Slave Communication Networks and Their Role in Facilitating Resistance Tactics: The Dutch Guianas, 1763–1823

by David Jamison

In the context of slave rebellion, information is like life's blood. Ideas, strategies, and rationales circulate amongst rebels, and whether these ideas will either unify or divide the movement often prefigures its success. Anyplace where the communication stops is like blood clotting, disrupting the entire system. The colonial complex, in turn, was designed to retard slaves' acquisition of any knowledge that would disrupt their work. They were not taught to read, they did not send mail, and their mobility was limited, hampering their ability to relay news to others. Given these obstacles, underground slave communication networks were doubly remarkable. First, they *existed*, despite these controls, bespeaking a natural human desire to want to be informed. Ignorance may be bliss, but it also seems to be unbearable. Second, these networks were vital to the construction of both slave solidarity and rebellious notions. But unfortunately, primary sources seldom reveal the details behind how these networks were constructed. It is often necessary to verify their existence by tracing details backwards from reports of solidarity and rebellion—the effects of these networks tell their tale.

The ways revolution is talked about is integral to how it is received by the potential rebel. The tendency for rebellious slaves to try to "recruit" others to their cause seemed to be a common practice in the Dutch Guianas, the area comprising modern-day Guyana and Surinam. We have no records of what rebels said to potential rebels, but it is clear that once a rebel questioned a slave's loyalty it was for many the first time since arriving in the New World that they were extended some agency in choosing their own destiny. It was in that moment, that split

second, where a slave might have been expected to fasten themselves to a “faithful” or “rebel” identity. In the context of rebellion, though, it was very important for slaves to be able to move fluidly between identities, as they so rarely had recourse to the protection afforded to those having civil rights. The savvy social negotiator had the capacity to use deception and guile to slip between identities—indefinitely, or until they were forced to choose a side. Their loyalty would be then, in a sense, contingent on which side—rebels or masters—could best guarantee their survival and access to social reproduction. Contemporary accounts suggest that the majority of slaves exercised this “contingent” loyalty, with a minority of extremist rebels. As such, once the rebellion started to tilt towards one way or another, large and small groups of slaves would start to commit to the winning side.

Just as before a telephone company establishes a network they must first lay down the cables and wires to make the transfer of information possible, slaves had to establish physical routes by which information could travel. For the most part, slaves entrusted with a high degree of mobility would travel colonial routes. But in the context of rebellion the transmission of information must be more clandestine. It is in this effort then that one can see the importance that gaining territory could mean in the context of rebellion. With each acquisition of territory, more and more rebels could be introduced into the network as possible human-information relays and their travels would be safer. In this sense, then, *acquisition of territory equals more unimpeded communication*. And since increased access to communication makes the spread of propaganda and the opportunity to recruit fellow rebels much easier, we can see the importance in establishing physical routes of access in the context of rebellion. During Guyana’s 1763 Berbice Rebellion, in which rebel slaves attempted to overthrow the Dutch colony, at one point the rebels were faced with the task of attempting to communicate with slaves from Demerara, another

Guyanese colony. The Berbice rebels did not know a route to Demerara, so they took Warrau Indian prisoners "in order to use them in their service to point out the paths in the forest and savannahs to the Demerary where . . . they proposed going to free in the same manner the slaves there."[1]

Unfailingly, when European military detachments would be sent into the Amazon jungle to retrieve runaways, they brought slaves along. Slaves knew the land better than the soldiers, the uneven black/white ratio made it a practical choice, and, frankly, officers were used to having people serve them. But the Jewish planters of Surinam believed that bringing slaves along on runaway-retrieval missions established paths of interaction between slaves and runaways. A historian chosen by that community to tell their story wrote that by 1743 "the woods were filled from day to day with new fugitives, and the roads to the retreats, or the knowledge of the forests, had become very easy for the slaves because of the continual expeditions which they made with the whites and which, so to speak, taught them the secret paths by which they could join the runaway slaves."[2] In addition to Dutch authorities unwittingly facilitating the establishment of slave/rebel communication networks, their bitter enemies the Spanish did the same in order to disrupt the Dutch colonial effort. It was likely the attempt by the Spanish to give support to "rebellious negroes" and "direct and head Negroes on their raids" that established a network of communication between them and former Dutch slaves, and ultimately revealed Spanish colonial territories near the Orinoco river as an avenue of escape for runaways.[3]

