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Review/Reseña

Landers, Jane, and Barry M. Robinson, eds. *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006.

Unearthing Latin America's 'Third Root': New Directions in African Diaspora Studies

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In this fine anthology, Jane Landers and Barry Robinson bring together some of the latest and most innovative scholarship on people of African descent in Latin America, including chapters on a wide range of topics covering several regions and the entire colonial period (as well as a few essays from before and after). One of the book's principal goals is to introduce Afro-Latin America to those who are entirely unfamiliar with the subject (unfortunately as true of many Latin Americans as North Americans). As Landers points out in her brief introduction, most U.S.

readers forget that the African presence in Latin America is more than a century older than it is in the United States. *Slaves, Subjects and Subversives* introduces readers new to the study of the African Diaspora in Latin America to the variety of experiences of people of African descent—as slaves, certainly, but also as free people of color, maroons, and newly freed citizens.

The book will also make obligatory reading for specialists, exploring topics such as the fluidity of ethnic and other identities, slave political consciousness, and the mobilization of diverse forms of resistance. Several of its chapters contribute to that growing body of work that insists on placing Africa at the center of African Diaspora studies. Two of the pioneers of that approach, Paul Lovejoy and John Thornton, contribute solid chapters that help put the capture and sale of millions of Africans to the Americas in the context of West and West Central African history.¹ Lovejoy's "The Context of Enslavement in West Africa: Ahmad Baba and the Ethics of Slavery", discusses a seventeenth-century Islamic legal scholar well-known to students of slavery in Africa. Ahmad Baba of Timbuktu, who was himself enslaved in 1592 by Moroccan invaders of Songhay, provided a list of West African peoples for the purpose of determining who could and who could not be legitimately enslaved according to Islamic law. Ahmad Baba's experience no doubt informed his writings; as a slave, he certainly encountered West Africans of diverse origins and beliefs. As a man who "would almost certainly have . . . been identified as a Mandingo" had he been sent to the Americas, he was particularly concerned with a Maghrebi tendency to regard any black person, Muslim or not, as eligible for enslavement (9). To combat what he saw as the great sin of Muslims enslaving Muslims, Ahmad Baba distinguished between several Islamic and "pagan" West African states. Although John Hunwick, John Ralph Willis, and Lovejoy himself have written before on Ahmad Baba, Lovejoy makes a new case here.² The *fatwas* of Ahmad Baba and other Islamic authorities,

¹ In discussing the chapters I have not followed the arrangement in the book.

² John O. Hunwick, "Islamic Law and Polemics over Race and Slavery in North and West Africa (16th-19th Century)," *Princeton Papers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 7 (1999): 43-68; Hunwick, "Ahmad Baba on Slavery," *Sudanic Africa* 11 (2000): 131-139; John Ralph Willis, "Jihad and the

he argues, became well-known and observed enough to restrict the number of Muslims sold overseas, which partially explains the relative paucity of Muslim slaves in the Americas.

In "Central Africa in the Era of the Slave Trade," John K. Thornton both summarizes and expands on arguments that he has advanced elsewhere. First he demonstrates the overwhelming predominance of West Central Africans in the slave trade to Brazil and Spanish America from the end of the sixteenth through the mid-seventeenth centuries. Culturally, Thornton states, West Central Africans "possessed a much higher degree of homogeneity" than other Africans taken to the Americas (84). Far from being confined to coastal enclaves, he shows, Catholicism deeply penetrated the societies of Kongo and Angola; in fact, "by 1600 most Kongolese proudly reported themselves to be Christian," he asserts (97). Embraced by Kongolese on their own terms, indeed propagated mostly by Kongolese, for them Christianity was not simply a religion of enslaving oppressors. Thornton argues for the development of a Kongolese Christianity that juxtaposed and overlapped indigenous with Catholic elements in ways that will sound familiar to colonial Latin Americanists. Moreover, by the seventeenth century a Luso-African creole culture had developed, especially in Angola, which in important ways "resembled Latin American countries" (84). The process went furthest in Portuguese-controlled areas such as Luanda, Massangano, and Ambaca, which became "creole in a sense that was more typically American than African" (99). All of this served to lessen the shock of arrival in an alien world and promoted the "easy integration of Central Africans into Latin American culture" (92). The impact of West Central Africans on Latin American cultures was, therefore, both subtle and profound.

