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## A Narrative of Escape: Self Liberation by Sea and the Mental Worlds of the Enslaved

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates a singular case of maritime marronage from Jamaica to Cuba in the 1760s to explore the possibilities that archives present to reconstruct the mental worlds of enslaved Africans and the multilingual, transimperial Caribbean underground created by their voyages of escape. Reading Spanish/Cuban and British/Jamaican archives together, the article contextualizes the testimony of a Kongolesé man who escaped one of the plantations where Tacky's Revolt broke out in Jamaica and made his way to Trinidad, Cuba, by sea. There he claimed freedom as an indentured servant whose term of service was up, using a West African mnemonic device as evidence to do so before a Spanish colonial tribunal. As this man's testimony illustrates, maritime marronage constituted just one part of an escapee's ongoing struggle not only for freedom but also autonomy and refuge.

*After distressing days, my dreams go marooning.*<sup>1</sup>

Written on cheap paper, folded in half, tucked in a box of documents that is encased in Cuban cowhide and tied with a string in Seville, Spain, is the testimony of an African man who escaped slavery on a Jamaican sugar plantation. When he presented himself to authorities in Trinidad, Cuba, he stated that his name was Bob in Jamaica and Pedro in Cuba. He did not give his African name, but he identified himself as a native of Africa [*'de Guinea'*] of the Kongo nation [*'casta congo'*].<sup>2</sup> Spoken in 'broken English,' his testimony was translated into Spanish by a free Black man and then written down by an official scribe in Trinidad. After an inquiry to determine the man's fate, the Governor of Trinidad forwarded his testimony from the south coast of Cuba to the Captain General in Havana in the spring of 1767. There it remained for more than a century in the Captain General's archive until 1888, during a respite in Cuba's independence wars, when a patriotic archivist visiting from Spain sent it to Seville, along with more than 2,000 boxes

[*legajos*] of documents from the Captain General's archive, thus rescuing Spanish patrimony from the insurgent Cubans.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars of African slavery in Jamaica do not often research their subject in the archives of southern Spain, but the violent itineraries of Caribbean slavery and European colonialism – and the struggle against them – provide rich material for them there. Maritime maroons constructed a counter-hegemonic Caribbean geography that defied the institutions of slavery and empire and refuses to fit neatly within national archives. Following the currents and winds that led Native peoples to journey across the Caribbean Sea and populate its many islands, enslaved people escaped from island to island in canoes and boats, linking regions across the political boundaries of empire and nation. Turning our attention to these watery routes of connection and escape reminds us how maritime maroons' journeys at sea contributed to a process that Katherine McKittrick has described as 'respatialization,' whereby their dynamic movements linked islands, built information networks, and reconfigured the landscapes of domination their owners sought to construct.<sup>4</sup>

In Trinidad, Cuba, the arrival of an escapee from slavery in Jamaica was not unusual. Mentions of '*negros ingleses*' showing up from Jamaica lace the correspondence from the south coast of Cuba to the Captain General in Havana in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. In the period between approximately 1680 and the end of the eighteenth century, several hundred men, women, and children fled slavery in Jamaica, the Bahamas, Saint Domingue, and British North America by escaping to Cuba and left traces of their journeys in its archives. Amid all these cases, though, the testimony of \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro stands out. Escapees from Jamaica arriving along Cuba's south coast often travelled by boat under their own control in groups of men, women, children, and even the elderly, but he came alone, a scenario more common among enslaved sailors and other maritime workers who jumped ship in major port cities like Havana or Santiago de Cuba. In addition, his testimony is nothing if not audacious. Amid hundreds of cases of *arivees* in Cuba, escaping from Jamaica, the Bahamas, Saint-Domingue, and British North America, no one I encountered before him made a case to Spanish authorities in Cuba of wrongful enslavement, based upon the claim that he was a self-liberated free man whose contract of indenture had expired. These claims may or may not have been true or even plausible but, as Natalie Zemon Davis has argued, how people tell stories matters at least as much as their veracity.<sup>5</sup>

This essay will centre the testimony of \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro in the inquiry held to determine his fate. By design it seeks to break open my own univocal historian's voice and allow \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's words more space to be the teller of his tale, making him not just the object but also the subject of my historical study.<sup>6</sup> How did this man pursue his freedom – by a series of escapes followed by a petition – in this multilingual, interimperial Caribbean space? How did he use African and creole knowledges to construct a narrative of wrongful enslavement

before a Black interpreter and a white audience of Spanish officials with a considerable amount of power over his fate? What can his testimony tell us about the mental worlds and knowledge networks of the enslaved? The end goal is not to achieve a kind of closure on his case, or to relate it to a triumphalist narrative of the journey from slavery to freedom or the resistance of the enslaved to their enslavement.<sup>7</sup> Rather I choose to listen to what he had to say and think about how we might use his testimony to peer into another world, as rich and beautiful and tragic, as familiar and unfamiliar, as transparent and opaque, as it comes to us in fading ink on this folded sheet of paper in Seville. Read between islands, empires, and archives, the testimony of a single individual can reveal a set of possibilities that constituted a world.<sup>8</sup>

According to his testimony, in Jamaica \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro had been owned by a man named ‘Mr. Cruccenk’, as recorded by the Spanish scribe, and in Cuba by a man named Pedro el Gallego, recently deceased. Through his interpreter, he stated that he had been brought to Cuba in a small sloop by Pedro el Gallego exactly four years, five months, and seven days before, a length of time he had carefully recorded by making lines [*rallitas*] on a wooden tablet [*tablilla*] he offered as evidence. When officials asked him about the details of his purchase in Jamaica, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro responded that he had never actually been bought [*efectivamente no fue comprado*].<sup>9</sup> His testimony is dense and elusive, third person as recorded by the scribe, as testimonies of enslaved peoples in the archives tend to be. According to the story taken down by the Spanish scribe, he had never effectively been bought because ...

