Loyalty in the Context of Rebellion: Race, Identity, Agency, and Change in the Dutch Atlantic

by David Jamison

The various struggles that blacks have faced while trying to acquire freedoms in the New World have been complicated by unique contradictions in the formation of racial identity. All identity categories have two perspectives: an inward-looking aspect and an outward-looking one; the subjective and the objective. But unlike most markers of identity, the subjective aspect of race is often wildly at odds with the objective aspect due to the frantic, incomplete, and inconsistent construction of the very concept of what race "is." Still, Western society has conditioned us to incessantly put people we observe into one of five racial categories.[1] Simultaneously, every one of those people *subjectively* maintains a racial identity that they claim for themselves, that may or may not be in accord with whatever category in which we (society) put them.

To understand why this is, we have to go back to the classical use of the term *race*. The Italian *razza* means "breed," or "stock," a concept referring to the fact that every "race" of people was a group who spent a lot time together and, as a result, shared many genetic traits. This is also the root of the word *nation,* from the Latin *nati* meaning "of birth." This classical notion of race developed as a way to distinguish whatever "tribe" the ancient Romans encountered as they swept across Europe, western Asia, and northern Africa. During this era—the last time that Europe and Africa would meet in intercontinental commerce before the transatlantic slave trade—people were identified by their nations: Romans, Ethiopians, Teutoni, Carthaginians, etc. Neither Europeans nor Africans saw skin color as a particularly useful marker of identity—you were much more prone to be identified by your people;

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[1] The PBS web site "Race: The Power of an Illusion" http://www.pbs.org/race/002_SortingPeople/002_00-home.htm provides an intriguing example. It includes an interactive sorting exercise in which one literally puts people into racial boxes, and then reads about their experiences with being into those categories by others.

your "nation." So, the words *race* and *nation* are testaments to the experience the Romans had as they expanded. Whenever they encountered a new people, from their perspective, these "races" of people lived in and attacked from "homelands." They seemed to have all been born in these geographic areas and they also shared genetic traits, so the term *nation* conflated geographical distinction with biological heritage. The Romans also believed that each tribe they encountered had certain characteristics that were inherent to that group: "The Goths were a warlike people," or "the Carthaginians are greedy," things like that. This followed in the tradition of Democritus' atomistic view of the universe, in which all things are just made up of similar smaller things—these "races" were seen to have essential natures that all its members shared. So the word *nation* became conflated not just with geographical nuance, but also with inherent behavioral characteristics. Since that time, the idea that races might have inherent behavioral characteristics stuck.

But that was as wrong then as it is now.

The groups of people the Romans encountered might have occasionally identified with a king or a chieftain; they most assuredly most often identified with far smaller groupings, such as a clan or family group. And yet, because many of these clans or communities shared languages and sometimes foodways and customs, imprecise Roman sociologists invented the concept of "tribe" to essentialize their unsophisticated social groupings and confine them to spaces. But they were almost always perambulatory hunter/gatherers without fixed borders. And just as now, the members of those groups were individuals with wide ranges of qualities and affectations.

The classical definition of race is not the one that we are concerned with, but it does have ramifications on how we see race today. The contemporary definition of race is still encumbered by many of the messy associations of its classical definition, and is also the one that often has such wildly different subjective and objective aspects. Before the 16th century, the Dutch, British, Spanish, and

Portuguese usually referred to all members of preindustrial societies as derivations of the word *heathen*, and to themselves as *Christians*. This reflects the same language they used during the Crusades in reference to Muslims, the Middle Age "others." This proved a dilemma however. One of the planks of Christian evangelism philosophies is proselytization. So once a Christian had converted a heathen, they were no longer a heathen.

This would not do in the world of the transatlantic slave trade. Only people of African descent were being enslaved, and yet it is not as if once they converted to Christianity, they would all of a sudden become European. A need arose for a system of identification that made explicit the difference between those being enslaved and those doing the enslaving. When you read colonial documents from the 1600s, there is actually a period during which you can see the Dutch and British start to replace the "Christian/heathen" dichotomy with the "white/black" dichotomy—*sometimes in the same documents*.[2] That was the beginning of the use of term "black" or "white" and the beginning of the contemporary notion of race. And the purpose was to separate the peoples who would go on to serve as the foundational labor force of capitalism—an economic system that was at the time also in its infancy— from the people who were conducting this system.

The Dutch first invented and the British perfected the system of joint-venture capitalism in the years leading up to the slave trade, and transporting African slaves to the New World proved an amazingly profitable way to build up capital with a minimum of investment. However, as argued by Winthrop Jordan, the English soon developed an implicit discourse of relating "blackness" with all things evil. "No other color except *white* conveyed such emotional impact. As described by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the meaning of *black* before the sixteenth century included ' . . . having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly, baneful, disastrous.'" Added to this, the

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[2] *Resolution Book of Curacao: 1643 and 1644, No. 58, MM* (Dutch West India Company, Amsterdam), 103.

English encountered blacks for the first time just "when Englishmen very much needed to be able to translate their apprehensive interest in an uncontrollable world out of medieval terms. The discovery of savages overseas enabled them to . . . move from miracles to verifiable monstrosity."[3] So since many Europeans were willing to believe that there were evil monsters out there in the unknown reaches of the planet, it was not a large step to get them to believe that African people might be fantastically different from them somehow. Most Europeans had not had regular contact with people of African descent since the Roman era one thousand years before—their "otherness" was established and incontrovertible.

