

Editor's Note

Escaped fugitive slaves and their runaway slave communities (*palenques*) were familiar occurrences throughout the Americas. In Cuba, for example, in the region of El Cobre, in the eastern province of Oriente, there were continuous insubordinations and runaway slave copper workers rebelled in 1673, 1691, 1731, 1737, and 1781. These actions led to the Royal Decree of 1800, which granted freedom to these slaves and their descendants. While the successful struggle of the copper workers may have been an exception, runaway slaves and their communities were not uncommon. Ventura Sánchez (Coba)'s Bumba and Manuel Griñán (Gallo)'s Maluala were well-known *palenques* in the early part of the nineteenth century. They were popularized in César Leante's novel, *Los guerrilleros negros* (1976), and in Sergio Giral's film *Maluala* (1979). Other films, such as Giral's *El otro Francisco* (1975), based on Anselmo Suárez y Romero's novel *Francisco* (written in 1839) and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *La última cena* (1976) also reproduce the lives of rebellious and runaway slaves and their societies. There were other communities, such as the Palenque de Sigua and the Palenque de Moa, the latter also known as the Gran Palenque de El Frijol that challenged slavery and created political awareness. According to José Luciano Franco, it contained more than three hundred men and women and whose leader was a black from Havana called Sebastián. Official documents stated that "in said Palenque formal establishment of houses, sugar mills, sugarcane fields, banana and tobacco plantations and all species of grains of corn, bean, rice, etc. were found" ("Los obreros y los palenques de negros cimarrones" 43; my translation). It was not uncommon for the *palenques* to conduct commercial business with whites and free blacks in the area and even with pirates and inhabitants from the newly created black Republic of Haiti (1804).

Few enslaved blacks provided extensive accounts about their lives in captivity and fugitive enterprise. Cuba is an exception. Its foundational literature begins with the life of Juan Francisco Manzano (1797–1853), the only slave in Latin America to write his autobiography (1835). It is even more remarkable that he accomplished this feat at a time in which enslaved people were denied a formal education. More than a century later, Esteban Montejo (1860–1973), who did not know how to read and write, recounted his life to the ethnographer Miguel Barnet in such sugar mills like Flor de Sagua, Purio, and Ariosa, marking the different stages of Cuban history. Though time had changed, the lives of blacks remained the same.

Manzano and Montejo each represented a different and unique side of slavery. Manzano was a house slave who expressed himself by mastering the literary and cultural customs of Western culture. He was treated as a privileged member of the Marquesa Justiz de Santa Ana family. However, his luck and status soon changed. After her death, her cruel daughter, the Marquesa de Prado Ameno, treated him like a common slave. Unlike Manzano, Montejo never set foot inside the master's house. Rather, he lived in the barracoons, worked in the fields, and shared in the communal practices of slaves, whose sole purpose was to feed the sugar machine.

Regardless of their status, both escaped the brutality of their conditions, though in different ways. According to his autobiography, Manzano was punished for no apparent reason and made a calculated decision to flee to the city and seek protection from the Captain General, as prescribed by the Royal Decree of 1789.

Like Manzano, Montejo escaped slavery. But, unlike the slave poet, the field slave rejected Western culture and its legal system of justice and sought his freedom in the woods. Manzano successfully navigated the legal system and eventually found another more benevolent master, Don Tello de Mantilla, to whom he dedicated a poem upon his death in 1821. Montejo mistrusted Western culture and even other slaves. “A *cimarrón* from birth,” he preferred to live alone, in communion with nature, until slavery was abolished in 1886.