*Fleeing the harshness of his owner, fearful of punishment, he left Port María Bay, where his owner lived, and from there went to Savanna-la-Mar [which is on the opposite end of Jamaica, on the southwest coast]. In Savanna-la-Mar he spoke with a black man from Curaçao who was resident there in order to ask him to solicit passage [meaning off the island] with the Spanish, obligating him to serve them for two years, after which they would have to give him his freedom. To that effect an agreement was struck with Pedro el Gallego, and el Gallego brought him to this land in his boat [this land meaning Cuba]. And it was because the term of his service had passed, and he had not been given his freedom, that he decided to present himself to this tribunal so that it bring him justice.*<sup>10</sup>

Famously, scholars of the Anglophone Black Atlantic have theorized the archive of Atlantic slavery as a painful site of violence and erasure – a ‘mortuary’ and a place of ‘deafening silence’ – but \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro’s testimony of flight from Jamaica, lodged in a Cuban, then Spanish archive, suggests possibilities for recovering some of this collective loss.<sup>11</sup> There is a need for historians to “think with” testimony of maritime maroons like \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro. If read with care and given the space and time for interpretation that his testimony demands, it provides a striking window on a transimperial, multilingual oral

underground of subversive Black politics that crisscrossed the Caribbean, operating at the limits of state archives and their national and imperial agendas and the Eurocentric frameworks that are the foundation of historians' academic work. His testimony shows us how enslaved and free people of African descent were potentially thinking, talking, moving, breathing, living, and perhaps even dreaming beyond the institution of slavery and the narrow confines of our discipline with its colonial impositions of field. By thinking with maritime maroons like \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro, historians have an opportunity to reimagine a broader Caribbean underground of oral knowledge networks and interconnected voyages linking this 'sea of islands,' not just after the Haitian Revolution but before it as well.<sup>12</sup> Doing so offers the opportunity to highlight the dynamic and creative ways the enslaved reshaped their worlds in all of the Caribbean slave societies connected by these journeys.

... *Andando huido del rigor de su amo, temerario del castigo,*  
*salió del Puerto Maria Be, donde es vecino su amo ...*

[Fleeing the harshness of his owner, fearful of punishment,  
 he left Port Maria Bay, where his owner resided]

In his novel *Slave Old Man*, the Martinican novelist Patrick Chamoiseau talks about '*la décharge*,' 'an impetuous inner presence' that seizes runaways just before they run.<sup>13</sup> We can never know exactly how that moment looked and felt for \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro, but we can reconstruct the conditions that made it impossible to resist. As Justin Dunnivant has argued in this Forum, from the point of view of the person fleeing, there is no easy distinction between petit and grand marronage. Escape unfolds in stages: the initial decision to depart, the first instance of flight, the chain of daily, nightly, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute decisions to stay away, and at times the choice to flee again, removing oneself farther away by sea or land.

\_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's terse phrasing belies the magnitude of his initial decision to leave his owner's estate. As an African man with broken English, it is likely he had not been in Jamaica for long. Like the vast majority of recent African arrivals in Jamaica, he would most likely have been relegated to the brutalizing regime of plantation labour in the cane fields. For six long days a week under the relentless sun, the overseer's whip would have driven his toil clearing brush and planting, tending, and cutting the cane. The cruelties of this life, the prevalence of malnutrition and disease, and the often sadistic violence of an overseer would have been reason enough for him to try his luck fleeing, as he put it, the 'harshness of his owner.'

In the mid-eighteenth century what scholars call petit marronage was so woven into the stitching of everyday power struggle that planters rarely prosecuted the enslaved for leaving unless the escapee stayed away for more than six months, was also deemed 'rebellious,' or had stolen from the estate. Absenting

oneself for shorter periods was common, either tolerated unwillingly or punished privately by owners, according to their own proclivities for violence, which could be great.<sup>14</sup> Frequent punishments included whippings, mutilation (the removal of part or all of a foot, a nose, or an ear), and/or the branding of the accused's body with an 'R' for 'runaway.' In addition to sadistic physical punishment, well beyond what was customarily inflicted on free people, returning to the plantation likely also led to the loss of prior privileges, such as mobility beyond the overseer's gaze. The fear of these punishments, then, drove his next decision – to leave the area altogether and later make his way to the relative safety of Cuba.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1760s groups of enslaved people in northern Jamaica were leaving directly for Cuba in stolen vessels at an astonishing rate. By 1767, the year \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro presented himself to authorities in Cuba, plantation owners on the north coast of Jamaica reported that 95 people had escaped their sugar estates during the last two years and were now in Cuba.<sup>16</sup> Writing to their merchant contacts in London, property owners in St. Ann's parish complained that on a clear day the island of Cuba 'is very distinctly seen' from the parishes of St. Ann, St. Mary, and St. James, and enslaved people had learned the ease of navigation between the two islands 'from the frequent commercial intercourse we have with the Spaniards.' 'They have got in the practice of seizing canoes,' they bemoaned, 'and making their escape thither.'<sup>17</sup>