In 1735, Swede Carl Linnaeus attempted to lend scientific credibility to the commercial practice of calling slaves *blacks* or *Negroes* by classifying all of humanity into one of four human "subspecies:"

Americanus: reddish; hair black; choleric; obstinate
Asiaticus: sallow; dark eyes; melancholy
Africanus: black; frizzled hair; women without shame
Europeaus: white; sanguine; acute; inventive

Linnaeus' credentials as a botanist were world class. He was here, however, lapsing into the field of anthropology, perhaps unknowingly. But it was in this straying from his field of expertise that the linkages between biology and behavior became racial canon. In keeping with the classical tendency to ascribe behavioral characteristics to *nation*s or *race*s, Linnaeus oversteps his qualifications and engages in this same type of pseudo-sociology. But since the time the Romans had laid waste to Eurasia, the world had gotten much larger to the Western world. Back when the Romans ascribed characteristics to races, the known world was Europe, northern Africa, and western Asia. But by the time that Linnaeus posited his classification scheme, the entire planet had been surveyed. So instead of ascribing a new "race" to every African ethnic group the Europeans encountered, the term *race* came to describe all the

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[3] Winthrop Jordan, *White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1974), 6.

peoples that Europeans encountered along the African coast (the black "race"), and the term *tribe* was later used to describe each individual ethnic group. So Linnaeus applied to the entire planet a practice the Romans just used to describe the area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. And that is how you have entire continents being ascribed characteristics such as "melancholy."

In 1795, Johann Blumenbach added "the Malay" category, which was to include all peoples of Polynesian descent. Rather than the term "subspecies" of man, Blumenbach used the term "variety," but continued the practice of distinguishing separate "races" of mankind.[4] So even though the pragmatic reality was that the human race was becoming separated into a pseudoscientific categories called "races," the categories were not created in response to objective observation, they were created in response to the commercial success of slavery.

Just as these theories on racial make-up were being formulated, the Dutch colony of Guyana was founded. By the the early 1700s, its founding colonies of Berbice, Essequibo, and Demerara were up and running. These colonies were founded on the British and French models of plantation colonies, but the Dutch never reached the commercial success of Britain or France. This was due to several factors, including but not limited to the fact that the Dutch never figured out 1) how to recruit large numbers of Dutch farmers to settle in the New World; 2) how to run a corporate plantation system with numerous slaves but few actual Dutch farmers; 3) how to protect these plantations from foreign attack when their fractured metropole could not agree on how much money should be spent on defensive resources; 4) how to forestall slave rebellions given the uneven black/white ratio and the low number of soldiers in the colonies; and 5) what exactly their slaveholding philosophy should be given this uneven ratio: cruel unyielding terrorists or paternal caring civilizers? The failure of the Dutch to resolve any of these issues satisfactorily contributed significantly to the decline of the Dutch plantation complex. It was in this

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[4] Kenneth Prewitt *What Is* Your *Race? The Census and Out Flawed Efforts to Classify Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 14 - 16

socially and politically unstable environment that Dutch slaves found ways to exploit the objective

aspect of race with which they were constantly labeled, and learned to manipulate Dutch attempts to

ascribe inherent behavioral characteristics such as "loyalty" to them.

Nightmares of the Colonial Imaginary

The state of the colony that Dutch officials wanted to reveal to their superiors back in the

Netherlands was often not in accord with events they saw on the ground. They wanted their bosses, for

instance, to believe that the tendency of slaves to run away was simply a matter of there being "good"

and "bad" slaves, and that the solution was to root out the bad slaves or, if necessary, torture the

"badness" out of a good slave. Due to the Dutch unwisely maintaining a disproportionate number of

slaves versus whites, they elected to employ a penal system that other colonial powers decried as

particularly cruel. One of the presumptions the Dutch made about the slave mentality was that their

bondsmen were predisposed to fearfulness, and so leaders of slave resistance were typically executed

and debased in the most horrific ways so as to prevent them from becoming inspirational icons. In 1763,

one slave revolt was large enough to have taken over half the colony of Berbice for almost a year before

it was put down with help from England. In the sentencing transcript of the Berbice Rebellion, the

lengths to which the authorities went to punish rebellion ringleaders in heinous ways almost beggars

logical reason. While six of the nine prisoners received what might be considered the state minimum

penalty of being "beaten without mercy," two of those considered to be lieutenants received the

sentence of being broken alive on the wheel, *as well as* being beaten without mercy. As for the leader—

What is left in this catalog of horrors?—he was beaten without mercy, broken alive on the wheel, and, for good measure, his flesh was torn off with glowing tongs.[5]

This study argues that the severe and constant scrutiny of slavery necessitated that slaves employed a shifting negotiation of identity, what Africanist Frederick Cooper calls a "complexity of engagement," that manipulated the expectations colonials had about their inherent behavioral characteristics, which were linked to the objectively ascribed categories of race into which they were lumped. The highly arbitrary nature of the Dutch or British considering any slave "faithful" or "rebellious" suggests that many labeled "faithful" never truly considered themselves either, but were instead savvy social navigators who would always undertake the course of action that would provide them with safety, shelter, and food for them and their family, what historian Jonathan Glassman calls "social reproduction."[6] I would further like to submit for the reader's consideration that this strategy of manipulating the categories thrust onto them by the state remained a viable resistance tactic employed by blacks throughout Guyana's independence, and in fact has historically been a tactic of social survival employed by numerous struggles for black autonomy in the New World.