Courier networks were the main mode of information-gathering for the Dutch colonial complex. Nearly all the correspondence between the governors of Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo mentions that their messages had arrived by courier. In the early days of rebellion, before the acquisition of territory, slave rebels were forced to come up with other ways to send

information, since main transportation thoroughfares were dangerous. Some of the techniques these rebels employed testify to a process of both adopting influences from their diverse ethnic traditions as well as those of the natives and the Dutch, and adapting these influences to the current situational and geographical context. Examples of this process of adoption and adaptation include the use of drums, whistles, and signal shots with pilfered guns. Although there is extensive evidence of African cultures using drum beats as a means of communication between distant parties, using gunshots to communicate over long distances and whistles to communicate over short ones was probably an African American adaptation.[4] Signal shots were used in cases where subtlety was not required, as in the instance in which slaves who had constructed a makeshift port along the Berbice were "sending signal shots presumably to warn their companions on the Vigilantie" about a nearby Dutch ship.[5] Although it is likely that slave rebels got the technique of using signal shots from the Dutch military, clearly they had to devise their own system as to what each signal shot might mean. We have one instance that might indicate what different shot patterns meant to the rebels. Although he never indicated who actually fired the shots, during the testimony of a slave named Jacob at the 1764 trial of the Berbice rebels, the court transcriber records that "in the beginning of the revolt he was in the fields. When he heard three shots they went to the house and absented themselves to the sea coast during the entirety of the revolt."[6]

By April 1763, the sound of drums had also become indicative of rebel presence in Guyana. The Dutch captain P. Berck reported that "the Savannah is already full with Negros, the ones who bring the same drums we hear beating, and while hearing continual shots . . . ."[7] It is very likely that during times of rebellion the slaves used drums to communicate strategic information. We know, for instance, that the Dutch used drums for that purpose. When Demerara

governor van Berchryck was attempting to capture renegade rebels on the Bermingham Plantation, he wrote to a postholder named Vleeshouwer "not to beat the drums until the rebels from Bermingham were captured."[8]

Whistling involves a good bit more stealth than either shooting a gun or beating a drum, so slave rebels might have picked up using it as a communication modality from local Indians, if they did not develop it themselves. When whistling for communications purposes in the bush, one's enemies might be only a few yards away—though invisible in the underbrush. At any rate, whistles seemed indicate to the Dutch an omen of rebel activity, as when contemporary historian J. J. Hartsinck related how "scouts who heard the signal shots on the Berbice" also heard "a whistling in the bush and a noise of felling heavy trees, whereupon the Governor found it advisable to withdraw the post to the Brandwagt."[9]

Once they had appropriated enough territory, the Berbice rebel camp began utilizing a courier network of their own. This new strategy of having a central hub and sending operatives to other plantations with orders seems to have replaced an earlier rebellion model in which rebel groups advanced from plantation to plantation to "stir up" neighboring slaves. According to several testimonies during the 1764 Berbice trial, a number of slaves were "sent" to different plantations to set them on fire. The slave Simon seems to have been a courier on this network. The first question he was asked by prosecutors was whether he was "a servant of Governor Coffij," the leader of the Berbice Rebellion. Simon answered first in the negative, but then admitted to indeed having knowledge of Coffy's orders and movements, including orders to murder Christians, which he did not obey. After the prosecutor accused him of being sent to the Plantation Wesfoubourgh to destroy it, he claims that fellow rebel Attaba told him "to his face . . . that he set fire to the sugarworks at the Plantation Wesfoubourgh."

Simon's testimony suggests that slaves who were acting as one or more nodes of authority at one location sent other slaves to other locations to accomplish strategic objectives. In this model, once the rebellion gets too large to travel en masse, it fixes itself geographically—establishing lines of contact in the surrounding territory, and prosecuting the rebellion by sending couriers on field missions. To receive information in this system, there must be dependable nodes of communication. Testimony of some slaves from the Plantation Hardenbroek suggests that in the context of rebellion, people serving as stationary nodes of communication can actually attain great power. Prins acquired a position of leadership during the rebellion "because he was an old Negro, and always remained home and received reports from the others." By their questioning, colonial prosecutors seemed to confirm both their knowledge of a communication network and their desire to retrace it. Of the 130 questions asked by prosecutors of captured rebels, fifty-six of them concerned the slaves' whereabouts, their travel to and from plantations, and who sent them there.[10]

It is likely that members at the highest levels of the plantation slave hierarchy were tapped into the rebel communication networks. Indeed, the very idea that slave drivers would not know information vital to a slave escape seemed absurd to some slaves, such as the carpenters on the plantation owned by a Berbice planter who was a victim of arson in 1761. After he fruitlessly interrogated his slave drivers as to the location of the arsonists, who were suspected runaways, "the carpenters came to me and said that it couldn't be that [the drivers] couldn't know where the runaways were."[11] This planter mentioned several times that he was dubious of his slaves' veracity. This could be his realization of an alternate power hierarchy on plantations that existed particular to the slave community and distinct from the hierarchy into which Dutch slaveholders ordered them.