Manzano made great strides and joined Cuba’s learned society, and for this reason he was unable to record the experiences of the field slave. The experiences of runaway slaves, like Montejo, remained relatively unknown until the initial stages of the Cuban Revolution, when Barnet saw the opportunity to fill a void in Cuban and Latin American history and culture. He interviewed Montejo in 1963 and published *Biografía de un cimarrón* three years later. While Barnet’s testimonial novel speaks to the life of Montejo in four stages of Cuban history (slavery, abolition, the War of Independence, and the start of the Republic of Cuba), it also refers to the time of the interviews, in the revolution, and also speaks to Barnet’s own autobiography. Furthermore, *Biografía de un cimarrón* provided the Castro government with a continuous revolutionary narrative that could be traced to the War of Independence (1895–1898) and even Ten Year’s War (1868–1878). From the perspective of *Biografía de un cimarrón*, the revolution started with slave uprisings.

Within the present context of the United States, runaway slaves and their communities also refers to a voice of protest against an establishment that continues to discriminate against blacks and considers black men expendable. It is abundantly clear that the police treat white and black suspects differently. While white perpetrators are given the benefit of the doubt, black men are deemed to be a threat, even when they are unarmed, and an increasing number of them are executed on the spot. The body cameras worn by officers who are entrusted with upholding the law reveal to this viewer that black perpetrators incite unprovoked rage and anger among officers who shoot first and ask questions later. When interrogated, these same officers, time and time again, disclosed that their lives were in danger, even when they were in the majority, as if the mere presence of an unarmed black person represented an ongoing threat to whites. I wonder if some of these white officers treat blacks as if they were runaway slaves, just as their forefathers had punished slaves during the time of slavery. Do their actions recall those of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists’ groups after Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement of the decade of the fifties? Is the anger and bias of slave masters and overseers any different from those of white

supremacists of the Jim Crow South, who became infuriated when a black man looked at a white woman and murder became their only redemption? Is this not what happened to Emmett Till for allegedly whistling at a white woman? His horrific death will always stand as an example of blatant racism. Consider Nicolás Guillén's rendition of the events of August 28, 1955:

ELEGÍA A EMMETT TILL

*El cuerpo mutilado de Emmett Till,
14 años, de Chicago, Illinois, fue extraído
del río Tallahatchie, cerca de
Greenwood, el 31 de agosto, tres días después
de haber sido raptado de la
casa de su tío, por un grupo de blancos
armados de fusiles . . .*

The Crisis, New York, octubre de 1955

En Norteamérica,
la Rosa de los Vientos
tiene el pétalo sur rojo de sangre.

El Mississippi pasa
¡oh viejo río hermano de los negros!,
con las venas abiertas en el agua,
el Mississippi cuando pasa.
Suspira su ancho pecho
y en su guitarra bárbara,
el Mississippi cuando pasa
llora con duras lágrimas.

El Mississippi pasa
y mira el Mississippi cuando pasa
árboles silenciosos
de donde cuelgan gritos ya maduros,
el Mississippi cuando pasa,
y mira el Mississippi cuando pasa
cruces de fuego amenazante,
el Mississippi cuando pasa,
y hombres de miedo y alarido
el Mississippi cuando pasa,
y la nocturna hoguera
a cuya luz caníbal
danzan los hombres blancos,
y la nocturna hoguera
con un eterno negro ardiendo,
un negro sujetándose
envuelto en humo el vientre desprendido,
los intestinos húmedos,
el perseguido sexo,
allá en el Sur alcohólico,
allá en el Sur de afrenta y látigo,
el Mississippi cuando pasa.

Ahora ¡oh Mississippi,
oh viejo río hermano de los negros!,
ahora un niño frágil,
pequeña flor de tus riberas,
no raíz todavía de tus árboles,
no tronco de tus bosques,
no piedra de tu lecho,
no caimán de tus aguas:
un niño apenas,
un niño muerto, asesinado y solo,
negro.

Un niño con su trompo,
con sus amigos, con su barrio,
con su camisa de domingo,
con su billete para el cine,
con su pupitre y su pizarra,
con su pomo de tinta,
con su guante de béisbol,
con su programa de boxeo,
con su retrato de Lincoln,
con su bandera norteamericana,
negro.

Un niño negro asesinado y solo,
que una rosa de amor
arrojó al paso de una niña blanca.