Once they had articulated their designs for future acts of resistance, many slaves positioned themselves within a realm of identity from which there seemed to be little chance of full reintegration into the slave corpus. Once a slave conspirator decided to tell other slaves that they were going to commit more disruptive acts in the future, the other slaves had to make the decision of whether *they*

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[5] The National Archives, Kew Gardens, U.K. Colonial Office (hereafter TNA CO) 318/74.

[6] Frederick Cooper, "Rethinking Colonial African History" *American Historical Review* Vol. 99 (1994), 1532, 1521; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972)*,* 149. An exception to most New World scholars of his time was Blassingame, who identified this identity-negotiation as "role-playing." Blassingame used as his evidence a number of sociologists who believe that slaves hide their "true selves" when they were not role-playing. The concept of identity negotiation is based upon the idea that *all* of these roles comprise our "true" complex selves. Jonathon Glassman holds that "social reproduction—the struggle for community and family life" such as "devoting a portion of their labor to peasant agriculture" is a "form of resistance characteristic to plantation slavery." Jonathon Glassman, "The Bondsman's New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast" *Journal of African History* Vol. 32, no. 2 (1991), 278.

were going to follow, abstain, or report these transgressions to the proper authorities. This act

illuminates a threefold path of potential slave identity: that of "rebel," "sellout"[7], or "collaborator,"[8]

because as soon as a slave heard these plans, all their possible subsequent actions put them on one of

these three paths. If they reported the plans, they would be objectively seen by their peers as having

sold out their fellow slaves for a possible reward. If they did nothing and kept the information to

themselves, the colonial authorities would see them as "collaborators" and they would likely be treated

the same way as slaves who were a party to the scheme. But did slaves ever see *themselves* in these

terms? These categories could be seen as artificial constructs which were totally dependent on any one

group's perspective. A planter, for instance, would not think you were a "sellout" at all, but would deem

you "faithful." And likewise, your fellow slaves would not call you a "collaborator," but would simply

think you kept a good secret. Still, membership in one of these political categories could turn out to be

the cause of subsequent acts of retaliation against one's family. And although the fear of negative

ramifications sometimes affected which one of the three paths slaves chose, they also often chose a

path based on the esteem they would receive; for instance, from planters who thought them "faithful,"

or fellow slaves who appreciated them due to their acts of solidarity.

The political identities formed in moments like this were unique to the New World. While much

extant scholarship is in relative agreement that the act of rebellion had deeper sociological implications

than simply breaking free of physical chains, what has not been ascribed a significant enough role is the

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[7] in the parlance of Black Power ideology.

[8] This is a highly contentious term in resistance theory. Most eloquently articulated in the field of African studies, a "collaborator" is one who is seen to be aiding in the oppressive actions of the colonizer. The contention arises out of its context: Are you collaborating in order to protect your social reproduction—as might be the case with women who make the choice to sleep with colonial administrators in order to avoid the rampant sexual assaults that often accompany wartime contexts—or are you collaborating in order to climb to a higher position of power in relation your fellow oppressed? For an examination of a woman negotiating a male social terrain in a colonial context, see Mas Utas, "West-African Warscapes: Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone," *Anthropological Quarterly,* 78, 2 (Spring 2005). For the debate on intermediaries and power-climbing, see Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts, eds., *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), and Cooper, "Rethinking Colonial African History," 1516-1545.

complicated agency involved in the decision to rebel or whether to report it. This identity choice is an act which makes slave rebellion an inherently political act *as well as* an act of physical liberation from quotidian labor and social control.[9] This is perhaps best exemplified by the term *rebel*.[10] "Faithful" and "rebel" were labels that were objectively affixed onto slaves by hegemonic forces, but the sources seem to indicate that because of the frequent communication of the rebels through intermediaries and written correspondence, they sometimes were indeed aware of and subjectively adopted many of these markers of identification. If so, there can be little doubt that, while the affixing of this appellation could be a cause of great anxiety for a slave who, so named, would now be subject to a far more cruel punishment upon their capture, it could also serve as a point of pride and solidarity, bringing them into a distinct, if criminalized, group that identified with the singular goal of liberating slaves.

This path effectively initiated a new discourse of social relations that slaves were forced to negotiate. Dutch authorities labored under the notion that as soon as you could either identify or isolate their inherent behavioral characteristics, you could better control your Negro. As such, many slaves were not incentivized to ever see themselves subjectively as simply a "rebel" or "not a rebel." Slaves were in a constant state of personal-identity negotiation, and sometimes the lines demarcating when they would shift identities would vary widely within any one slave over the course of a lifetime. So even though a historian might label someone a "rebel" objectively based on a chronologically fixed document, they might very well have no access to a record of what this "rebel" might have done the next day, such as jovially washing her mistresses' clothes while ruminating on the previous night's slave-quarter conspiracies. So can we trust that any of these slaves were "faithful" in the way the Dutch would have interpreted them as "faithful?"

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[9] Landers, *Atlantic Creoles*, 221–222; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 105.
[10] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. III, 50, 51.

