucatan were relatively expensive not in terms of peso value (costing on average a little over 200 pesos) but in terms of the relative poverty of the colony and the lack of any high-profit economic enterprise. The costs of shipping slaves from Jamaica and the high incidence of flight from logging sites seem to have kept slaves' prices relatively high in Belize.

64. Archivo General del Arzobispado de Yucatán, Mérida, Jesús parish records, vols. 5–6; escribano volumes by Argaiz, 1778–81 and 1782–84, Archivo Notarial del Estado de Yucatán, Mérida, microfilm rolls 21–22; Restall, *Black Middle*, 23, 49–67; Patch, *Maya and Spaniard*, 192. Also see citations in note 31 above.

their spouses, rights that in Yucatan were typically extended to all inhabitants, slaves included. A final example: Maya villagers were obliged to convert to Catholicism (in the conquest years) and live in *policía cristiana* (Christian civility); likewise, slaves entering the colony, whether through legal trade and auction in Mérida and Campeche or through flight from Belize, were obliged to be baptized as Catholics and become members of a parish for people of African descent.⁶⁵

By contrast, in Belize “the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations”; “slavery was the pivot around which everything revolved.”⁶⁶ The slaveholding Baymen were the ruling class. They exercised social domination both out on their logging works and in town; their economic ascendancy was overwhelming, rooted in their possession of the logging business; and they wielded considerable political power by controlling the institutions of the Public Meeting—at which “no person of color was allowed to vote”⁶⁷—and the self-elected body of magistrates.

The Baymen’s complete control over the subordinate slave majority was sometimes contested by the superintendent. But until the 1830s (at least), as numerous contemporaries noted, the superintendent was “not much more than a Looker-on,”⁶⁸ ordered to permit the Baymen “the full enjoyment of their ancient Customs.”⁶⁹ Half a dozen leading slave owners “held in subjection the rest of the Inhabitants,”⁷⁰ maintaining “a very arbitrary aristocracy.”⁷¹ The superintendency was “so very undefined” that it was impossible to “administer Public Business.”⁷² Styling themselves the “Principal Inhabitants,” the

65. Most notably, these included the Jesús parishes in Mérida and Campeche. A trio of new monographs on the spiritual conquest and imposition of *policía cristiana* in Yucatan is Hanks, *Converting Words*; Christensen, *Nabua and Maya Catholicisms*; Solari, *Maya Ideologies*. On parishes, marriages, and other aspects of the Afro-Yucatecan experience, see Restall, *Black Middle*.

66. The quoted passages discuss slavery in North America: Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 8–9 (commenting on North America; also see 109–42); Rodolphe Desdunes, commenting on Louisiana, quoted in Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 15; and in Restall, *Black Middle*, 281.

67. A “law” passed by the magistrates in 1790, but confirming long-term practice. TNA, CO 123/12 (23 Apr. 1790).

68. James Stephen, 4 Oct. 1838, TNA, CO 123/54; quoted in Bolland, *Formation*, 167.

69. Lord Liverpool, 1810, quoted in Bolland, *Formation*, 167.

70. Superintendent Cockburn, 27 Jan. 1830, TNA, CO 123/41; quoted in Bolland, *Formation*, 172–73.

71. Superintendent Despard, “Narrative,” 1790, TNA, CO 123/10; quoted in Bolland, *Formation*, 38; and in Conner, *Colonel Despard*, 85, 87.

72. Superintendent Arthur, letter to Lord Bathurst in London, 31 July 1819, TNA, CO 123/28; quoted in Bolland, *Formation*, 40.

dominant Baymen used agents in Kingston and London to undermine superintendents or other colonial officials who sought to curtail their right to log, trade, and treat their slaves as they wished. They even managed to have the settlement's first superintendent, Colonel Edward Marcus Despard, removed from office in 1790. His position that slaves and free people of color had some rights in the settlement was attacked as the kind of "wild and Levelling principle of Universal Equality" that induced slaves "to revolt, or to desert to the Spaniards; unless they themselves were likewise made Free."⁷³ The Baymen's claims that Despard was a revolutionary despot gained credence when he became caught up in the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and was hanged for treason in 1803, further boosting their sense of entitlement to autonomy. After Despard, anyone attempting to defend the settlement's mistreated slaves was easily tarred with the brush of the executed colonel's treachery.⁷⁴