Lynne Guitar's "Boiling It Down" outlines the beginnings of the sugar industry and the rising importance of African slavery in Hispaniola. Oddly enough, those crucial first decades of the rise of the New World plantation complex seldom receive sustained attention. Guitar reminds us

Ideology of Enslavement," in *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, ed. Willis (London: F. Cass, 1985), 1:16-26; Lovejoy, "Slavery, the Bilad al-Sudan and the Frontiers of the African Diaspora," in *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, ed. Lovejoy (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 2004): 1-29.

that as in so many other aspects of Spanish colonization, Hispaniola set the tone for the Americas in master-slave relations. She demonstrates how, due to a number of concurrent circumstances—the disastrous decline of the indigenous population, Crown decrees designed to protect the Indians, the growth of the sugar industry and the Atlantic slave trade—, Africans quickly became the majority of the island’s population. By the 1540s, there were up to 30,000 Africans on the island—more than twenty times more than there were Spaniards (53). To reconstruct the living and working conditions of enslaved Africans on Hispaniola, Guitar mines a 1547 inventory from the Santiago de la Paz *ingenio*. Africans presented Spanish planters with as many problems as solutions, however, as their “seasoning” meant learning not only aspects of Spanish culture, but ways of rebellion. Guitar thus introduces another important theme in the collection: as Africans forcibly adapted to slavery and colonial rule, they simultaneously assimilated new ways of resistance.

Jane Landers shows in “*Cimarrón* and Citizen” how communities of maroons in New Spain exploited colonial political realities and the Spanish legal system to secure lasting independence. She concentrates on the well-known case of the settlement founded by Yanga at the beginning of the seventeenth century in what is now the Mexican state of Veracruz. Landers shows that Yanga’s community drew on indigenous and Spanish as well as African styles of warfare, architecture, agriculture, and religion. Yanga’s *palenque* sheltered Africans from widely separated regions, including at least one man from Mozambique, as well as Mexican-born fugitives. His war captain was known as Francisco Angola, confirming that factors other than ethnicity shaped the community’s choice of leaders.

In New Spain as elsewhere, Landers shows, the Spaniards alternated two strategies when dealing with *cimarrones*. First, they tried to conquer a settlement outright and return its residents to slavery. If they failed at military conquest, they sent missionaries to negotiate and try to “reduce” the settlement as a legally sanctioned town. When another Spanish expedition attacked in 1609, Yanga sued colonial authorities for peace. In return for recognizing the freedom of people who had joined the community before 1608, the Spaniards demanded the maroons’

cooperation in hunting and returning runaway slaves in the future. The *cimarrones* accepted and, in subsequent years, complied with that condition. The settlement founded by Yanga was incorporated as San Lorenzo de los Negros in 1618, and survived constant harassment from its *hacendado* and *casta* neighbors for at least a century and a half. Landers argues that contrary to a ubiquitous historiographical assertion that Spanish colonial law divided the inhabitants of the Indies administratively into a *república de españoles* and a *república de indios*, towns such as San Lorenzo de los Negros comprised, in effect, a *república de negros*. In these unusual cases, free black subjects of the Crown were able to claim corporate identities and privileges like those afforded to Spaniards and Indians.

Renée Soulodre-La France shows a similar phenomenon in a fascinating case study of how two groups of slaves in colonial Colombia took advantage of their unusual status and an event of Empire-wide significance to advance claims to corporate rights. "*Los esclavos de Su Majestad: Slave Politics and Protest in Late Colonial New Granada*" examines how slaves on two Jesuit-owned haciendas responded when their masters were expelled and they passed to the power of the Crown in 1767. Over several generations, the slaves of the Villavieja hacienda near Neiva and Trapiche Cúcuta in Santander had exercised considerable autonomy and developed unusually strong, stable communities. The Jesuits in New Granada did not sell slaves away from their properties; they encouraged adult slaves to marry, refrained from separating slave families, observed days off, and respected slaves' rights to provision grounds, to grow crops, and to maintain livestock. But when the Jesuits left, new administrators attacked these traditional rights which, they complained, made discipline impossible.

Administrators' attempts to impose their new expectations by force provoked derision, verbal defiance, flight, murder attempts, rebellion, and ultimately legal action from the slaves. Slave spokesmen presented petitions to authorities in Bogotá on behalf of their whole communities, appealing to the king for his paternal protection. Stressing their new status as "Slaves of His Majesty," the former slaves of the Jesuits asserted their corporate identity and special relationship to the Crown in ways more

typical of Indians than slaves, demonstrating “how profoundly the enslaved understood the colonial society that subjected them and the tools they could expropriate from that system in order to advance their interests” (p. 176). Soloudre-La France clearly shows the slaves’ adept use of the law in their own interests, which Herman Bennett has called “legal consciousness” and identified as a crucial element in the creolization of Africans in New Spain.³ She also persuasively demonstrates these enslaved men and women’s strong sense of community based in history, place, and kinship. The question of whether the language framing the petitions represented the slaves’ own “political philosophy” as Soloudre-La France asserts, their skillful deployment of rhetoric they knew to be persuasive with colonial authorities, or even just a talented scribe’s distillation and translation of their complaints, is unlikely to be settled anytime soon. Her contention that the former slaves of the Jesuits sought to set right a world that had been turned “upside down,” however, and restore a “moral economy” of “traditional and customary rights” seems indisputable (184-5).