The investment that planters put in a "faithful" identity is evident in the subtexts of official

communiques. The repeated use of these terms might be seen as an instance in which insecure colonial

administrators wanted to ascribe a positive characteristic to as many slaves as possible to assure their

superiors back home that things were not as bad as other reports might make them out to be. But the

tendency for colonial administrators to ascribe a singular character to slaves was one fraught with

uncertainty and, perhaps, misplaced optimism. The tendency to utilize the term "good" and faithful" to

describe their slaves could be considered to be part of the colonial imaginary, a perspective from which

a faithful slave does indeed have an immutable character—they are one of the "good guys." The truth,

however, is most likely far more complicated. Emilia da Costa provides the most candid example of this

contingent identity negotiation in her account of the progress of Goodluck, the half-brother of Jack, one

of the leaders of a slave rebellion in 1823 Demerara. As da Costa portrays it, Goodluck confessed in

church that he had done "all sorts of mean things to his fellow men," including telling lies, causing many

slaves to be unjustly punished "to gratify his masters." In the parlance of traditional Afrocentric

scholarship, this slave would be unconditionally labeled as a "collaborator." Upon hearing the conjecture

that Demerara planters were keeping news of the slaves' liberation from them, however, Goodluck then

went on to actively recruit slaves who might be interested in participating in a general rebellion. This is

an act that another scholar coming upon the texts documenting these actions would label as that of a

key actor in the rebellion apparatus.[11] This all goes to show that a particular slave could perform various

acts of resistance, rebellion, *and* revolution over a lifetime. Hardly any one person would ever identify

subjectively as *either* a resistor *or* a rebel *or* a revolutionary for their entire lives. There are moments of

shifts between each, notions of each that shift through time, and considerable time spent in the gray

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[11] da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood,* 186–187.

areas between all three, incorporating multitudinous acts and identities as exigent circumstances necessitate.[12] Goodluck was neither "faithful" or "unfaithful"—or else we must label him both.

Indeed, in some instances the sources themselves betray this slippage between the observed world and the planter imaginary. Charles C. Crooke of Dominica, in a 1797 communique, tried to convince his readers that the black slaves in Dominica maintained an "attachment" and "fidelity" to their masters and an abhorrence of the typical rebellious "brigand," who "they . . . imagined . . . was more of a Demon than of a human Being, and that his hands were always embued in blood." However, Crooke also surmises that the insurrection in Dominica was caused by "familiar intercourse" between rebels and black slaves while the rebels had been in jail some time. Evidently, loyalty of "the Colonial Negroes" was compromised when they came into conversation with a man named Jean Pere, "the Principal person of these Brigands," "a remarkable handsome fellow of fine address," who "sung a good Song" and was "the admiration of all the Negroes!" According to Crooke, "Jean Pere made converts of every negroe who saw him or heard him," and "where there was one Negro of Brigand principles when these Prisoners of War first went into the Jail, there were one hundred when they left." Crooke ends his letter with the pronouncement that if Jean Pere were sent "once to preach the Standard of Liberty and Equality he would be joined by nine tenths of the Colonial Negroes."[13]

Administrative officials repeatedly used terms meaning "good," "trustworthy," or "faithful" to describe biracial creoles in particular, a telling indication of their role as a "buffer culture" in the colonial hierarchy. *Creole* was the label given to persons of African descent who had been born in the New World. Due to the presumption that, having been born in the New World, they were more loyal to their masters than African slaves, creoles were often chosen to be on slave-recapture patrols. But there was no way for colonial administrators to really tell whether or not any slave they employed to recapture

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[12] Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 14.
[13] 1797 Letter from Charles Crooke, TNA CO 71/2.

their African brethren was truly faithful to the colonial apparatus. Indeed, the existence of Suriname's notorious and eponymously named Creole Island, an island comprised solely of runaway biracial Africans, proves quite conclusively that not all creoles were ideologically invested in the European culture-building project. As C. L. R. James demonstrates, it is far more likely that biracial Africans were a diverse "new race," with some identifying with colonial administrators in the hopes they would be allowed more social mobility in the European sphere, and some identifying with the African sphere in the pragmatic realization that any "allowed" social mobility would be limited and contingent upon European controls.

The context of rebellion might be the first time that anyone ever asked a slave where their loyalties lied. During peace time, those answers were not really solicited because slaves were considered property. But in the context of rebellion the property status is suspended indefinitely while the slave's citizenship is in negotiations. So it could be said that the context of rebellion is the most opportune moment to witness conscious identity choice. This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by the way contemporary historian J. J. Hartsinck reported a couple of episodes detailing an expedition undertaken by Skipper Michliel Ramelo to salvage plundered plantations in war-torn Berbice in late March of 1763. Upon encountering an old slave at the Plantation Mara, Hartsinck recounted that the rebels had just left and "had taken with them all slaves except some 25 to 30 who had fled into the bush."[14] So were the slaves who went with the rebels kidnapped, or did they make the conscious choice to join the rebel groups? There appear to be no further details, but given the practical presumption that the rebels could not force an unlimited amount of slaves to accompany them, either some degree of choice was given to the slaves, or the rebels had refused to take with them slaves who they did not think would be useful.[15] And what of the neutral slaves who escaped into the bush? Would they be labeled as "collaborators"

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[14] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. III, 46.
[15] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. III, 50.

for not staying or as "sellouts" for not joining the rebel cause? Other sources add some nuance to this phenomenon. Essequibo director L. Storm van s' Gravesande mentioned in May of 1763 that "three or four of the Berbice mutineers came over to stir up the slaves by showing the good results of their undertaking."[16] In this case, it seems that an actual negotiation went on between rebels and slaves in which the rebels laid out their case for why slaves should join them. Further on in his account, Hartsinck reported that in the latter part of July a "troop of mutineers [was] commanded by the negro Cesar who, a short while before had run away from the plantation of Master Stubbleman."[17] Since a "short while" elapsed between the time that Cesar escaped and the time that he was leading a troop of mutineers, this seems a fairly clear instance of conscious identity choice, a transition from that of "faithful" slave to that of free "rebel."