Cuba's visibility on the horizon had a powerful allure to the enslaved in northern Jamaica, particularly for those familiar with the Spanish asylum policy, which was widely known throughout the Caribbean, as discussed by Fernanda Bretones Lane in this Forum. Indeed knowledge networks connecting the islands transformed the view of Cuba, as seen from northern Jamaica, into a visible representation of a space beyond the thrall of their owners, a place of refuge, one that was reachable and knowable, where people they potentially knew and loved had escaped before them – an island where they might leave behind the terrors that afflicted them and pursue a better life.

What precipitated \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's moment of '*la décharge*' and caused him to leave Port Maria Bay on Jamaica's north coast (Figure 1)? To Spanish officials he presented a familiar narrative, one maritime maroons from British colonies to Cuba often invoked – he feared the punishment of a cruel master.<sup>18</sup> Cruel slave masters abounded in eighteenth-century Jamaica, the punishments they inflicted on runaways were harrowing, and an especially cruel one was a good reason to risk a perilous journey of escape. But escapees were not speaking freely in their testimony to Spanish officials: they were being interrogated by officials who held tremendous power over their lives. The frequency with which maritime maroons described the cruelty of their masters in their testimony also suggests that escapees may have understood the claim to be one of the magic phrases they must utter to Spanish officials to secure manumission, much like the predicament of asylum seekers today. Beneath





**Figure 1.** An idealized, pacific view of a plantation yard with slave houses on a hillside in Port Maria Bay. James Hakewill, *A Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica, from Drawings Made in the Year 1820 and 1821* (London, 1825), Plate 11. Image courtesy of *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*.

\_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's clipped, carefully chosen words lie a personal narrative we cannot access with greater certainty, though there is more to the story.

... su amo en Jamaica es Mester Cruccenk ...

[... his owner in Jamaica is Mister Cruccenk ...]

To Spanish authorities in Trinidad \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro identified his former owner in Jamaica as 'Mr. Cruccenk,' as spelled by a Spanish scribe softening the harsh sounds of this distinctive English name with his Spanish tongue. Thus his testimony identified both the name of his presumed owner and the location of his sugar plantation, which ostensibly would have placed him in peril of being returned to that man's possession. Having lived in Cuba for several years at the time of his testimony, though, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro would have known that escapees from Jamaica were seldom returned to their British owners. From the distance of Cuba, he had less incentive to lie about the name and location of his former owner, who had not come looking for him seeking extradition. Rather, he needed to prove that he had indeed fled his owner in Jamaica, thus self-liberating before he stepped foot on Cuban soil.

At the time a man named John Cruikshank did indeed own a sugar plantation named Ballard's Valley just a few miles upriver from Port Maria Harbor. Recent events had made it one of the most infamous plantations in Jamaica. Just two years before \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro claimed he had arrived in Cuba in April 1760, enslaved people on Ballard's Valley initiated Tacky's Revolt, the largest slave rebellion in Jamaican history up to that time. Deserting Ballard's Valley and several neighbouring plantations, insurgents captured the fort that guarded Port Maria Bay, where they seized weapons, musket balls, and gunpowder. Returning to Ballard's Valley armed and several hundred strong, they killed its overseer and three other white men. Before the Revolt was suppressed, insurgents killed fifteen or sixteen white men in total.<sup>19</sup>

We don't know \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's involvement in these events, but we do know he had to have been acutely affected by what happened there – not just the insurgency but also the counterinsurgency that followed. Ballard's Valley and St. Mary's parish, where it is located, were the sites of spectacular acts of retaliatory violence. Colonial militia and maroon volunteers captured and killed fifty or sixty of the insurgents, including their Coromantee leader Tacky, and authorities in Kingston put many of the survivors to public and sadistic death. An insurgent accused of committing murder at Ballard's Valley was among those burned at the stake.<sup>20</sup>

Slavery was in and of itself more than sufficient grounds for rebellion and flight, but it is also likely that John Cruikshank and/or his overseer ran the plantation with especially abominable cruelty. Enslaved rebels often targeted notoriously cruel slave owners in their strategic actions. In addition enslaved people on particular plantations and in specific regions developed their own political and martial cultures with African roots.<sup>21</sup> Resistance on Ballard's Valley persisted even after the initial uprising had died down. In November 1765, just two years before \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro presented himself to authorities in Cuba, enslaved people rose up in the Port Maria vicinity and attacked Ballard's Valley again. This time a band of insurgents attempted to burn it down before escaping into the woods, leaving an overseer of a neighbouring plantation dead as well as a plantation owner.<sup>22</sup>