The slaves themselves also opposed the Baymen's "arbitrary aristocracy," which takes us to the fourth comparative criterion: the treatment of slaves by owners and the judicial treatment of them by colonial authorities. In Yucatan, there was certainly prejudice against Africans and their descendants, deeply rooted by the eighteenth century and sometimes articulated in starkly racist terms. For example, in 1806 José Carreño called the Afro-Haitians of San Fernando de los Negros (a pueblo built in the former Maya town of Ake) "cannibals"; as the Spanish commissioner assigned to the town, which had been founded in 1796 as a settlement for Haitian refugees, he abhorred the residents as "ugly" and "bad mannered."⁷⁵ But it is telling that one finds such comments in a report on black foreigners, not on Afro-Yucatecans; no doubt the Spanish elite used such language to refer to their own slaves, but one scours the archives in vain to find written evidence of it. Furthermore, while the exploitation and abuse of slaves was surely common in Yucatan, it was neither so commonplace nor so publicly accepted as to be found widely in the legal record. When Fernando de Castro was arrested in 1793 after fleeing his Spanish owner in Campeche, the slave accused his master of overworking him and hitting him,

73. The Baymen's agent, Robert White, to Lord Sydney, 21 Feb. 1788, TNA, CO 123/6.

74. In addition to the sections of TNA, CO 123 cited above, see Bolland, *Formation*, 32–40, 157–73; Conner, *Colonel Despard*, 85–109, 279–99; Jay, *Unfortunate Colonel Despard*, 106–67.

75. AGI, Estado 24, no. 53, fols. 1–5 (a duplicate is Estado 25, no. 74); Archivo General del Estado de Yucatán, Mérida (hereafter cited as AGEY), Militar 1, 13 and 1, 22. For a brief history of this settlement, see Restall, *Black Middle*, 148–50, 182–83, 222–26. For a longer study, see Victoria Ojeda and Canto Alcocer, *San Fernando Aké*. Also see Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 194–95.

and it was the master, don Sebastián Betancourt, who was detained, fined, and later tortured on the rack for refusing to accept the court's authority.⁷⁶ Years of research produced only one case of a slave tortured during questioning by the Yucatec authorities: a black man called Juan Patricio, who beat a Spanish priest in 1690. He was put to torment during his interrogation until he admitted his owner had ordered him to do it.⁷⁷

Presumably there were numerous instances of abuse that were never recorded on paper or that lie waiting for future historians to discover. Sexual violence and other forms of insidious, daily abuse against slaves in Yucatan no doubt occurred and may remain just beyond the reach of researchers. Nonetheless, the contrast with Belize on this topic is clear. For example, when a French ship dumped 213 Haitian refugees on tiny, uninhabited English Caye (see figure 3) in the autumn of 1791, the magistrates sent them biscuits, salt beef, and water. But the prospect of them coming to the mainland was met with panic in Belize Town. The Spanish in Yucatan and the British in Belize both viewed the Afro-Haitian refugees of the 1790s as a serious and unwanted problem; thus the commander at Bacalar collaborated in the self-serving relief operation by sending a hundred bushels of corn to English Caye. But the British response was the more extreme: "so infectious a cargo" and "a sett of villains of so horrid a description" was not to be allowed into the settlement under any circumstances. After some six weeks on the tiny cay, underfed and many sick, the 208 survivors were shipped to Kingston. During those weeks, three Baymen named Kendall, Tillet, and Todd sailed out to the cay and talked 32 of the Haitians into coming in a skiff to a logging works on Manatee Lagoon (on the coast just south of the Sibun River), intending to work them as logging slaves and then sell them. The Baymen were arrested and the 32 sent back to English Caye, not because the Haitians were legally free men but because the magistrates feared the spread of slave violence and revolutionary ideas.⁷⁸

Even more revealing is the difference between the legal records from Yucatan and Belize pertaining to the treatment of slaves. Despite having only a fraction of Yucatan's population, Belize has numerous records of abuse cases found in various archives. Spanish records hint at the measures Baymen employed to keep slaves in line, as slave refugees often spoke of the execution of those recaptured by Baymen. For example, the three maroons mentioned in this