The Dutch determined the identity of Africans based either on their own feelings of security or on cold hard political calculation. The context of rebellion, then, made self-identification an incredibly precarious enterprise. In the fevered rush to recover articles from plundered plantations, many colonial ship captains made on-the-spot determinations of whether the slaves they encountered were rebels. On Skipper Ramelo's expedition upriver, he encountered some slaves who were most likely hiding from the chaos, perhaps having fled from their plantations after a rebel attack. Either unaware of their allegiances or simply uninterested in determining them, the skipper shot at the slaves, whereupon they subsequently took to flight.[18] Given that both colonists and slaves had been awaiting rescue by Dutch ships in the wake of the revolt, there can be little doubt with whom these slaves, who at one time might have been considered "faithful," soon made their camp.

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[16]May 2, 1763 letter from L. Storm van s' Gravesande, TNA CO 137/14. Where I use the term *stir*, Gravesande uses the Dutch verb *stoken*, as in "to stoke a fire."
[17] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. IV, 47.
[18] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. III, 45.

But as far as Ramelo knew, there could have been an overwhelming force of fugitives amassing in the jungle and he might have considered himself well-served by eliminating every one of them he could from the equation. But Ramelo was a ship's captain, not a politician. In December, after several ships had arrived in Berbice from Suriname and Demerara, a Lieutenant Thielens, with a sergeant and six privates, "caught sight of several negroes who, on recognizing them, immediately ran into the forest." However, in this instance, the Berbice governor Simon van Hoogenheim "ordered the aforesaid sergeant and six privates to remain there until further orders with the recommendation that, by kindness, they should win over to our side these negroes who, it appeared, were well-intentioned but evidently had taken to their heels through fear."[19] The rest of the expedition went on like this, Hoogenheim at one point even enticing a "large multitude of negroes" with the offer that if any of them "were disposed to come and join our people, they . . . would not suffer the least harm."[20] By late January 1764 Hoogenheim clearly had the upper hand. He subsequently made it general policy "to prevent as far as possible any further harm being done to the Colony and the plantations, and that no further negroes were to be struck down unless they offered resistance, but that efforts shall be made to capture them alive and bring them in."[21] What this means in effect is that if soldiers and ship captains *had* been shooting slaves on sight, they were to cease and desist now that the Dutch could see a fortuitous end to their calamities. All property—including slaves—was to be safeguarded.

The Indictment of Color

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[19] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. VI, 58.
[20] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. VI, 59.
[21] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. VII, 65.

In many ways, one's fate was up to the whims of whom they encountered and when. The sources seem to indicate that African slaves had a far greater chance of self-identifying to rebel leaders. Unlike colonial administrators, rebel leaders could not afford to refuse the help of any African slave who decided to identify themselves as a rebel. Thus, even though rebels often treated runaways harshly and held them captive until their fidelity to the cause was beyond reproach, their blackness made them *all* potential rebels. One can well understand why a neutral slave might choose an uncertain future with the rebels over turning themselves in to overtly hostile colonials like Skipper Ramelo. But the rigid class separation dictated by contemporary race theory, as well as isolation from a significant abolitionist discourse, made the Dutch Guianas an environment in which a slave was especially likely to have their life choices dictated by colonial authorities based solely on their skin color. From the point of view of the Dutch, however, blackness was a far more precarious signifier—it could just as equally indicate a "rebel" slave as a "faithful" Negro. In this context, skin color indicts one along a "possible/potential" axis of identity. When either a rebel or colonial official encounters an unknown slave, they immediately assess the *possibility* that this person *at that present time* could be a rebel. This assessment might be influenced by factors such as situational context or even signs of "Western" acculturation. At the same time, both rebels and colonials assessed the unknown slave's *potential to become* rebels during the course of the conflict.

These determinations largely occupied the same arena of thought that assessed the "faithfulness" of slaves. Governor van Hoogenheim's subsequent order to cease the killings of rogue slaves represents an important shift in perceived colonial identity, for it suggests that the spirit of rebellion was so pervasive that the possibility that any particular slave was a rebel was no longer assessed. Most slaves instead were all inscribed with a "faithful" identity and given a general amnesty, presumably in hopes of reducing the potential that they would go to the other side. So here, the ascription of the behavioral characteristic "faithful" to persons of African descent was conscious,

intentional and *motivational*. The colonial complex was fine with seeing a slave as a less-than-human piece of property when they thought they were in control. But in the context of rebellion, slaves were the only pieces of property for which their loyalties were actually lobbied.

There were also instances during the 1763 Berbice Rebellion in which slaves made the conscious choice to be objectively seen by the colonial state as "faithful." This tendency was likely motivated by the pragmatic notion that the rebels would sooner or later be taken down—which of course they were—and that unaffiliated slaves had better make it explicitly clear that they did not want to suffer whatever horrible fate the rebels would experience. One seemingly clear instance of this choice was that of a group of twenty-two slaves who had found their way back into the hands of the Dutch colonial government during the rebellion. After being "kidnapped" by the rebels, they got out of the settlement "while the rebels were merrymaking . . . and got past . . . where the sentries had challenged them." Hartsinck makes note that these were "house-slaves"—suggesting the likelihood that they were creole—and that "the want of victuals amongst them was very great."[22] In many accounts of recaptured slaves, one hears of them either running off into the jungle or, as previously recounted, being brought into the camp of the rebels. But if a slave held no ideological stance either way, or, more likely, if they were more concerned with the well-being of their family than with any ideological position, it would make most sense to remain neutral until they could determine what would be the long-term fate of the colony.