But what relationship did \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro have to the historic events that unfolded at Ballard's Valley? Had he truly fled John Cruikshank's estate? The documents offer clues but no definitive answers. During his physical inspection of \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro, the Spanish scribe noted that he had the number '10' branded on his left shoulder.<sup>23</sup> This number was likely a misreading. Spanish and British slaveholding societies shared the barbaric practice of branding enslaved people like cattle, but the custom took different forms on the two islands. In Cuba enslaved people were branded with an image of the royal crown or an 'I' for *indulto* upon the payment of import duties. In Jamaica they were more often branded with their owner's initials or as punishment for a crime. According to 'runaway slave' advertisements in Jamaican



newspapers, the initial 'J' was often branded as the capital letter 'I.' What looked to a Spanish scribe like the number ten, then, could have been 'I C,' if the scribe misread the letter 'C' as an 'O.' Potentially it was poorly burned on \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's arm or he may have flinched when they branded him or other markings may have distorted the scar.<sup>24</sup>

By identifying himself as coming from Cruikshank's estate, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro publicly claimed kinship with the rebel heroes of Tacky's Revolt, word of which had reached Cuba. He could have been one of the insurgents from Ballard's Valley who went on the run in response to the events in the spring of 1760, or he may have left later on, after the Assembly enacted a harsh slave code in the wake of the rebellion. Whatever his relationship had been to the uprising, it seems unlikely he would have claimed belonging to such a notorious master if that hadn't been true, given the risk, even if slight, that he should be returned. His flight likely served as an offshoot of the political tumult and bursts of violence occurring in that region and the whispered conversations and secret plots animating slave barracks there at night. We might consider him another part of what Vincent Brown has termed 'an archipelago of insurrection,' a wartime refugee, perhaps radicalized into taking flight by events there, perhaps involved in the uprising and fleeing a plantation zone where the enslaved were locked in violent conflict with their captors.

*... y desta a Sabana del Mar ...*

[... and from there to Savanna-la-Mar ...]

\_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's second departure in his ongoing story of marronage was from Port Maria Bay to Savanna-la-Mar, a port on the southwest coast of Jamaica and the capital of the booming plantation zone of Westmoreland parish. Founded only in 1730, often buffeted by hurricanes, Savanna-la-Mar was one of Jamaica's minor ports – a hub of intra-island and inter-Caribbean regional trade, particularly well connected with the southern Caribbean and Spanish territories. Though we know the least about this segment of his journey, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's itinerary of marronage *within* Jamaica, before he left for Cuba, illustrates the crucial linkages between plantation life in northern Jamaica and the maritime worlds of intra- and inter-island trade. It also reminds us of the need not to separate histories of maritime and plantation worlds, particularly in northern Jamaica, where plantations hung close to the shoreline and agricultural commodities moved to market by river and sea.<sup>25</sup>

Given that \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro didn't leave directly for Cuba in a stolen canoe or paddleboard and he ended up seeking passage in a Spanish boat, it seems likely he didn't have highly developed maritime skills of his own of the sort discussed in Kevin Dawson's contribution to this Forum. At the same time, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's choice to travel to Savanna-la-Mar suggests that he travelled by boat, which would have been faster and less dangerous than trying to cross the

island by foot, particularly if his owner placed a 'runaway slave' advertisement in the Kingston newspaper or authorities were searching for him after the uprising. Likely he was aided by a fisherman, a market woman, or someone with experience in the local canoe trade, the means by which Black men and women took goods to market.<sup>26</sup> Someone must have helped him board a dugout canoe or other coastal craft to leave Port Maria, perhaps heading west to the ports of Montego Bay or Lucea on his way to Savanna-la-Mar. In this instance again \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's terse phrasing belies multiple steps in his journey as well as unnamed accomplices.

\_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's itinerary of escape also provides a window on clandestine circuits through which news, knowledge, and 'runaways' moved around the island that have previously been invisible both to contemporaries and scholars. In fact his route of escape helps illustrate a wider web of communication connecting eastern to southwestern Jamaica, networks that would erupt into white consciousness during the second wave of Tacky's revolt. A month after the uprising was subdued in mountainous St. Mary's parish in the east, insurrection broke out on the plains of Westmoreland. The consensus among white authorities in Jamaica was that the uprisings were planned in coordination, even if they had little understanding of how precisely the insurgents had done so. \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's itinerary provides a potential answer. Here we have a man navigating the route along which the insurrection of 1760–1761 spread, suggesting ways in which Black information networks carried messages around the island and through the region beyond the control of their enslavers or authorities in Kingston.<sup>27</sup>

*... que allí habló con un negro Curazao vecino de allí  
para que le solicitasse pasage con los españoles,*

[ ... there he spoke with a Black Curaçaoan resident there  
in order to ask him to solicit passage with the Spaniards,]

In Savanna-la-Mar \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro tapped into a Caribbean-wide network of information and contraband trade connecting Jamaica to Dutch and Spanish territories. That in 1762 a free black man from Curaçao was living in Savanna-la-Mar, one who had connections with Spanish smugglers, should not surprise us though we infrequently find written references to these diasporic connections. People of African descent played a critical role in smuggling throughout the Caribbean, one that still needs further research, and Curaçaoan merchants often manumitted their enslaved workers before taking them to sea on voyages of intercolonial trade. Given that \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro described this Black man from Curaçao as a '*vecino*,' or resident, he likely stayed in town as a local agent of a larger pan-Caribbean trading operation.<sup>28</sup>