76. AGEY, Reales Cédulas 1, 45 (the torture of Betancourt is on fol. 12r).

77. AGI, México 368, fols. 1–599 (Juan Patricio's torture is on fol. 435v).

78. Letter from James Bartlet, 26 Nov. 1791, TNA, CO 123/13 (first quoted phrase); Magistrates' meeting, 18 Nov. 1791, TNA, CO 137/90 (second quoted phrase); Burdon, *Archives*, 196; Bolland, *Formation*, 75; Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies*, 99, 108–12.

essay's introduction (Cuacò, Prince, and Kofi) all described how in 1756, "there having fled to the hills many black men, the English went after them, but they only caught two, one of whom they hanged, and he is still left hanging."⁷⁹

British archival sources corroborate the use of such methods. A small sample, all taken from the 1790s, begins with a case from the summer of 1791, when the settlement's magistrates fined a Bayman £100 and expelled him from Belize for flogging one of his slaves to death; a month later, they fined one of their own £10 for "ill-treating and mutilating" one of his slaves.⁸⁰ The monetary amounts have the chilling effect of putting an affordable price on brutality; in a slave society, where people could be property, their abuse was a matter of money. As slave owners themselves, the magistrates sought to protect the public peace, not the rights of slaves. On other occasions, they imposed flogging sentences on slaves and even on free servants. For example, a slave and some indentured servants were flogged and jailed over Christmas in 1793 because they went to town for the holidays, disobeying their master's order to return to his logging works. In 1795 two slaves were flogged and exiled from Belize for supposedly planning to desert to the Spaniards, while later that year another was exiled from Belize for "inveigling" other slaves to flee to Yucatan. A slave who allegedly murdered another slave was hanged in 1796, then decapitated, his body burned and his head put on display as a lesson to the slave community.⁸¹

There was almost continual friction between the Baymen and the superintendents, over everything from logging limits and church services to whether magistrates could try the accused. Inevitably, the treatment of slaves became one of these battlegrounds. This was especially true during the administration of Colonel George Arthur, who in 1820 wrote to his superiors in London of "the increasing severity and cruelty which is now practised with impunity" by Belize's slaveholders.⁸² The chaplain in Belize Town confirmed that there were "many instances of horrible barbarity" toward slaves by Baymen.⁸³ By this date, Superintendent Arthur had already spent five years battling—and detailing in

79. AGI, México 3099, fols. 861–63.

80. Burdon, *Archives*, 194–95, catalogues the sentencing documents, archived in Grand Courts section F; the original documents should now be in TNA, but I have yet to find them.

81. Burdon, *Archives*, 208, 213, 215–16, summarizing Meetings of Magistrates records #1, 24 Dec. 1793, 16 Feb. 1795, and 11 Dec. 1795; and General Courts records T, 7 Mar. 1796. In another 1795 case, a man was sentenced to "transportation for life" (possibly meaning he was shipped to the new penal colony in New South Wales) for beating a free black man to death. I suspect the perpetrator was also a free black man, but I have yet to find the original case files (catalogued in Burdon, *Archives*, 214).

82. TNA, CO 123/29; quoted in Bolland, *Formation*, 70.

83. Quoted in Bolland, *Belize*, 17.

official correspondence—the settlement’s culture of violence against slaves. When in 1816 the magistrates only fined Michael Carty £35 for repeatedly flogging “a poor young Negro Female, his property,” naked in the open sun, Arthur attempted in vain to have the victim removed from Carty’s house; all he could do was temporarily remove Carty’s license to sell liquor. Nor could he prevent the magistrates in 1817 from giving a slave girl 100 lashes for “insolence and bad conduct” to her mistress and a male slave 250 lashes for theft, leading both around the town as public humiliation after their flogging.⁸⁴

Arthur achieved some small victories against the Baymen. In 1816 he prevented them from trying a black slave named Linda, “accused of murdering her child Thomas.” The issue, Arthur insisted, was whether she was a British or Spanish subject, and thus whether she should be shipped to England for trial or turned over to the Spanish authorities in Yucatan.⁸⁵ In 1820 he had a slave girl removed from the Douglas household because Mrs. Douglas had been treating her with “inhuman severity.” One of the magistrates, James Hyde, defended the young slave in court, foiling efforts by Robert Douglas to have the girl returned to his wife.⁸⁶