There were even instances in which slaves went to extreme lengths to be seen as faithful—or at least not to be seen as rebellious. British doctor George Pinckard writes of a case in 1796 Berbice in which the vessels containing five slaves were captured by French privateers. The Frenchmen, giddy with the prospect of freeing these bondsmen, regaled them with the revolutionary notions of *liberte*, *egalite*,

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[22] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. IV, 49.

and *fraternite*, and went on and on about the new emancipated circumstances in which they soon

would find themselves. The slaves, however, were so conditioned by their captivity that they instead

killed their liberators, and returned to their owners. When confronted with their crime, the slaves

presented the rationale that they were afraid that if they were recaptured, the Frenchmen would falsely

claim that it was the slaves' idea to escape. They knew in that circumstance that their word would never

be taken over the word of whites, and so they concluded that murder was their best recourse.[23]

Perceived "faithfulness" was often rewarded with amnesty, probably owing to the fact that

Dutch authorities were well aware that once the "cancer of revolution" began to spread, it was

extremely contagious.[24] Accounts of the rebellion by recaptured slaves are particularly revealing as to

the ways slaves navigated this new legal environment. One by a slave named Coffy reports that "there

were yet more good people hiding in the bush." Another by a female slave name Dinah claims that

"there were many well-intentioned negroes from [Plantation] Markey hiding behind the mountain in the

forest."[25] In an August 1763 letter, Essequibo governor Storm van s' Gravesande claimed that "good-

willed slaves who remained hidden on their plantations" would be "saved and protected."[26] In the

waning days of the rebellion, Hartsinck noted that "now and then, there came various negroes with

their wives and children . . . to surrender voluntarily." Although nearly all the accounts during the early

part of the rebellion reported that slaves repeatedly vanished into the jungle once a Dutch ship came by,

once the Dutch began to get the upper hand after receiving reinforcements, it was reported by Berbice

governor Hoogenheim that "no more rebels were to be seen in the neighborhood" and that rogue slaves

were "standing at the waterside begging to be taken over, as they were well-intentioned slaves who had

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[23] Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies,* Vol. II, p, 112-113.
[24] Jordan, *White Man's Burden.* This term is borrowed from Jordan's formulation that slave revolution often spread like cancer when slaves heard about other successful revolutions.
[25] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. VI, 61.
[26] August 22, 1763 letter from Storm van s' Gravesande, TNA 137/14.

committed no wrong." Most of these subsequently claimed that the rebels "had forced them into their power."[27]

Once the Dutch received reinforcements during the 1763 Berbice Rebellion, Hartsinck saw the rebel contingent slowly shrinking. But this could be seen not as a case of many people who had identified as "rebels" dying, but rather that the rebel constituency, the masses, those who retained enough anonymity in both spheres of power that they could switch from one side to the other, had already made the choice to deny their rebellious identity and re-appropriate the one of a slave who had been forced to join the rebels against their will. In other words, for slaves, the construction of alibis was in full swing, with the open knowledge that the majority of people who might be able to contest your alibi would soon be arrested or killed. In the transcript of the trial for the 1763 Berbice rebels, the politics of identity negotiation are quite apparent. One recaptured slave, a creole named Andries, identified himself as a "faithful" slave by twice referring to rebelling negroes as simply "evil Negroes."[28] This is a phenomenon that we cannot presume to think the Dutch were unaware of. Note Hoogenheim's policy of general amnesty—it would have been far more expensive in effort and lost property for the Dutch to prosecute and possibly execute all who had defected than it would have been to simply accept these tales of kidnapping. Even Hartsinck seemed to acknowledge as much, with his wry claim that "the power"—not the number—"of the rebels was dwindling continually." Still, one marvels at how this phenomenon was represented in Hartsinck's account, with continuous references to "insurgent negroes" being a threat. Given that there was no way to identify these "insurgents," given that they never, say, wore uniforms or got tattoos, the continued reference to this mysterious "other" is almost surreal. Passages indicating that "the River below the late Fort cleared of rebels and these being scattered apart so that their reassembly in really large numbers was rendered impossible" suggest that

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[27] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. VII, 60.
[28] December 9, 1764 Hearing of the Berbice Court of Political and Criminal Justice, TNA 116/106.

there was a mass of "rebels" still out there, watching, waiting, plotting; rather than what was more likely the case—them adroitly switching sides and coming out to the riverbanks. "Large numbers," indeed. All but the most hard-core insurgents had long since switched identities. One could imagine this process continuing until there were no more actual rebels extant, while the search for them, ever-vigilant, ever-comforting, continued in earnest.[29]