In Savanna-la-Mar the resident Curaçaoan's commercial connections and knowledge made him particularly well suited to aid \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro. Routes

of maritime marronage between Curaçao and Venezuela were so busy that any Curaçaoan would have been familiar with the Spanish asylum policy for those who escaped from slavery in the lands of its Protestant rivals. This Black man from Curaçao may have been inclined to help \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro out of a feeling of solidarity with someone with whom he shared the experience of enslavement, or even ancestry, or who reminded him of the self-liberating journeys of his own friends and family members.<sup>29</sup>

For a man like \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro, likely a native Kimbundu or Kikongo speaker who knew no Spanish and lacked contacts in regional trade, a Black sailor from Curaçao would have offered crucial introductions, knowledge, and language skills. Spanish and Papiamentu, the creole language of Curaçao, are mutually intelligible, one of the many reasons Dutch trade with Spanish possessions thrived. A Papiamentu speaker who also knew some English, as a man resident in Jamaica presumably would, would have made an excellent translator for \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro with Spanish speakers, another accomplice on the marine underground connecting him to escape.<sup>30</sup>

*obligandose a servirlos dos años,  
con tal que despues le havian de dar la libertad  
y que con efecto se hizo el ajuste con Pedro el Gallego,  
y lo condujo en su barco a esta tierra;*

[obligating him to serve them for two years,  
after which they would have to give him his freedom  
and to that effect an agreement was struck with Pedro el Gallego,  
and el Gallego brought him to this land in his boat [this land meaning Cuba]]

According to \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's testimony, the Curaçaoan helped him negotiate a two-year contract of indenture with Pedro el Gallego, the Spanish ship captain, in exchange for his passage from Savanna-la-Mar to Trinidad, Cuba. The claim that he had indentured himself was a crucial element in the case he made to authorities in Cuba of wrongful enslavement, even though indentured servitude was rare for a Black man in 1760s Jamaica. That said, placing himself in temporary legal bondage would have presented a familiar practice of pawnship or debt peonage \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro knew from his years lived in the kingdom of the Kongo. Indenturing himself to a ship's captain may have struck \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro as a way to distance himself from the horrors of chattel slavery on a sugar plantation, assuming risk but also returning to a milder and more recognizable – and importantly, temporary – form of the institution. In the heat of the moment, as \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro sought immediate passage off the island, fearing for his life, binding himself to Spanish smugglers could have presented a better alternative than risking recapture and brutal physical punishment or even execution as punishment for running away or playing a part in Tacky's Revolt. The Black man from Curaçao may even have suggested it, based on his experience as a sailor.

There is little reason to think, though, that Pedro el Gallego, the Spanish ship's captain, would have honoured this agreement even if he verbally agreed to it. Before the rise of the coolie trade from China in the mid-nineteenth century, indenture contracts were not standard practice in Spanish Caribbean colonies, and it seems unlikely that Spanish subjects would extend such terms to \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro rather than try to force him into slavery instead. At the time Spanish boats from the south coast of Cuba – and Trinidad in particular, a town famous for its privateers – had developed a practice of raiding plantations in northern Jamaica at night for their enslaved work force. Privateers who captured free Black mariners often tried to keep or sell them in Cuba.<sup>31</sup>

By stepping onboard this Spanish vessel and entrusting himself to Pedro el Gallego, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro was putting himself in danger. As many scholars have shown, the sea was a space of freedom and mobility but also of great peril for mariners of African descent, as those who crossed imperial lines often struggled to defend their free status in the face of capture, enslavement, and sale.<sup>32</sup> According to his own testimony, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro was the only person of African descent onboard, joining a crew of eight white men and a smugglers' cargo of cloth, hatchets, and flour purchased in Jamaica. His situation onboard was precarious: there was nothing to stop the crew members from throwing him overboard should they wish. According to \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro, the boat landed clandestinely somewhere along the coast of Cuba at night, and then he was whisked up into the hills.<sup>33</sup>

*y que como está passado el termino y no se le ha dado libertad,  
determinó presentarse en este tribunal*

*[And it was because the term of his service had passed, and he had not been given his  
freedom, that he decided to present himself to this tribunal.]*

It was \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro who initiated the official inquiry into his case by presenting himself to authorities in Trinidad. Notably he did *not* do this when he arrived in Cuba or when his indenture allegedly expired two years later, but more than four years after his arrival and two years, five months, and seven days after his indenture was supposedly up. Presenting himself to authorities in Trinidad represented another step in his ongoing journey of marronage, which had not ended when he left the thrall of John Cruikshank or even Jamaican law behind. Now he fled the control not of Pedro el Gallego, now deceased, but his widow Gregoria Sánchez.

Indebted after her husband's death, Gregoria's poverty had driven her to sell another enslaved African, a woman she had inherited from her deceased husband, and the writing was on the wall for \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro.<sup>34</sup> Now his situation resembled another classic instance of marronage, which often occurred after an owner's death when an enslaved person realized that they would not be manumitted, potentially as promised, and risked sale to a potentially crueller

master, somewhere far from loved ones. It was at this point that \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro chose to step forward to make a legal bid for his freedom before Gregoria could try to sell him.