However, such victories were exceptions rather than the rule. For instance, in 1822, slaves belonging to two Baymen, Bowen and Wright, were placed under the protection of the provost marshal pending Arthur’s investigation of their abuse by their owners.⁸⁷ But the Baymen protested at every turn, both in direct confrontations with Colonel Arthur and in writing to London, where the authorities paid lip service to Arthur’s moral position but ordered him to placate the Baymen and maintain the peace. Lord Bathurst, secretary of state for war and the colonies, deftly walked the line between morality and politics that made slave societies possible: “It would be quite impossible for the Crown to interfere to prevent Messrs Bowen and Wright from holding Slave Property either personally or by representation, but at the same time it is equally impossible to express too strong indignation at their gross brutality.”⁸⁸

Slave responses to a slaveholding culture of brutality in Belize were as varied as in other slave societies, from foot-dragging and faked illness to murder

84. TNA, CO 123/25; Bolland, *Formation*, 66.

85. “Record D.1, 1816–1819,” BARS, R1, pp. 193–99.

86. “Miscellaneous Inward & Outwards 1820–1834,” BARS, R2, pp. 5–14.

87. “Dispatches Inwards 1821–1824,” BARS, R3, pp. 39–56, 131–34.

88. Letter from Lord Bathurst to Superintendent Arthur, Mar. 1822, BARS, R3, pp. 39–42. He goes on to express his hope that the magistrates in Belize will expel the two slaveholders from their body, due to “utter unworthiness and incompetency.” Campbell discusses the conflict between Superintendent Arthur and the Baymen over slave treatment in *Becoming Belize*, 285, 293–95.

and revolt. Because logging works were more remote and unsupervised than sugar plantations, flight, as we have already seen, was a particular problem in Belize, both in the form of *petit marronage* (temporary, brief periods of absence, which often meant trips downriver into town without owner permission) and permanent flight into Spanish territory. This topic thus brings us full circle and to the fifth criterion defining the difference between Yucatan as a society with slaves and Belize as a slave society.

Slave flight in Yucatan took the form of *petit marronage* only, typically into the major Spanish cities or towns (such as the example of Fernando de Castro mentioned above); there were neither slave revolts nor mass escapes nor maroon communities in the colony's history. The one exception proves the rule: an escape of 20 African men into the Yucatec countryside in the late 1540s during the fragile transition from conquest to colonial rule, all of whom were captured in 1550 and returned to the construction sites of the new city of Mérida.⁸⁹ Slaves who were African-born were imported into the province in a steady trickle for the rest of the colonial period. But they were increasingly outnumbered by the Spanish- and Maya-speaking residents of the growing mixed-race communities—the free black, mulatto, and pardo Yucatecans who lived in Mérida and the Spanish towns, and by the late eighteenth century in almost every Maya village too. It is possible that slaves fled into the few rural communities in late colonial Yucatan that were predominantly black, such as the Afro-Haitian pueblo of San Fernando de los Negros mentioned above, or an unofficial rancho of Afro-Yucatecans called San Francisco de Paula, located off the northwest coast.⁹⁰ But I have found no evidence of such cases, nor have I found mention in either Spanish or British archives of maroon settlements in the Yucatan peninsula.⁹¹

By contrast, flight by Belizean slaves was endemic and extensive. In addition to the pattern of flight into Bacalar, the Petén, and Omoa, Afro-Belizean slaves also fled into Maya villages in the western and southern regions that today

89. AGI, Patronato 66A, 1, exp. 4, fol. 1; Restall, *Black Middle*, 16, 57, 179–80.

90. On San Francisco de Paula, see Restall, *Black Middle*, 148–50, 182–83, 224–26, and the sources cited therein, especially the extraordinary archaeological work led by Anthony Andrews and Fernando Robles Castellanos.