This phenomenon was also illustrated during the 1821 trial of a Berbice slave named Willem (alias Cuffey). As an obeah practitioner, Willem was a high-ranking member of an internal slave hierarchy that was particular to the slave community and distinct from the white community. The British outlawed most obeah rituals in 1761 largely due to the fact that many slave-revolt leaders had proven to be obeah practitioners.[12] The obeah culture set up an internal hierarchy that, since it was outside the auspices of the colonial panopticon, could also deliver justice outside those auspices. In this case, Willem was accused of autonomously issuing a sentence of death against a fellow slave named Madalon. This internal slave power hierarchy was at least partly reinforced by and enacted through communication. And if the testimony of Munro, Madalon's husband, is any indication, slave leaders could be none too forgiving if one strayed outside the expected protocols. He related a scene in which he was castigated for going outside this internal hierarchy in order to procure information as to the whereabouts of his wife. After asking the plantation manager as to his wife's welfare, he "found several men assembled, who were ordered by the man of Buses's Lust, the Monkesi Sara, to beat me for going to the manager's house first."[13] According to Munro, Willem alias Minje Mama indeed admitted to ordering his beating, and seemed indignant that Munro followed the external hierarchy over the internal one: "You know I am here; my father is here; and my mother; how did you dare go first to the manager's house?" Testimony by a slave named Isaac paints quite the autocratic picture of Willem in claiming that, in an attempt to show mercy to Madalon, "the people attempted to speak to the drivers in favour of the woman, but they were not listened to. Willem prevented the people from interfering, and beat them if they attempted to speak."[14]

multicultural complicity and the construction of the new atlantic world citizen

Slave-communication networks seemed to incorporate members of every racial and social group. In speaking of an uprising that happened in his colony during the 1763 Berbice Rebellion, Essequibo governor Storm van s' Gravesande indicts a multicultural coalition of participants in the plot, citing that the complicity of "the resident Jan La Tureve with his Indian," "a Criole of Mr. van Doom's," and a "Negro of the Widow de Bruyn" caused "great consternation" as they were "the least suspected."[15] In Berbice itself, Governor Hoogenheim suggested interracial complicity with his claim that "the Negros in Canje had three whites with them, who with them left to Berbice, to the other rebel Negroes, where they jointly defended it against the Christians."[16] And only nine years after the Berbice Rebellion, Gravesande's colony was witness to yet another example of white complicity with a slave revolt, as the "traitor" P. Callart was caught openly assisting the rebels by "secretly handing guns and powder to the rebels out of a window despite being well watched by colonial defenders."[17] Could these whites have been nodes on the rebel communication network before open hostilities even started?

A closer look into reports of the goings-on at the Bermingham Plantation further place it as an intriguing site of identity formation in the context of how notions of loyalty were perceived. Although there is no evidence of verbalized complicity between whites on the plantation and rebels, many of the actions of the Bermingham Planation's proprietor raise questions. On April 3, 1763, for instance, Demerara governor van Berchryck reported in his journal that "Mr. E. Bermingham has prevented the creoles from catching the rebels who were at the plantation."[18] Two days later, it seemed that Bermingham's obstinance only escalated, as "the Commander again went upriver with his assistant to give the order that if not followed willingly then it should be enforced with violence, and that if Mr. Bermingham does not want to hand

them over or let them go, he would also be taken prisoner."[19] By April 8, it seems that Bermingham had forced the hand of the Dutch authorities, as van Berchryck reported that he had received news that "Mr. Bermingham with all of his people have been taken prisoner."[20] The term "his people," seems ambiguous as to the identity of the captives, however. Were these people solely friends and family of Mr. Bermingham and colonial citizens? No. A subsequent entry from van Berchryck confirms that included in the congregation Bermingham was protecting were "prisoner slaves."[21]

Letters written by Essequibo governor Gravesande give further details into Bermingham's actions. A letter written in May notes that when trusted slaves tasked with the responsibility of finding rebels arrived at the Bermingham Plantation, they showed Mr. Bermingham a written command, whereupon he "refused immediately to leave from the plantation, saying his people had no need, with many unbecoming expressions which no white witness should consider."[22] An October letter further details that when Bermingham refused to leave his plantation, for instance, he actually subsequently "ordered [the creole] to abandon the plantation, which he did." On succeeding days, Bermingham "with a yacht and a canoe went sailing in the face of an oncoming vessel with a soldier standing on guard, not answering after three calls, whereupon he was told that if he did not answer it shall be to his peril." When a commanding officer named Vleeshouwer later questioned him as to the whereabouts of the rebels, Bermingham replied that he did not know. But when reminded of the orders from the commander to turn in rebels, "he impertinently answered in the French which was spoken 'I don't care for the orders of your Commander!'" Bermingham was arrested, but that was not the end of it. Vleeshouwer at first was not inclined to put him shackles, but did so "at the request of

some of the important Burghers." When he did, however, a "French burgher armed himself with his rifle and cartridge saying he would no longer stand by."[23]