As \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro testified, he had been ‘serving’ Gregoria (notably, he didn’t call her his ‘*amo/a*’ [boss] as he had called Cruikshank) since Pedro’s death, but their relationship appeared highly conflictive. Gregoria was livid that he had taken his case to royal officials and demanded that they not give credence to his ‘false declaration,’ calling him ‘a vile subject of wretched mental capacity’ and insisting that he was a slave not a servant, one that her deceased husband had captured while privateering in the Seven Years’ War.<sup>35</sup> Well prepared for her counterarguments, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro had already made the case that he had not been captured or purchased but had indentured himself and even presented evidence of the contract.

*Dijo que el mismo Pedro el gallego fue quien lo trajo de Jamaica,  
a esta tierra en una balandrita,  
y que el tiempo lo se nota:  
unas rallitas que tiene la tablilla que demuestra,  
las que reconocidas según se da a entender  
son 4 años, 5 meses, 7 días*

[He said that it was the same Pedro el Gallego who brought him from Jamaica  
To this land in a small boat,  
And that the time has been noted:  
Some notches on the wooden tablet that he displays,  
That when examined according to what they seem to suggest,  
are 4 years, 5 months, 7 days.]

In the absence of a written contract of indenture, Bob/Pedro sought to authenticate his claim that he had come to Cuba as a temporary servant – not as a slave – by presenting as evidence a wooden tablet upon which he had kept track of the days he had served of his indenture. It is the wooden tablet that may be the most distinctive and arresting element of \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro’s testimony. Over 250 years later, mention of this rare device made me sit up in my researcher’s chair in the Archive of the Indies in Seville. When reviewing the testimony after it was forwarded to Havana in the 1760s, either the Captain General of Cuba or one of his deputies had a similar reaction, underlining the mention of the *tablilla* and writing ‘*ojo*’/[‘look’] in the margins.

Neither indentured servitude nor counting by the use of a *tablilla* was a familiar practice in Spanish legal culture at this time, which relied on writing, and yet officials in both Trinidad and Havana appeared to be compelled by this unusual evidence. When they rendered their ruling, authorities in Trinidad accepted \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro’s timeline of his arrival in Cuba, based on the *tablilla*, even though they rejected his claim about a breached indenture agreement. In fact they gave more credence to his account of how he arrived in Cuba than they

did to the testimony of the white woman Gregoria Sánchez, whose incensed appeal sent the file onward to the Captain General in Havana.

Counting by tally sticks was a widespread practice in West Central Africa, including \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's native Kongo, where they were used as monthly calendars and records of business dealings. Making marks on a wooden stick was a common mnemonic aid to keep track of days and weeks, and this practice is thought to have grown in usage along the coast in the form of accounting devices in business dealings with Europeans.<sup>36</sup> Effectively \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro was forcing a Spanish body of law to take as evidence an African counting device, an object of West Central African material culture he had reconstructed in the Americas based upon memory. The device was just one element of creole knowledge he brought to bear in his ongoing journey of marronage, now transformed into a legal bid in a Spanish court to free himself from a white woman's exploitation. The fact that it was taken as credible in a Spanish colonial court of law is similar to how Indigenous Maya and Nahua maps, wills, property records, and tribute lists were accepted as legal evidence in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mexico, and represents a remarkable victory, even if partial, for \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro.<sup>37</sup>

\_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's wooden *tablilla* also resembles a memory board, or *lukasa*, as studied among the Luba people in what is now the southeastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and which probably existed in one form or another in other societies in West Central Africa. Memory boards among the Luba comprised carved wooden tablets, sometimes decorated with beads, and served as recording devices for the political history of kings. Carved lines and clustered beads indicated migrations and other historic events in the lineage of a people and their king, which would be read aloud by trained court historians.<sup>38</sup>

In both cases \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's wooden *tablilla* provides direct physical evidence of the persistence and adaptation of African writing, computation, and archival systems in the Americas. Both tally sticks and memory boards are typical mnemonic devices of oral cultures and have the added benefit of being reproduce-able in the diaspora. All a person would need is their memory of the practice and a carving tool to recreate this element of African or Kongolese material culture in the Americas. \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's hands had retooled a piece of possibly indigenous Caribbean hardwood into a cornerstone of West Central African legal and commercial culture. His use of it when he presented his case before the tribunal reminds us that it was not just rhythms, languages, and cosmologies that travelled from Africa to the Americas but whole knowledge systems and ways of knowing. It also demonstrates vividly that African intellectual production circulated and coexisted – and sometimes even integrated – with European notation and state bureaucracy.

Ultimately, the wooden tablet forces us to reckon with the enslaved and the formerly enslaved's will to record and preserve their own stories and to shape



and transform their worlds. Here in this wooden tablet, now lost, was an archive of experience, a writing and computation system, a storyteller's mnemonic – a whole intellectual world – that could be disguised, hidden in plain sight, right before whites' patronizing and unknowing eyes or that could be called forth and used by its creator to try to shape events to their advantage. Sitting in a Spanish archive, encountering the scribe's description of this device, convinced me that it was \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro himself that needed to tell his tale, just as he did so brilliantly before his questioners.