For slaves intending to rigidly cement their identity as "faithful," there was the Holy Grail of slave betrayal: actually participating in the recapture of fugitive slaves. Demerara governor Laurens van Berchryck attests to one example of how this could come about in detailing the instance of a slaveowner who had acquired an "oath, that thereafter they [the slaves] would inform on troublemakers and put them in handcuffs and deliver them" presumably on the assurance that they would not themselves be held responsible for any criminal acts perpetrated during the rebellion.[30] There were even many instances where blacks (presumably especially trusted) were given command of armed expeditions to find rebel slaves. This was the case with the slave leader Quassy in the early stages of the rebellion, "who, armed and with his blacks in two ships, went above to see and catch the rebels."[31] The Dutch did not only use faithful creoles to retrieve kidnapped slaves, they later expanded their policy to include faithful Africans. There is also evidence that they hand-picked "faithful" slaves to comprise the corps of a slave-capturing militia. Hartsinck made mention of "negroes from the estate who had remained faithful" tracking down "insurgent negroes" during a 1749 rebellion.[32]

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[29] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. VI, 61.
[30] March 23, 1763 entry in the journal of Laurens van Berchryck, TNA 137/14.
[31] March 29, 1763 entry in the journal of Laurens van Berchryck, TNA 137/14.
[32] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. I, 37.

Power to the People

Many slaves likely felt ambivalent about being labeled "faithful" by colonial authorities in the context of rebellion. This was a fixed identity being placed upon them when they had only ever received incomplete identities before. In fact, African slaves in the Dutch Guianas could be excused for feeling that they had no self-defined identity at all—they were not fully legal citizens of the state, for instance, and they were often only given first names. While many of the slaves during the 1763 Berbice Rebellion made a conscious choice regarding whether to take up an identity as a rebel, some had that identity thrust upon them. And when the rebellion was at its peak, they could just as easily be shot on sight as they could be entreated to surrender. So the context of rebellion is clearly one in which both the marginalized and the powerful are forced to make choices of identity as much as on ideological grounds as on grounds based purely on survival.

Although most African slaves tended to self-segregate themselves by ethnicity on the plantation, instances of slave solidarity still pepper colonial accounts of rebellion in the Caribbean. While discussing an attack by insurgents in 1812 Barbados, a commander from St. Ann's Fort even noted that he had every reason to think" that the black troops who were fighting for the British "would not fight" against black rebel slaves. We get nothing further however from this exchange as to the reason *why* these commanders believed that their black troops would not fight against fellow blacks or what possible "subsequent information" the commander received.[33] But it is in the context of rebel solidarity that the term "faithful" takes an ironic twist. In 1796 British doctor Pinckard used the term "faithful" to describe captured rebels in Demerara who refused to inform their captors of the whereabouts of their base camp. Despite first characterizing them as "cruel, bloodthirsty, and revengeful," Pinckard later

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[33] Letter from a British Commander on Barbados, TNA CO 28/85.

conceded that "the prisoners, *faithful* to their cause, have suffered torture and death without betraying their forest associates."[34] So here, "faithful" is used by a colonial official to describe allegiance to the rebel cause rather than the colonial. So if the term *faithful* itself is slippery, we must question who really was "cruel, bloodthirsty, and revengeful." One must admit that it is either *both* the rebels *and* the Europeans or neither. And if this is the case we can safely make the conclusion that the ascription of negative and positive terms to each side is wholly dependent on the side with whom the claimant has identified.

In order for a slave to successfully negotiate social reproduction in the context of rebellion they had to be adept in how their blackness could be construed by others and how they could in turn knowledgably deploy it. This was complicated even more by the indeterminate status of Caribbean blackness in the context of peace. Although this phenomenon is, again, difficult to trace in the historical record, the way slaves referred to themselves in front of a colonial audience seems to mirror that of the colonial class. In correspondences with Europeans, Guianese slaves typically referred to each other by some variation of the Dutch word "neger," a skin-color designation that the Dutch appropriated from their former sovereigns the Spanish (*negro*).[35] This is likely due to the fact that when slaves were talking to whites or when they were aware whites were around—which make up the bulk of contexts in which the historical record displays slaves referring to themselves—they would want to refer to themselves in terms that they knew whites would understand or appreciate. Since the overwhelming majority of whites identified transplanted Africans by their color, perhaps the slaves did the same, in a sort of creolized cultural assimilation. Of course, the logical correlation would be that slaves would refer to Europeans as "whites," but that is largely not the case. The term Dutch slaves used to describe anyone of European derivation *while talking to Europeans* was "Christian." Of course, what the historical record

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[34] Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies, Vol. II,* 370, 376.
[35] Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies,* Vol. II, 115 "Negro," 168, "neger,"; Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches,* 241 "negger."

does not reveal is the manner in which slaves referred to each other and Europeans in the sanctuary of

the slave community. It is very possible that, once relegated to the safety of their domestic hubs, slaves

made reference to each other based on ethnic affiliations, new clan linkages, or a number of other

possibilities. John Blassingame explored the phenomenon of the slave subcommunity and posited that

slaves formed their own autonomous systems of identification wholly independent of the one they

displayed to their masters and overseers.[36] This is also suggested by the fact that in less formal

circumstances, blacks used the term *backra* to distinguish the white man.

According to an 1828 report by the Commissioners of Enquiry in the Administration of Criminal

and Civil Justice, the freedom of a black man was still highly contingent, as the commission found that

"the colour of the Negro is a presumption of slavery," and that it "appears to be the regulation in force

in these Colonies" that it is "put to [a black person]" to prove his own freedom.[37] And while this might

seem to be an attainable goal, the story of the Frenchmen murdered by the five Essequibo slaves in

1796 confirms that slaves knew the difficulty of defending themselves in the colonial legal system. The

commission went on to find that a slave's ability to "give evidence in criminal and civil cases" was based

on their "production of a certificate by his religious teacher, of his understanding the nature and

obligation of an oath" and "how very unsettled is the question as to the degree of credibility to be

affixed to the evidence of slaves in their present state."