91. There is no evidence of slaves fleeing Yucatan for Guatemala, although former owners complained in the years after the 1829 abolition of slavery in Mexico that their ex-slaves were migrating there. AGEY, Poder Ejecutivo, Gobernación 2, 58, fol. 1. But as the movement of Afro-Belizeans into Petén was a persistent problem through to the abolition years (see above, as well as Lentz, “Black Belizeans,” 657–60), it is possible that evidence will emerge of some slaves fleeing Yucatan into Petén.

make up Belize. Little is yet known of the interaction between maroons and Mayas.⁹² But by the 1810s it was known in Belize Town that there were several maroon communities in the region of the upper Sibun River, “very difficult to discover, and guarded by poisonous Snakes,” one perhaps on the tributary known today as Runaway Creek. In 1820, Superintendent Arthur commented on “two Slave Towns, which it appears have been long formed in the Blue Mountains to the Northward of Sibun.” It is unlikely that such “Slave Towns” existed as early as the 1760s and 1770s, when Belize experienced a series of violent slave revolts. Those were not so much “revolts” as armed, mass escapes into Spanish Yucatan; had the Sibun communities existed, at least one of those rebel groups would likely have fled south.⁹³

“To Leave the Company of the Heretics”: Another Flight Frontier

In the summer of 1755, two refugees appeared in Bacalar. They asked immediately to see the commander of the small fort town, from whom they sought asylum, having fled the British logging settlements at the mouth of the New River. They told the commander—and then, a few weeks later, the governor in Mérida—that they were “Roman Catholic” and wished “to leave the company of the heretics and be among Catholics.”⁹⁴ Repeatedly questioned about the nature of British activity on the Belize and New Rivers, the two men helpfully offered consistent details (despite the massive and totally destructive attack of the previous year, the two river mouths were already a rebuilt hive of logging activity, with a hundred “Englishmen” and 200 black slaves at the New River alone, guarded by Jamaican soldiers and Miskito Indians, a new Belize River fort manned by 40 Jamaicans and 60 Miskitos, boats and ships loaded with logs,

92. The topic is tackled in a book Grant Jones is currently writing for a Belizean press. Grant Jones, personal communication, 13 July 2013.

93. Bolland, *Formation*, 81, citing sources now in TNA, CO 123/26 and 123/29 that I have not yet accessed (Bolland has “Stakes” instead of “Snakes”). Campbell, in *Becoming Belize*, 290–93, takes issue with Bolland terming four slave disturbances “revolts,” three of them in 1765–1773; she prefers “uprising” or “group-runaway” situation. In my view, Campbell is right to see escape out of Belize as the primary goal of these uprisings, with organized violence a means to that end or a response to Baymen efforts to prevent flight. But her underlying argument is to show that slaves in Belize were too content with their situation to ever rebel, and in that sense Bolland’s emphasis on discontent and resistance is more illuminating. In the end, the evidence regarding the massive scale of flight renders the debate over revolt something of a moot point; however one terms what happened in 1773, it was one of numerous instances of slave escape from the settlement.

94. Michael Soames, 1755, AGI, México 3099, fol. 717v.

and so on). These two refugees were hardly the first to flee voluntarily to Spanish territory, nor the first to provide intelligence on the foreigners in Belize. But they stand out from the hundreds of other Afro-Belizean refugees described above because, while they likewise gave religion as their motivation, they were neither slaves nor African by birth or descent. They were both Irishmen, free white sailors named William Conelett and Michael Soames.⁹⁵

The flight of nonslave refugees from Belize to Yucatan—the answer to the fourth question posed at the start of this article—suggests another dimension to how the topic of slave flight illuminates comparative British-Spanish colonialism and slavery, particularly if Conelett and Soames were not rare cases. In fact, they were not rare at all. This is surprising, in view of the absence of any mention of such flight in the secondary literature⁹⁶ and for its challenge to our assumptions that slaves flee because they seek freedom while free men remain loyal to their compatriots (tied by ethnicity, language, and imperial identity). Clearly this was not so, at least in the Spanish-British circum-Caribbean.

A year after Conelett and Soames fled to Yucatan, more “English deserters from the Rivers of Belize” were sent up to Mérida from Bacalar. An Irish sailor named William Sheen (“Guillermo Cheen”) told the governor that after eight miserable months on the Río Hondo logging works, he had “the luck to encounter some fishermen” (probably Mayas or mixed-race Yucatecs) north of the river mouth; they took him to the nearest Spanish lookout post, where he found three Englishmen, a Frenchman, and an African maroon, all refugees from Belize. They had all been “mistreated” (*maltratados*) at the works, said William Bacon (“Guillermo Blacon”), and “a comrade of his died of hunger.” Another of the “Englishmen” was actually a Scotsman from Jamaica, Alex O’Cleary (“Alexo Creri”). He had put in a few months moving dyewood logs on the New River with a couple of friends, but because “a comrade of his died of hunger, they were badly paid, and the work was excessive [*trabaxo execivo*], they agreed to flee to the territory of the Spaniards.” The Frenchman, a sailor named “Julian Minio,” claimed to have been captured by English slavers off the Guinea coast and put to work with African slaves in Jamaica and Belize; he was trying to get home to Saint-Servan.⁹⁷