The Amerindian role in the slave communication network lasted throughout and well beyond the Berbice Rebellion. A 1778 letter from an Essequibo administrator believed the Dutch colonial administration also unwittingly aided the establishment of communication networks between African slaves and native groups in Guyana and Surinam. According to the letter, "There has been here from former times on the Company's plantations a very harmful custom of sending the slaves . . . to the River of Orinoco, and of sending different young ones with them to learn the salting of fish and the various manners and languages of the nations of Indians. Now the young ones . . . know so thoroughly the route and language that I am obliged to wonder at it." This was, however, nothing new for the Dutch. As early as 1683, "Negro traders were employed by the [Dutch West India] Company to travel among the Indians and obtain by barter the products of the country" and to "put an end to native wars on the Cuyuni."[24] Although Indians might have served as nodes along the slave communication network, that fact alone was not enough to make slaves able to utilize these portals of information. Ignorance of the languages of the various Indian groups that populated the network vastly decreased a slave's odds of reaching their intended destination, and made them less able to take advantage of resources in the bush. A group of runaway slaves the Essequibo administrator captured learned this lesson the hard way: "These three negroes, not knowing the way to Orinoco, and being unskilled in the various languages of the Indians were not able to discover Orinoco, and were very hungry and fatigued, and glad they were even captured."[25]

Of course, the key to any effective communication network is mutual intelligibility. While this seems like it would be a foregone presumption, the transatlantic slave trade made it

such that mutual intelligibility even between slaves could by no means be presumed. At any given point on the plantation, a linguistic acculturation was going on, what the British would later call "seasoning." As soon as new slaves would arrive at the plantation, they would begin learning Dutch creole. But until such a time as they developed any fluency in their new language, they spoke the African language they knew with whomever else knew it. That means that at any given time, a plantation would consist of three main groups: newly arrived slaves who spoke only their native languages; seasoned slaves who spoke Dutch creole and an African language; and those born on the plantation who only spoke creole. So although slaves might share the desire to resist oppression from their masters, they might *not* share a lingua franca to communicate their frustration with each other. This seems to be the case with Alexander of the Plantation Hollandia Zeelandia, whose experience was captured during his testimony at the trial of the Berbice rebels. When asked who first began to speak of war, Alexander remarked that "His father Pokke with other folks deliberated over it, but that he did not know what they were talking about because he did not understand the language."[26] It might seem odd that a son would not understand the words of his father, until one notes in the trial transcript that, underneath Alexander's name and the plantation where he worked, where the African ethnic group of the respondent is often listed, one finds the word *Creole*. This seems to be a case in which a slave from Africa named Pokke had a son named Alexander in Guyana, but when it came time to begin talking about the rebellion, Pokke enlisted other Africans in the cause. His son could not understand the deliberations, and might have played a more subordinate role in the ensuing rebellion as a result.

As it seems to have turned out, the multicultural aspect of the network was a phenomenon problematic enough for British colonial authorities to find it necessary to pass legislation limiting

interracial communication in their colonies. A large enough number of whites and free blacks participating in the slave communication network seemed to inspire Dominican governor John Orde to pass a resolution "to make the testimony of Negroes against Free people admissible in certain cases, and under certain restrictions." As Orde related, "This act was originally passed in 1785 and 6 whilst the Runaway Negroes were so troublesome in the colony and was calculated to increase the danger to any white or free person in having communication with them."[27] Likewise, an 1823 Demerara trial against missionary John Smith was actually part of a larger effort to stem the tide of interracial communication. One of the charges brought against him was the fairly nebulous crime of "[promoting] discontent and dissatisfaction in the minds of the Negro slaves . . . thereby intending to excite the said Negroes to break out in such open revolt and rebellion."[28] An example of the most damning evidence against Smith was the testimony of the slave Azor, who claimed that Smith told his black congregation that "this country was a very wicked country; in England they were all free, and they all kept the Sabbath day."[29]

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of John Smith's attempt to change the mentality of Guyana's slaves comes not in what he said, but how he said it. A great deal of the trial is spent on Smith's use of metaphor to spread ideas of freedom. During the course of the trial, prosecutors continually inquired into one or two biblical stories Smith liked to relay, particularly regarding Moses and his attempts to free the Israelites from the clutches of the pharaoh. The testimony strongly suggests that through this use of metaphor regarding the concept of freedom and his condemnation of the British state, Smith established himself as a trusted intermediary between interests of the slave and interests of the state. Although Smith's defense was based on the premise that he neither condoned nor was complicit in the 1823 rebellion, it seems his ambiguous[30] status prevented him from being able to resist surreptitiously[31] divulging British

intelligence before it was scheduled to be announced. The danger here was that when that news was not announced in a timely fashion, slaves started to suspect that the colonial authorities were conspiring to keep it from them, and to erase or elide some or all of the rights King George had bestowed upon them. There are instances where it is not clear whether intermediaries consciously intended to pass on certain bits of information, however. Upon receiving news of his parishioner's plans to drive the whites into town to obtain the truth, Smith imploringly replied, "Quamina, don't bring yourself into any disgrace. . . . the white people were now making a law to prevent the women being flogged, but the law had not come out yet."[32] Was Smith aware of the significance of the word *yet*? And Smith assuredly was not the only culprit, as evidenced by the case of the head driver on the Demerara plantation Le Resouvenir, who strongly hinted his slaves' emancipation was coming when he told them to "work, for they were not free yet."[33]