This brings up a core precept about the psychology involved in the construction of the colonial

imaginary. Several times in the record of colonial planters one discovers blatant lapses in logic—the

ascription of cause to an imagined enemy; the blatant denial of causative factors—that seem to suggest

that the practice of slavery itself gave rise to what could be characterized as fits of mass social

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[36] Blassingame *The Slave Community,* 22. "Subcommunity" is my term, not Blassingame's, which I use to describe a culture unique to the slave population and their common living spaces.

[37] "Second Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the Administration of Criminal and Civil Justice in the West Indies and South American Colonies" United Colony of Demerara and Essequebo and Colony of Berbice (April 14, 1828), TNA CO 111/4.

schizophrenia. For instance, one wonders if Berbice governor van Hoogenheim even realizes the innate

contradiction in his intention "not to destroy the rebels but, through kindness, to bring them again

under subjection."[38] How do you "kindly" subject someone? These contradictions made most racial

theory rationally suspect, often having hegemonic agents represent two separate and contradictory

points of view. While George Pinckard was quite explicit in his disapproval of the institution of slavery,

he still attributed the actions of the five Essequibo slaves who slew their liberators to "the savage

inhumanity which characterizes the Africans." He also used the assertion that these slaves had been

"treated with kindness and humanity by their owners" as justification as to why they wanted so much to

return to their masters. Rather than understanding the natural fear these slaves might have of their

masters' retaliation, Pinckard concludes that they would rather be treated kindly by their masters than

be masters of their own destiny. Rather than seeing the slaves as having been terrorized by seeing the

horrific acts of murderous torture endured by rebel slaves, he characterizes the slaves, not their

slaveowners, as savagely inhuman. It is testimonies like this that make it even clearer to see *why* slaves

chose to rebel. Even their primary European advocates were subject to short-sighted racism and the

irrational rationalization that slavery was not the problem in and of itself, but was subordinate to, for

instance, the widespread phenomenon of *cruel* slavery.

The transition from slave to subject to citizen required that Africans fundamentally change how

they saw themselves in the world. The colonial geography was even a real-time map of this inculcation.

People of African descent were given a fairly straightforward proposition—the more they willingly

inserted themselves into the Western cultural and economic lifestyles, the easier their life would be.

And they knew how bad it could get. This shift in cultural priorities meant that black people had to be

conscious of the identities they deployed. The hypocritical nature of a people for whom *civilized* meant

that you were Christian, and yet who still saw humans as chattel, a practice Jesus himself decried,

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[38] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. VI, 56.

became obvious to slaves even during their enslavement. Could they even really adopt Western

practices like Christian marriages? Any female slave who had reached marrying age knew that, if she got

married, she would not be able to guarantee fidelity to her husband due to the lusts of slaveowners or,

more often, their post-adolescent sons.[39] This was but one in a series of paradoxes—blacks knew that

seeming more Western than African would lead to an easier life, and yet it was the Western world that

was the cause of their disassociation from their homelands.

Still, the colonial project demanded that slaves abandon their previous cultural narrative and

accept the Western one as a condition of their subjecthood and as a confirmation of their "faithful"

identity. However, due to slaves' ability to slide between poles of loyalty, the Dutch were too distracted

by their hate for former sovereign Spain and the British too convinced of their cultural superiority to get

an accurate grasp on whether slaves in the Dutch Guianas were really internalizing this narrative. This is

the main reason that the "faithful"/"rebel" dichotomy was the most pervasive categorization in Dutch

colonial writing—for many it was a primary indicator of whether colonialism was "working."

This whole process is an illustration of how race is constructed. The assimilation into Western

culture meant the assumption of a "black" identity, whereas the assimilation into African culture did

not—since the definition of "blackness" carried within it the argument of white supremacy, the

adoption of a Western identity and the rejection of African culture was necessarily the tacit acceptance

of perpetual inferiority. Due to how most black behavior was reported, "blackness" became affiliated

more and more with narratives essentially attempting to nail down the inherent behavioral

characteristics of the black "race." Western forces would go on to use these narratives to explain why

blacks either did or did not deserve all of the privileges and rights that went with full citizenship in the

nation-state. In the context of rebellion, slaves navigated their bodies and their families through violent

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[39] Carbado, p. 90

assault and amongst continual inquiries into their political identities and notions of personhood. Although slaveholders and their allies put great stock and took great pride in slaves whom they identified as "faithful," loyalty was a vastly more complicated and nuanced notion to the slaves themselves. Not only did their pursuit of personal autonomy depend on how they might deploy one of multiple situational identities to suit a particular context, their personal ideologies likely changed over the course of a lifetime, so one who might have identified themselves as a "rebel" in their youth, might define themselves as "faithful" in later years. This elastic engine of identity negotiation in the context of rebellion allowed slaves to subsist in a colonial complex and survive a wartime context that often presented them with absurd contradictions regarding the mobility and meaning of their black bodies.

So since race was a medieval construction, how hard could it be to deconstruct? Before that happens, the aspect of race that we must isolate and neutralize is our internalized propensity to objectively all humans into one of five distinct racial categories. It is beyond time that we work towards eliminating all races other than the only one that has any scientific credibility: the human race.