Slave soldiers in Argentina also proved adept at pursuing their own interests within the limits imposed by dominant legal discourses. In the only chapter dealing with the post-independence period, Seth Meisel shows in “‘The Fruit of Freedom’: Slaves and Citizens in Early Republican Argentina” how the first British invasion of Buenos Aires in 1806 began an era of “unprecedented opportunities for Afro-Argentines to win their freedom” through military service (280). Necessity moved colonial, insurgent, and post-independence leaders alike to offer freedom to slaves who fought for their causes. In 1807, the cabildo of Buenos Aires publicly awarded liberty to slaves who fought to expel the British from the city. Other slaves, selected by lottery, were manumitted in ceremonies on the king’s birthday. This model of liberation as a reward for loyal service proved acceptable to republican as well as colonial leaders; it attributed freedom to the benevolence of the state rather than to the efforts—the violent efforts, in fact—of the slaves themselves. During the wars of independence, a shortage of manpower forced insurgents to recruit slaves

³ Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003).

with promises of liberty. Although both colonial and republican leaders tried to contain the meanings of freedom, militarization—and competition for black soldiers—provided “greater leverage for those who sought social change than for the defenders of social stability” (285). Creole patriots’ constant excoriation of Spanish “slavery” and their promises of “emancipation” and “liberty” forced them, to an extent, to make good on their rhetoric. Individual slaves held insurgent leaders to their word, insisting, often successfully, that their own freedom and that of the nation were bound by destiny. After independence, leaders including Bernardino Rivadavia, Juan Manuel de Rosas, and José María Paz all vied for Afro-Argentine constituents, reflecting a general need “to create a new political base independent of local men of property” (295). Meisel notes the strength of patron-client relations between Afro-Argentines and men such as Rosas and Paz, arguing that newly freed Afro-Argentines proved to be some of the most loyal partisans of the leaders who had delivered on their promises of freedom. He contends that although military leaders did not seek such a result, when they mobilized slaves for service, ultimately “black soldiering sapped all vitality from the institution of slavery” (298).

In his chapter on “*Cantos and Quilombos: A Hausa Rebellion in Bahia, 1814*,” Stuart Schwartz focuses on a single episode in the era of resistance he has elsewhere called “the War to End Brazilian Slavery.”⁴ As the rebellion never went off—Schwartz himself calls it an “abortive rising”—the incident might be better termed a conspiracy (263). The revolt planned for May 1814 is instructive not so much for its impact as for what it reveals about how Africans, both free and enslaved, urban and rural, within and across ethnic lines, organized resistance. The plot originated in Salvador da Bahia among the Hausa *cantos*—groups of African workers, in this case of men from what is now northern Nigeria, who gathered at strategic points throughout the city to hire out their services. The *cantos*, which included both enslaved and free porters, stevedores, and other mobile workers who roamed the city virtually at will, provided ideal cover for coordinating the uprising. The conspirators planned to involve all

⁴ Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), chap. 17.

Hausas, both slaves and freemen, in the city of Salvador and its hinterland, the Recôncavo. According to some witnesses, the plot extended to Africans of other origins, creoles, mulatos, and Indians. The plan focused on the coordination of an urban slave insurrection with attacks by runaways from the *quilombos* outside the city. Historians have tended to create an artificial distinction, Schwartz contends, between marronage and rebellion, the two modes of slave resistance that held the most potential to threaten the slave system. In early nineteenth-century Bahia, a proliferation of *quilombos* on the outskirts of Salvador paralleled, and was related to, the explosive growth of an increasingly restive urban slave population. Multiple contacts “integrated” the two worlds (251). Mostly urban slave rebellions and mass flight to rural *quilombos*, Schwartz shows, were not necessarily counterposed; sometimes they were interrelated, “mutually supporting tactics” (247).