In addition to slaves receiving news and aid from white elites, the historical record also indicates that it was well known that slaves received information from members of other marginalized groups. These groups could be considered to be members of a disaffected European lumpenproletariat who carved out new democratic spaces in the Americas on their way to forging the essence of a new type of global citizenship. These new Atlantic world citizens could erase themselves from European social hierarchies, mobilize, and demand the same natural rights as any man.[34] And if the early nineteenth-century Atlantic world was a place in which peoples of the lower economic classes were beginning to find unity in shared oppression, ports seemed to be a particularly busy site of information transfer. Since the main thoroughfare of each of the Dutch colonies was essentially whichever river its string of plantations was on, many slaves became adept seamen by conveying their masters up and down those rivers, allowing for a great deal of contact with sailors from across the Atlantic world. [35] The British doctor George Pinckard

unwittingly sketched the contours of how the slave communication network might have procured information from ports in 1816. He first made mention of a ship that had "arrived at Demerara, which was some weeks ago at St. Domingo, and I am sorry to observe that the captain brings a very afflicting report . . . ."[36] This is a reference to the slave rebellion in the former slave colony of Saint-Domingue, which overthrew the whites there and led to the creation of the nation of Haiti. Later, in a seemingly unimportant aside, Pinckard mentioned that, upon returning to his barracks he saw "a string of negroes singing out in the sailors' cry 'Yeoh-yeoh, yeoh-yeoh' and hauling at a long rope."[37] These are fairly innocuous incidents, except when combined with the testimony of the slaves accused of treason during the Demerara rebellion seven years later. Testimony in the 1823 case indicates that the rebels heard that they had been emancipated "from sailors, when they had come down for produce; that the sailors would introduce into their songs that they were great fools to be slaves."[38]

Once rebellion is underway, the most vital kind of information rebels can receive is military intelligence, and this is another way whites maintained their importance in the slave communication network. However, instead of sympathetic elites passing on information to their slaves, in this context it would be marginalized whites, particularly soldiers, who could play a vital role in the rebel cause. When a group of French deserters near the Courantyne River came to the Canje River seeking aid, Hartsinck reported that one of the conditions of the aid was the surrender of "arms and war materials and join in with them and to help them."[39] It is reasonable to presume that what the rebels meant by "help them" was that they were to supply military intelligence, as would be the standard objective of any combatant upon capturing a defector. This certainly seems to be the case described in a document simply entitled "Transaction In Rio Berbice & Demerary from good Authority which happened In December 1763," which describes

a skirmish in which Dutch authorities took prisoner “a white man, who had assisted the Rebells all along and was a Deserter.” But not only did this deserter assist through force of arms, it seems that “The Negroes that were taken at Savonette Declared that the white man with them frequently urged them to march a Cross to Demerary & to attack that settlement, which they would have done had they not had Intelligence of the English Forces being in that river & of the arrival of Troops sent by the Directors [of the DWIC].”[40] So not only did the rebels receive military intelligence from defected whites, it seems they also had their own military intelligence network that was in some instances more reliable than that of the white defectors.

Evidence of the espionage necessary to make this slave-controlled intelligence network viable came through the testimony of two captives during the 1764 trial of the Berbice rebels. When asked why he was put in shackles in Demerara, the mulatto Dirk remarked that it was because “we [he and his companion Cobus] had been taken for spies.” Erasing any room for doubt, when Cobus was asked how they came to be in Demerara, he said outright that, after council with Governor Coffy, “they went there to spy.” After hearing both of these testimonies, the Berbice Court of Police and Criminal Justice ruled that “they were pardoned, although they were to understand well that they had done a bad thing, and their pardon was given in the expectation that they henceforth in all parts shall behave as faithful slaves.”[41] What is not clear in this instance is the actual operational structure of this spy mission. Were the slaves, for instance, sent to simply reconnoiter and scope the landscape for potential weaknesses? Or were they meant to actually infiltrate the colonial administration and pose as servants while listening for intelligence items?