## Conclusion

We do not know what became of \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro. I have yet to find a mention in Spanish or Cuban archives of further decisions on his case, whether he was sold off as ordered, with the proceeds deposited in the royal treasury, or whether Gregoria Sánchez successfully defended her claim to his person on appeal to the Captain General. The Trinidad tribunal didn't actually seem to care about \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's plight; rather, they were much more interested in whether Pedro el Gallego was engaged in contraband and whether his estate should be fined.

This incomplete judicial paper trail potentially represents a depressing, inconclusive ending to \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's otherwise inspirational story. Other cases of maritime marronage to Cuba are similar: uplifting narratives of escape could devolve into ongoing, labyrinthine struggles for autonomy, property, and protection, proving Neil Roberts's thesis that Black 'freedom' is an ongoing state of marronage.<sup>39</sup> Even worse, in the longer view, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's journey to Cuba meant his descendants, should he be so lucky to have them, would live in a land where the sugar boom would soon strike and slavery would remain legal for fifty years longer than it did in Jamaica. Can this be the escape that \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro – and we on his behalf – sought?

Even if \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro never became free and his ingenious legal argument didn't subvert a judicial system rigged against him, his story still has meaning and power. If we set aside a fixation on the state of slavery vs. freedom, we can see an alternate longer view, whereby an African man survived the Middle Passage with his connection to the forms of knowledge of his homeland intact. He defied a powerful sugar plantation owner in Jamaica, perhaps engaged in open rebellion, escaped brutal physical punishment, and obstructed a white woman's attempt to control his fate. Ultimately, he may have failed to impede his own sale, but he made a credible attempt to construct his personhood before the Spanish law, forcing the court to accept as legitimate an African form of evidence. There is also every reason to think he continued to struggle, defending himself in inventive and adaptive ways that reflected knowledge and experiences gained along the underground circuits of the Black Atlantic, linking the kingdom of the Kongo, Jamaica, Curaçao, and Cuba.

Approached with care and respect for the integrity of the source, \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's testimony opens a window onto the subjective experiences of the enslaved, their efforts at world making, and the Kongolesse, British, Dutch, Spanish, Creole, Black, and Caribbean geographies that their experiences and imaginations linked together and that the historical discipline has traditionally sliced and diced apart. Thinking with \_\_\_/Bob/Pedro's testimony suggests ways that we might continue to reimagine the forms, methods, and spatial frameworks through which we narrate the history of the African diaspora. Doing so presents the possibility of making Black people themselves – and not the institution of slavery – what Herman Bennett described so eloquently as 'the subject in the plot.'<sup>40</sup>

## Notes

1. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Slave Old Man*, Translated by Linda Coverdale (New York: The New Press, 2018), 115.
2. Archivo General de Indias [henceforth AGI] Cuba 1078, No. 29, *Autos sobre la presentación de un negro bozal sin herida*, Trinidad, May 21, 1767, Azorena to Bucarely, ff. 435-454, 436.
3. "Papeles de Cuba," AGI, as accessed March 5, 2021, <http://pares.mcu.es/ParesBusquedas20/catalogo/description/1859812>.
4. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xix. On the way that the lived and imagined geographies of African diaspora are constructed across time, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). On geographies of resistance, see also Stephanie M.H. Camp *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
5. This essay draws from research conducted for a broader study of maritime marronage to Cuba. For other studies of maritime marronage across imperial lines, see Neville Hall, 'Maritime Maroons: Grand Marronage from the Danish West Indies', *The William & Mary Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (October 1985): 479–98; Hilary Beckles, 'From Land to Sea: Runaway Barbados Slaves and Servants, 1630–1700', in *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance, and Marronage in Africa and the New World*, ed. Gad Heuman (New York: Routledge, 1986); Jorge L. Chinae, 'A Quest for Freedom: The Immigration of Maritime Maroons into Puerto Rico, 1656-1800', *Journal of Caribbean History* 31, no. 1/2 (1997): 51–87; Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Linda M. Rupert, 'Marronage, Manumission, and Maritime Trade in the Early Modern Caribbean', *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 3 (September 2009): 361–82; José Luis Belmonte Postigo, "'No siendo lo mismo echarse al mar, que es lugar de libertad plena': Cimarronaje marítimo y política transimperial en el caribe español, 1687–1804', in *Esclavitud y diferencia racial en el Caribe hispano*, ed. Consuelo Naranjo Orovio (Madrid: Doce Calles, 2016); Julius Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2018). Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