Matt Childs’s “‘The Defects of Being a Black Creole’: The Degrees of African Identity in the Cuban *Cabildos de Nación*, 1790-1820”, looks at the dynamics of state-sanctioned fraternal associations of free and enslaved blacks in colonial Havana. These societies, known as *cabildos de nación*, had precedent in both Spain and Africa and served their members in a number of ways. Like Catholic confraternities, *cabildos de nación* sometimes lent money to sponsor manumissions, extended funeral benefits, and hosted processions and dances on feast days. Cabildos also operated small restaurants serving daily lunch plates, rented rooms to members, and sometimes offered vocational training. Colonial authorities encouraged cabildos, Childs argues, to aggravate ethnic differences among Africans and “prevent a unifying racial identity” from developing (212). For the same reason, they discouraged the participation of creole blacks, and in this they failed. Havana cabildos frequently included creole women and men as well as Africans of various ethnicities. Creoles were not, as one might assume from their putative position in the Spanish racial hierarchy, privileged over Africans; in fact, they were usually excluded from voting, and some cabildos excluded them from membership altogether. Africans resented creoles who jockeyed for power in the cabildos, and African-creole relations in the associations apparently often turned fractious.

Cabildos were ostensibly organized by "nation." These designations can frequently be accepted as rough indicators of African regional or ethnic origins. How cabildos with names such as *mina*, *lucumí*, *carabalí*, or *congo* chose their members in Havana, however, remains obscure. Childs states that Africans in Havana organized themselves around "cultural, geographic, and linguistic criteria," but their cabildos included women and men from different, sometimes widely separated, regions of Africa (231). The "Mina" and "Mandinga," for example—names which refer to origins on the Gold Coast and/or Slave Coast and Senegambia/Upper Niger regions, respectively—shared a cabildo, but no close linguistic or ethnic connections in Africa. The "Bambara"—if they came, as their name suggests, from the Upper Niger area—would have had much in common with the "Mandinga," including mutually intelligible languages, but they belonged instead to the "Lucumí" (Yoruba) cabildo, perhaps because of Old World animosities. Antonio, who called himself a "Congo," belonged to the "Carabalí" cabildo (which would suggest origins in the Bight of Biafra region), despite the existence of several "Congo" cabildos in the city to choose from, and so on. Childs argues that "cabildos enabled Africans to fashion their own categories for defining themselves that emphasized their ethnicity and geographic provenance," but it seems that those self-definitions must have derived, at least in part, from other criteria that remain elusive.

Matthew Restall contributes a different kind of article, examining "Manuel's Worlds," which connected Yucatan and "the Black Caribbean." Many readers will be surprised at the degree of geographic mobility exercised by Congo-born Manuel Bolio and many other "Afro-Yucatecan" men, slave and free. African slavery in the Yucatan, a region dominated by the indigenous Maya, remained limited throughout the colonial period. Slave ships typically disembarked no more than twenty captives annually at Campeche, and Spanish masters in the Yucatan seldom owned more than one or two slaves. Although not necessarily more humane, slavery in Yucatan was certainly more personal than in plantation societies. Eventually, under unknown circumstances, Manuel gained his freedom and married a Maya woman, as did a "significant minority" of Afro-Yucatecan men (155). He soon went to work in Bacalar (also in Yucatan); from there

he went to Havana, La Guaira (Venezuela), and finally, Cartagena. Manuel's travels, Restall argues, represent the "black Caribbean world" that many men (and women?) of African descent experienced, crossing "boundaries between colonies and empires" (147). Slaves arrived in Yucatan by way of Campeche and Mérida, hubs of a small-scale regional slave trade; when their masters, loggers from what was then British Honduras, moved them across the frontier; when Spaniards raided British settlements to steal African slaves; and sometimes as refugees seeking the freedom Spain intermittently offered to fugitive slaves from British colonies. Tracking the movements of individuals through multiple jurisdictions requires not just diligence but extraordinary perseverance, and for this seamless article, Restall draws on research he conducted in archives in Yucatan, Mexico City, Guatemala, Spain, and Great Britain. Through Manuel's story, Restall provides an intimate view of slavery in a little-known area on the margins of the Spanish Empire, and offers a glimpse of Afro-Yucatecans' surprisingly extensive contacts with the wider world.

All of the chapters in *Slaves, Subjects and Subversives*, unlike those in some anthologies, are well-written, solid contributions to the field. (If there is one chapter that seems not to fit with the rest, it is Lovejoy's on Ahmad Baba, which relates more directly to studies of the Atlantic slave trade than it does to the African Diaspora in colonial Latin America.) The editors have designed the book with students as well as specialists in mind, and it will be welcomed by teachers of advanced undergraduate as well as graduate courses. Most chapters begin with brief but adequate background information for students to contextualize the discrete topics that follow. Each chapter concludes with a primary document that will be useful for students learning historical methods. Instructors seeking to incorporate more material on people of African descent into their colonial Latin American courses will want to consider this book for course adoption or for informing their own lectures. The book will also be ideal for African American Studies instructors seeking to introduce a broader cultural and geographical perspective to their courses. *Slaves, Subjects and Subversives* should be essential reading for graduate students and all working

historians of colonial Latin America, comparative slavery, and the African Diaspora.