Testimony from the 1823 trial of John Smith suggests that some slave spies were sent to retrieve information from other spies who were already on the inside. This is the dynamic that

seemed to be in play when Jack, one of the Demerara Rebellion leaders, was informed that instructions regarding slave freedom had been sent to Guyana from England "by one of the governor's servants, who, it seems, heard his master speak to some gentleman concerning the instructions. . . . This was the source from which the information was first derived by the negroes."[42] We see further evidence of a slave communication network of military intelligence during the testimony of the slave Manuel. He claims that when Smith told Quamina about the soldiers sent to put down the rebellion, Quamina told his fellow slaves that "the report was the soldiers would not come, they would not have nothing to do with it; he did not tell Mr. Smith that, he told us after we came out from Mr. Smith."[43] There is no indication, however, of what this "report" was or how Quamina had gotten ahold of it. Smith was convicted really more for spreading ideas about personal liberty than for taking any actual strategic role in Demerara's rebellion. Indeed, one of the charges brought against him was the fairly nebulous crime of "[promoting] discontent and dissatisfaction in the minds of the Negro slaves . . . thereby intending to excite the said Negroes to break out in such open revolt and rebellion."[44]

Due to the clandestine nature of antisocial conspiracy, oftentimes the history of rebellion must be written not as a narrative, but as a patchwork of more-likely or less-likely propositions. Essequibo governor Storm van s' Gravesande gives possible answers to these questions in his reportage of the events surrounding the Berbice Rebellion six years later. In Gravesande's case, "several . . . plantations in this river also together conspired to form a rebellion."[45] But how much organization does it take for large settlements to revolt at the same time? Were there certain slaves that were allowed to continually travel from one settlement to the other carrying messages? And for how long? In addition to Hartsinck's account of the bomba Adam marching from plantation to plantation, "stirring" slaves up with favorable reports and guile, Guianese

slaves also conspired with slaves from other plantations to organize simultaneous multiplantation unrest.

Sometimes Dutch authorities were curiously speculative when trying to determine how the word of rebellion spread. Hartsinck described the onset of the 1763 rebellion using prosaic phrases, calling it "a running fire [which] in a short while set the whole Colony ablaze."[46] But he could not transmit "on-the-ground" coverage, where *word* of rebellion passed from one slave whisper to another slave ear; he could only transmit bird's-eye reportage, in which rebellious action is only indicated when cool sites ignite into hotspots. After a rebellion in 1795 Demerara, a Dutch officer seemed to attribute the spread of rebellious behaviour to an ethereal force moving across the landscape, only affecting the souls of black folk. He marveled that "great Numbers of Blacks in different Parts of the Country, remote from the Scene of the Revolt, and who had never before manifested the least Discontent seem'd now struck with some sympathetic Principle, which glared in their Countenance and occasionally broke forth in their Expressions."[47] The officer gives us no indication of how slaves could have acquired this "sympathetic principle." Essequibo governor van s' Gravesande engaged in the same type of mysticism when he mentioned that "partly because of . . . ungrounded fear, on some of the upper English plantations the spirit of revolt and mutiny has taken hold."[48] Thus we are left to fill the gaps in the slave-rebellion narrative with wistful fictions of revolutionary "spirits" and spontaneous bouts of sympathy.

conclusion

While undoubtedly the interruption of communication networks would have cut down the instances of slave rebellion markedly, planter options were somewhat limited. Any stringent

measures to hamper the communication between blacks would have severely slowed down economic production—the lines of communication that allowed the colonial apparatus to operate often travelled along the same routes and utilized the same human relays of information that entertained notions of rebellion against it. This integration of the slave communication network into the colonial apparatus as well as the uneven black/white population ratio made any prohibitive action against this network untenable.

The Demerara planters' confirmation that the slaves circulated a common message about Orinoco suggests that they could not control a slave communication network that they also could not destroy for economic reasons. Indeed, they attempted to insert (probably coerced) intermediaries into the network to spread pro-Dutch propaganda. But Western attempts to gain psychological control of both Africans and natives resulted in a vast array of equal and opposite displays of identity to cope with and thrive in the colonial landscape. And the slave communication network was but one of the media through which those marginalized by Western colonialism likely shared successful tactics of social navigation.

The possibility that a major slaveowner like Bermingham was complicit in the rebel designs of his slaves suggests the possibility that native whites and as well as free blacks, influenced by antislavery ideology as well as being versed in the natural-rights philosophy that had helped spark the Haitian Revolution, aided and abetted a slave communication network. The Bermingham incident is in fact one of many instances of French complicity with slave rebellion. Although Bermingham was himself of Irish descent, he defied Vleeshouwer's soldiers in French, and it was a French burgher who tried to protest his being shackled, in defiance of other burghers who requested it. We also have the example of the man P. Callart, a Frenchman on the plantation of Bermingham's son Edward, who was caught actively helping the rebels in 1772. Lastly, the

leader of the Courantyne deserters, Jean Renaud, was also French, and was believed by the editors of Gravesande's letters to be the same white man fighting with the rebels described in the "Transaction in Rio Berbice and Demerary."[49] These incidents support the argument that the introduction of natural-rights discourse by French soldiers and sailors affected the tenor of not only Haitian, but all Caribbean slave rebellion.