Cases such as these recurred, with similar details, for decades. In 1766 the governor of Yucatan actually complained to the king of the cost of having to

95. AGI, México 3099, fols. 706–22. Their names appear as “Guillermo Conelett” and “Coneles,” and “Miguel Siomes” and “Ioanes” (so the latter might have actually been Jones).

96. The closest relevant discussion that I have found thus far is Cromwell, “Life on the Margins.”

97. AGI, México 3099, fols. 848–58.

feed free English refugees from Belize, asking if he could pass the buck to his Cuban counterpart and ship them to Havana. Later that year he asked the crown to pay shipping costs for the English refugees he had assembled in Campeche, ready to go to Havana or Veracruz—anywhere out of his jurisdiction. “A few times, there have come a dozen of them, or more,” he reported; “they come due to the poor treatment [*el mal trato*] they receive at the logging works where they are used.”⁹⁸

Indeed, the phenomenon was not restricted to Belize but was endemic to British logging efforts on both the southeastern and southwestern frontiers of Yucatan. In the early decades of the eighteenth century, as mentioned above, British logging activity was still focused primarily on the Laguna de Términos area; from 1702 to 1716, the Spanish waged a sporadic, costly, but ultimately successful campaign to root it out. Many of the same patterns that would characterize Yucatan-Belize relations throughout the eighteenth century can be seen in Yucatan-Laguna de Términos relations in the century’s early decades—including the flight of free “Englishmen” to the Spaniards. In the 1710s, dozens of them fled along the coast to Veracruz or Campeche “due to the mistreatment that I received from the owner of the works where I was laboring” (in the words of an unmarried Protestant Englishman named Daniel Brown).⁹⁹ If a refugee was Catholic, he usually identified religion as a motivating factor. But one group of a dozen who fled “various works” in 1713 were all self-identified Protestants, laborers or sailors from places like Connecticut and Exeter (England, via Jamaica). They sought refuge among the Spaniards, despite the long war only just ending between Spain and Britain, because of hunger (“a lack of supplies” [*falta de vestimientos*]) and exploitation. As one refugee put it, logging works owners like Thomas Drake “did not want to pay us for our work”—a succinct summary of abuse that, intentionally or not, evoked the region’s entire world of unfree labor.¹⁰⁰

“Motivated by Mistreatment”: Conclusion

“Motivated by mistreatment” (*con el motivo de maltrattamiento*) was how the governor of Yucatan summed up the phenomenon of free English laborers and sailors seeking refuge among Spaniards, even when the two nations were at

98. AGI, México 3099, fols. 1313–16, quote on fol. 1313.

99. AGI, México 1017, fol. 259. What Spaniards called *ranchos de palo de tinta* the English called “logging works,” and thus in the context of this article I have glossed *rancho* as “works.”

100. AGI, México 1017, fols. 212–82, quote on fol. 256v.

war.¹⁰¹ That phenomenon forces us to consider maroons' motivations slightly differently.

An overview of flight from British logging settlements (Laguna de Términos and the three Belizean rivers) into Spanish territories (Yucatan, Petén, and Omoa) from the early eighteenth century to the early nineteenth suggests this general conclusion: refugees came from among all the workers, regardless of nationality, race, or slave/free status, and all sought to escape miserable working and living conditions. That said, three significant subpatterns can be seen. First, the flight of free workers was more common in the first half of the eighteenth century, tapering off and replaced by slave flight in the century's second half for obvious reasons: free workers were increasingly replaced by slaves during the century. Second, refugees fled relatively unsettled places (mostly seasonal logging camps, but also ranches, boats, and the unimpressive St. George's Caye and Belize Town communities) for fully developed colonial settlements (even small frontier towns like Bacalar and Petén were structurally urban, complete with imperial church-state apparatus)—in other words, the opposite pattern of movement from that typically associated with maroon flight.¹⁰² Third, individuals fled alone or in small groups, and with individual motivations. Some simply detested their abusive employer (from the loathed Thomas Drake in the Laguna de Términos in 1713 to the hated George Johnson, whose slaves caught turtles off Cape Catoche in 1800).¹⁰³ For some, no doubt, religious motivations were sincere.¹⁰⁴ Some hoped to find a quicker way back to hometowns or to wives in other ports. Slaves surely sought freedom, but they also sought shelter, sustenance, better working conditions, and the opportunity for family life, even if all that came within the confines of slave status in a Spanish colony. Some were just hungry, lost, and probably terrified—like the black refugee who was found hiding in the forest by two other