¡Oh viejo Mississippi,
oh rey, oh río de profundo manto!,
detén aquí tu procesión de espumas,
tu azul carroza de tracción oceánica:
mira este cuerpo leve,
ángel adolescente que llevaba
no bien cerradas todavía
las cicatrices en los hombros

donde tuvo las alas;
mira este rostro de perfil ausente,
deshecho a piedra y piedra,
a plomo y piedra,
a insulto y piedra;
mira este abierto pecho,
la sangre antigua ya de duro coágulo.

Ven y en la noche iluminada
por una luna de catástrofe,
la lenta noche de los negros
con sus fosforescencias subterráneas,
ven y en la noche iluminada,
dime tú, Mississippi,
si podrás contemplar con ojos de agua ciega
y brazos de titán indiferente,
este luto, este crimen,

este mínimo muerto sin venganza,
este cadáver colosal y puro:
ven y en la noche iluminada,
tú, cargado de puños y de pájaros,
de sueños y metales,
ven y en la noche iluminada,
oh viejo río hermano de los negros,
ven y en la noche iluminada,
ven y en la noche iluminada,
dime tú, Mississippi . . .

I ask if the white jurors who acquitted the white murderers are the same whites who refuse to acknowledge the police's execution of black children because of the inherent fear, anger, and insecurity whites feel towards blacks and black children?

Even the most presumably sublime murders are clouded by race matters. I was surprised to read about the recent Antioch Waffle House shooting in my home city of Nashville, when the white Travis Reinking executed José R. Pérez (20), DeEbony Groves (21), Taurean C. Sanderlin (29), and Akilah Dasilva (23). While any crime is terrible, I wonder why the white shooter carried out his actions in Nashville, not in a white neighborhood against other whites but in a multicultural community against people of color? How did the white perpetrator escape, only to be captured alive the following day without any altercation? I can only imagine, if the perpetrator had been black, would he have lived to tell his story? Would the police have felt threatened by his black presence and caused them to execute him on the spot? I ask again, why are innocent blacks more of a threat to white officers than white perpetrators? The Waffle House case is particularly disturbing since the criminal had been recently arrested by US Secret Service Officer for trespassing near the White House, attempting to speak to the president. After assessing the danger, FBI officers confiscated four arms, including the AR 15 used in the Waffle House shooting. The guns were returned to the father for safe keeping and he, in turn, gave them back to his son. Had it not been for the heroic efforts of an African American customer, James Shaw, Jr., who risked his life to disarm the assassin, the casualty count would have been higher. Did the incident described above have anything to do with the fact that Reinking was a self-proclaimed "sovereign citizen"? Does that information explain why Reinking attacked that particular neighborhood and why officers treated him with a certain level of camaraderie and familiarity than the fear triggered by a black man in a similar circumstance? Reinking escaped naked and on foot, returned to his apartment to retrieve his pants, and he remained at large for more than thirty hours. In spite of being highly dangerous, Reinking was captured without police officer's firing a shot! Even more bizarre, the night court judge set a two-million dollar bond, creating the opportunity for the alleged murderer to walk free, and only after some protest was the bond revoked by another judge. Does the past persecution of blacks

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continue into the present? Indeed, today's blacks and people of color have no other alternative but to fight for the same rights enjoyed by their white counterparts, and these blacks represent the rebelliousness of the contemporary runaway slaves.

The present issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* on *palenques* and *palenqueros* began as a colloquium on "Black Resistance and Negotiation in Latin America: Runaway Slave Communities," organized by John Maddox and Graciela Esther Maglia Ferrari, at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, during in the first week of October of 2016. The event was attended by scholars from different disciplines and countries and *palenqueros* of the Palenque de San Basilio, in the outskirts of Cartagena, Colombia. We gathered to explore the resistance of runaway slaves, their communities, culture, and language. Marronage, as a physical and metaphorical action in Latin America and the Caribbean, became the subject of lively and fruitful conversations. I want to thank John Maddox and Graciela Maglia for organizing the conference and proposing to edit the present monographic issue.

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Editor