What is surprising, however, is that all of these incidents took place *before* the French Revolution, the well from which this discourse was supposed to have sprung. It would be foolhardy to presume, however, that the natural-rights discourse emerged fully formed from the French Revolution—the conversations that gave birth to the revolution must have been circulating in France long before 1789. Jean-Pierre Jessene has written extensively on the financial problems France faced in the years leading up to the revolution due to crippling war debt, and the social unrest that gave the Third Estate the bravado to challenge Louis XVI's government.[50] Likewise, Robert Mackey has detailed how the seventeenth-century natural science of thinkers such as Bacon, Hobbes, and Newton led eighteenth-century *philosophes* such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot to shift the tenor of academia toward humanism in such elite schools such as Ecole des Mines, Ecole des Ponts et Chausees, and Jardin du Roi. It was the enlightened nobility who went to these schools that led impassioned *parlements* to challenge first Louis XIV's and then Louis XV's right to tax them before openly confronting Louis XVI.

It was during this time that the American Revolution broke out, and Mackey holds that it was this disaffected but enlightened elite that supplied America with soon-to-be war heroes such as Marquis de Lafayette and Henri de St. Simon. When these French veterans of America's war came home, they ended up playing a pivotal role in the composition of the Declaration of Rights and Man and Citizen.[51] But aside from the famous Thirty-Eight patriots who returned to France,

for young, rich, enlightened French war heroes, the Atlantic world was their oyster. What of the soldiers who did not come home, but sought their fortune in the Americas? And what of escaped prisoners from the neighboring penal colony French Guiana who inspired such fear in Surinam maroons?[52] The Dreyfus Affair was proof enough that a good number of them would have been political prisoners.

The construction of the new Atlantic world citizen also occurred amongst marginalized groups in the South American jungle. The Dutch use of blacks to barter and trade with Indian groups ended up having a monumental impact on the dynamic of slave fugitivism. It was only through the aid of local Indian groups that the hundreds of slaves who escaped slavery would have been able to survive in the Amazonian jungle. However, the majority of slaves who escaped into the jungle encountered a rude awakening upon their first exercise of freedom. Undoubtedly unable to truly grasp the scope of the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, there was no way for them to anticipate that, although it might look similar, the infinite variety of natural selection dictated that the South American flora and fauna would have been at the very least somewhat different than anything they would have experienced in Africa. As a result, they would not have been able to recognize, for example, what fruits or vegetables were safe to eat and which would be poisonous. Likewise, they would likely not have knowledge of the defenses of many animals they might come across. As a result, escaping into the Amazonian jungle without knowledge about natural resources would have been quite a fraught existence for a runaway slave, and there is no doubt that several disappeared into the jungle and were never seen again.

While using a signal shot to send a message to other rebels would be an “illegal” communication mode, a slave had a vested interest in knowing the patterns. This knowledge often allowed slaves to slip between “rebel” and “faithful” identities depending on the situation.

For example, if the slave Jacob from the Berbice trial did not know that three shots meant the rebellion was starting, he probably would have been locked into a "faithful" identity. But in this case, after Jacob and his compatriots went back to the house, he uses the verb *absenteeren* to describe their later flight to the sea. Slave absenteeism is another term for *petit maronnage*, where runaways would often send up a third-party arbiter to express their grievances to masters before they would come out of hiding. They would thereby hold their labour in "escrow" until the issues could be settled. Jacob made no mention of whether he was with his master, was ordered by him, or was protecting him—which could have potentially earned him credibility points with the court—so we can assume he was not there.[53]

If Jacob and his compatriots did flee without his master, and they chose to "wait and see" how the rebellion turned out before revealing themselves, then they were utilizing the coping strategy of keeping their true loyalties indistinct so that they would not be punished for choosing either side. 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. Once the Dutch received reinforcements during the 1763 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 and killed. This is a phenomenon that we cannot presume to think the Dutch were unaware of. After the rebellion was put down, Governor Hoogenheim could not determine who was a rebel and who was not, and so the vast majority of slaves in Berbice received a 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 seems 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 is 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 there was a mass of "rebels" still out there, watching, waiting, plotting; rather than 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.[54] *Freedom* is a term that must be considered to be highly contingent on what that freedom will look like. Will my family be able to eat? Will we receive clothes and shelter? During the Berbice Rebellion, both masters and rebels were engaged in a struggle for control of slave bodies, as they knew that with access to bodies meant access to information, and access to information was the key to victory. It was the savvy social negotiator who could exploit the fact

that what they brought to the table was far more than slave labour—a great degree of power lie in the knowledge that with slave allegiance came de facto control of the land.