101. AGI, México 1017, fol. 265.

102. For example, Campbell defines marronage as “the process of flight by slaves from servitude to establish their own hegemonies in inhospitable areas.” Campbell, *Maroons of Jamaica*, 2. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 7, and Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border*, 2, both emphasize maroon movement as escape from European settlements to “inaccessible, inhospitable areas for concealment and defense.”

103. AGI, México 1017, fols. 256–61; AGI, México 3111, no. 38.

104. This seems more likely in cases of Irish Catholic sailors, less clear in cases of slaves born in Jamaica or Africa. But although black refugees' claim to religious motives was obviously a way to claim freedom, based on their understanding of Spanish refuge laws, we cannot assume that all religious declarations were mere strategy—the “pretext of religion” or “the false and purloining pretence of religion,” as British observers put it. See citations above in notes 25, 29, 33, 47, and 49.

refugees canoeing up the Belizean riverines and who was taken by them to Bacalar, where “nobody could be found who spoke his language,” he being “a completely closed recent arrival from Africa, whose nation nobody knew” (*vosal serrado enteramente, y de una nacion no conocida de forma*).¹⁰⁵

The varied identities of those who fled reflected the varied identities of those who traded or worked on Belize’s shores. It was not only African slaves who came from numerous towns and “nations” of origin. For example, in 1727 Spaniards found on an English ship captured off the Tabascan coast “various enslaved Indians from Campeche,” including Yucatec Mayas and Mayas from Tenosique, Tabasco, which had been raided by Miskitos, some of whom were also onboard.¹⁰⁶ In 1744, two ships, one Dutch and one English, were captured en route from Belize to Jamaica; both were loaded with dyewood from the Belize River and were thus taken to Havana, where the ships and cargoes were auctioned off, the proceeds going mostly to the Spanish crown. The crews—who, as was typical of such incidents, either escaped, died in custody, or were ransomed—came from New England, Hamburg, Denmark, Norway, Toulouse, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam. The crew of another English ship—taken in 1753 at the mouth of the Belize River and sent to Santander to be ransomed—were identified as five Englishmen from New York, a Frenchman, an Irishman, and two Miskito Indians.¹⁰⁷

These cases illustrate broader concluding points regarding the human dimension of frontier crossings and connections. We tend to view Spanish and English settlements as separate, as assigned to distinct fields of development and study. But in reality they were closely tied together by human threads, by the people who moved by land and sea around and through and within the frontiers. This was true of the greater circum-Caribbean, but even the narrower focal point of Belize reveals a frontier world that tied, rather than divided, people of different categories.¹⁰⁸ Frontier travel and activity were multiracial and multinational, including Mayas and Miskitos, Europeans born anywhere between Boston and Hamburg, and Africans born anywhere between Philadelphia and Angola. Such people were mostly male but included women and

105. AGI, México 3099, fol. 864v.

106. AGI, México 1017, fols. 823–26.

107. AGI, Escribanía 62, piezas 1–2; AGI, México 1017, fol. 940.

108. As was arguably true on the Mosquito Shore (see Offen, “Race and Place”; Williams, “If You Want Slaves”; Williams, “Living between Empires”), the Laguna region (see Cromwell, “Life on the Margins”), and elsewhere in the Americas (see Guy and Sheridan, *Contested Ground*, 10–12, as well as various essays in that volume and in Weber and Rausch, *Where Cultures Meet*; see also Landers, “Gracia Real”).