6. Herman L. Bennett, 'The Subject in the Plot: National Boundaries and the "History" of the Black Atlantic', *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2000): 101–24.
7. Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 1–14, 8; James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 5.
8. See for example Sweet, *Domingos Álvares*; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary* (New York: Random House, 2010); and João José Reis, Flávio dos Santos Gomes, and Marcus J.M. de Carvalho, *The Story of Rufino: Slavery, Freedom, and Islam in the Black Atlantic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
9. AGI Cuba 1078, No. 29, ff. 435–454, 437.
10. AGI Cuba 1078, No. 29, f. 437.
11. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2008), 17. Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 144.
12. On the Caribbean as a "sea of islands," see Kevin Dawson's article in the Forum. In his 1986 dissertation and 2018 book *The Common Wind*, Julius Scott provides the model for understanding how these networks functioned in the wake of the Haitian Revolution.
13. Chamoiseau, *Slave Old Man*, 23–5.
14. Simon P. Newman, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Escaped Slaves in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-century Jamaica', *William & Mary Quarterly*, digital edition (June 2018), <https://oieahc.wm.edu/digital-projects/oi-reader/simon-p-newman-hidden-in-plain-sight/>; Hilary McD Beckles, 'Running in Jamaica: A Slavery Ecosystem', *William & Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (January 2019): 9–14.
15. Diana Paton, 'Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica', *The Journal of Social History* 34, no. 4 (2001): 923–54, 929–30. The 1788 slave code introduced this distinction of marronage for more or less than six months. Stephanie Hunt-Kennedy, "'Had His Nose Cropt for Being Formerly Run Away": Disability and the Bodies of Fugitive Slaves in the British Caribbean', *Slavery & Abolition* 41, no. 2 (2020): 212–33.
16. The National Archives at Kew, United Kingdom [henceforth TNA] SP 110/75, Bb, London, March 9, 1767, Stephen Fuller to the Earl of Shelburne.
17. TNA SP 110/75, Bb, The Justices and Vestrymen of the parish of St. Ann, September 28, 1767. On navigational knowledge gained through local trade, see Beckles, 'From Land to Sea'; Hall, 'Maritime Maroons'; and Rupert, 'Marronage, Manumission, and Maritime Trade'.
18. See for example Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Correspondencia de los Capitanes Generales, 5: 203; AGI SD 1137, No. 5, Case of Francisco Antonio Guagui.
19. Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2020), 129–56. Thank you to Trevor Burnard for sharing his database of Jamaican inventories with me to help identify Mr. Cruikshank.
20. Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*, 156–7.
21. Brown has argued that we must consider Tacky's Revolt part of a Coromantee "archipelago of insurrection": Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*, 3.
22. Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*, 222.
23. AGI Cuba 1078, No. 29, f. 438v

24. Lúcio Menezes Ferreira and Gabino La Rosa Corzo, 'The Archaeology of Slave Branding in Cuba', in *Current Perspectives on the Archaeology of African Slavery in Latin America*, ed. Pedro Paulo A. Funari and Charles E. Orser, Jr., *SpringerBriefs in Archaeology* (2015): 45–59; Gregory E. O'Malley, *Final Passages: The Intercolonial Slave Trade of Spanish America, 1619–1807* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute/University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 219–21; and 'Runaway Slaves in Jamaica (I): Eighteenth Century', ed Douglas B. Chambers (University of Southern Mississippi, February 2013), accessed March 5, 2021, at <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00021144/00001>.
25. Kenneth Morgan, 'Anglo-Dutch Economic Relations in the Atlantic World, 1699–1783', 119–38, 131, and Wim Klooster, 'Curaçao as a Transit Center to the Spanish Main and the French West Indies', 25–51, 30, 32, in *Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680–1800: Linking Empires, Bridging Borders*, ed. Gert Oostindie and Jessica V. Roitman (Boston: Brill, 2014); Nadine Hunt, 'Expanding the Frontiers of Western Jamaica through Minor Atlantic Ports in the Eighteenth Century', *Canadian Journal of History* (Winter 2010): 485–501, 491, 500. TNA CO 142/18, Naval Shipping Lists of Jamaica. Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 164–90.
26. Shauna J. Sweeney, 'Market Marronage: Fugitive Women and the Internal Marketing System in Jamaica, 1781–1834', *William & Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (April 2019): 197–222.
27. Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*, 173, 240.
28. Hunt, 'Expanding the Frontiers', 493. On race and pan-Caribbean worlds of piracy and contraband, see Jesse Cromwell, *The Smuggler's World: Illicit Trade and Atlantic Communities in Eighteenth-century Venezuela* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro/University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 239–70; Ernesto Bassi, *An Aqueous Territory: Sailor Geographies and New Granada's Transimperial Greater Caribbean World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); and Edgardo Pérez Morales, *No Limits to Their Sway: Cartagena's Privateers and the Masterless Caribbean in the Age of Revolutions* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2018).
29. Rupert, 'Marronage, Manumission, and Maritime Trade', 361–82, 374.
30. Here I follow Justin Dunnivant's use of Neville Hall's phrase in his article in this Forum.
31. AGI Cuba 1077, No. 17, Havana, October 2, 1766, Bucarely to Azorena, f. 24.
32. W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in an Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Charlie Foy, 'Maritime Populations', in *The Princeton Companion to Atlantic History*, ed. Joseph C. Miller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 324–6.
33. AGI Cuba 1078, No. 29, f. 436v.
34. AGI Cuba 1078, No. 29, f. 440v.
35. "un sugeto vil y de miserable capacidad": AGI Cuba 1078, No. 29, f. 449r.
36. Sture Lagercrantz, 'Counting by Means of Tally Sticks or Cuts on the Body in Africa', *Anthropos*, Bd. 68, H. 3/4 (1973): 569–88, 569; Jan M. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 44–5.
37. James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 56, 112–113, 411; Bianco Premo and Yanna Yannakakis, 'A Court of Sticks and Branches: Indian Jurisdiction in Colonial Mexico and Beyond', *American Historical Review* 124, no. 1 (February 2019): 28–55, 34.
38. Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, 'Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History', *African Arts* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 23–35, 31.

39. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
40. Bennett, 'The Subject in the Plot'.

### Disclosure Statement

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