children. Their movement could be involuntary (as slaves, as captured ship crews, or as prisoners of war) or voluntary (as maroons or rebels, as migrant families, as workers seeking better conditions, or as sailors seeking a living). War was a factor so constant that it was either taken for granted or, if possible, ignored; Britain and Spain bounced between peace treaties and outbreaks of hostility so frequently that colonial residents lived in a permanent liminal state of war/peace. Sometimes African slaves and free white Europeans made common cause and helped each other escape and flee. But this is not to suggest that flight circumstances created some sort of racial harmony, any more than the presence of black slaves and white sailors on the same pirate vessels made for shipboard racial democracy. As Arne Bialuschewski has persuasively argued, there was no such democracy;¹⁰⁹ and, broadly speaking, the pirate and privateer demographic spectrum (through the 1720s) was similar to that of eighteenth-century refugees in the greater Yucatan region.

Do flight patterns thus show that life in the Spanish empire, for slaves and free workers alike, was more bearable than it was in the British Empire? The deep-rooted, long-lasting, and endemic nature of one-way flight from British logging settlements into neighboring Spanish territories throughout the eighteenth century might be read to support such a simplistic argument. Certainly it mattered that Belize developed in the late eighteenth century into a slave society, whereas Yucatan remained a society with slaves. Furthermore, flight patterns reflect the facts that systems of colonialism, slavery, and labor exploitation affected individuals in varying ways and that individuals regularly crossed frontiers to find better conditions.

But because the frontier acted more as a bridge than a barrier, we might do better to think of the whole region, from the Laguna de Términos to Omoa, encompassing Yucatan and Belize, as a single macrosystem, one complex dynamo containing two connected systems of colonial exploitation. The self-declared motivations of Richard Dobson and his friends—and their sorry fate in Havana—warn us against misreading the differences between Belize and Yucatan as a defense of slavery in the Spanish colony. The Spanish and British repeatedly asserted that their own society and system was more benign and free than the other, but such claims only underscore how committed European colonists were to the institutions of labor exploitation.

Nor should statements by slaves and maroons regarding the differences between the two systems be taken on face value as apologies for one or the other system. Africans navigating and negotiating the Atlantic world tended to be

109. Bialuschewski, "Pirates, Black Sailors."

better informed and more skilled in their efforts to mitigate the impact of slavery and racism than Europeans recognized. An example is that of a slave named Cuffee (probably originally Kofi, although there were plenty of Cuffees in the Americas), born in West Africa and a onetime slave in Jamaica and Belize. Captured in the Spanish attack that overran Belize in 1754, he was taken to Bacalar and then Mérida, where he was sold and taken to Cuba. In 1762, according to a statement Cuffee made the following year in Jamaica, word reached him on the “mountain plantation” where he lived that the British had invaded the island, and “immediately upon his hearing of the said invasion he forthwith left the said Don Manuel and the service of the Spaniards and went to the British camp then before the Havana [*sic*] in order to aid and assist the English in the taking of that place.” It was in Cuffee’s interests to claim that he identified with the British and that he was motivated to live among them rather than the Spaniards. But whether that was true or not, surely his underlying motivation was the same as that of Richard Dobson and his comrades, or Cuacò and his fellow maroons, when they fled to Bacalar, or January and his friends when they escaped to Omoa: they saw an opportunity to be free.¹¹⁰

The Spanish colony of Yucatan and the British settlement of Belize were in many ways very different places in the eighteenth century, as these African men knew. But the two places were also closely linked to each other, in large part by the human threads of Atlantic world labor. For those who crossed between the Spanish and the British territories, be they Irish sailors or Afro-Jamaican maroons, the frontier represented their hopes for a better life amid the turmoil and violence of the Atlantic world.

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110. A copy of Cuffee’s testimony, taken in Jamaica in June 1763, is framed on the wall of the reading room in BARS, in Belmopan. Several “Cuffees” appear in the records of the Jamaican maroon rebellion of the 1730s (Campbell, *Maroons of Jamaica*, 50, 81, 92, 108, 126, 150, 177; Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 213, 287), but it seems unlikely—although possible—that one of them was this Cuffee. For discussions of maroons’ motives in collaborating and negotiating with colonial authorities in places outside Belize and its immediate neighbors, see Price, *Maroon Societies*; Campbell, *Maroons of Jamaica*, 126–208; Thompson, *Flight to Freedom*, 265–94; Proctor, *Damned Notions*, 125–51.

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