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[1] J. J. Hartsinck, translated by Walter Roth, "Berbice Revolt of 1763" *Journal of the British Guiana Museum and Zoo* No. 20, (Dec. 31, 1958): Pt. IV, 44.
[2] Jacob R. Marcus and Stanley F. Chivet, eds., *Historical Essay in the Colony of Surinam, 1788* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 70.
[3] *British Guiana Boundary: Arbitration with the United States of Venezuela* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1898), 43.
[4] This is excepting the Dutch slaves who had gained experience with guns in Africa, such as any warriors from King Affonso's sixteenth-century Christian empire of the Congo who might have found their way to the Dutch Guianas via Portuguese slave dealers.
[5] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. IV, 47.
[6] 1764 Testimony from Berbice Rebellion Trial Transcript, the National Archives in Kew Gardens, U.K. [hereafter 'TNA"] CO 116/33.
[7] April 8, 1763 letter from Captain J. Berck, TNA CO 116/33.
[8] April 6, 1763 entry from the journal of Demerara governor Laurens van Berchryck, TNA CO 116/33.
[9] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. IV, p. 47.
[10] 1764 Testimony from Berbice Rebellion Trial Transcript, TNA CO 116/33.
[11] February 16, 1761 letter from Berbice planter, TNA CO 116/33.
[12] Browne, "The 'Bad Business' of Obeah," 455.
[13] "Trial of a Slave in Berbice . . . " 25.
[14] "Trial of a Slave in Berbice . . . " 27
[15] May 2, 1763 letter from Essequibo governor Storm van s' Gravesande, TNA CO 137/14.
[16] November 20, 1763 letter from Wolfert Simon van Hoogenheim, TNA CO 116/33.
[17] Storm van s' Gravesande, *The Rise of British Guiana: Compiled from His Despatches Vol. II*, C. A. Harris and J. A. J. de Villiers, eds. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1911), 668.
[18] April 3, 1763 journal entry from Demerara governor Laurens van Berchryck, TNA CO 116/33.
[19] April 5, 1763 journal entry from Demerara governor Laurens van Berchryck, TNA CO 116/33.
[20] April 8, 1763 journal entry from Demerara governor Laurens van Berchryck, TNA CO 116/33.
[21] April 9, 1763 journal entry from Demerara governor Laurens van Berchryck, TNA CO 116/33.
[22] May 2, 1763 letter from Essequibo governor Storm van s' Gravesande, TNA CO 116/33.
[23] October 20, 1763 letter from Essequibo governor Storm van s' Gravesande, TNA CO 116/33.
[24] *British Guiana Boundary: Arbitration with the United States of Venezuela* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1898), 14.
[25] *British Guiana Boundary, Vol. IV*, 191.
[26] 1764 Testimony from Berbice Rebellion Trial Transcript, TNA CO 116/33.
[27] Letter from Governor John Orde, TNA CO 71/2.
[28] *The London Missionary Society's Report of the Proceedings Against the Late Rev. J. Smith, of Demerara, Minister of the Gospel, Who Was Tried Under Martial Law and Condemned to Death, on a Charge of Aiding and Assisting in a Rebellion of the Negro Slaves* (London: The Directors of the London Missionary Society, 1824), 65.
[29] *Proceedings Against the Late Rev. J. Smith,* 10.
[30] Smith's status was not ambiguous in the sense that he was not unsure of his political loyalty—as far as he was concerned he was British. Smith simply had a severe policy disagreement with his government; namely that the institution of slavery existed. Instead, Smith's ambiguity lay in his extremely close interaction with the slave population, which assigned him a blurred social identity located between British and slave interests.
[31] unconsciously?
[32] *Proceedings Against the Late Rev. J. Smith*, 128.
[33] *Proceedings Against the Late Rev. J. Smith*, 86 fn.

[34] Or woman. Women also used the less-stringent notions of identity in the New World to stretch bounds of gender, whether in exchange for markers of loyalty, in regard to sexual intimacy, or as they applied to prescribed notions of motherhood. On female slave loyalty in the American South, see Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). For more on the exchange of sexual intimacy in the construction of identity, see Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). For more on notions of slave motherhood and reproductive rights, see Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[35] 1764 Testimony from Berbice Rebellion Trial Transcript, TNA CO 116/33. "*Ja*, I rowed on my master's yacht."

[36] George Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies, Including Observations Relative to the Creoles and Slaves of the Western Colonies, and the Indians of South America, Interspersed with Remarks upon the Seasoning or Yellow Fever of Hot Climates, Vol II* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy Paternoster Row, 1816), 125.

[37] Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies, Vol. II,* 232.

[38] *Proceedings Against the Late Rev. J. Smith*, 101.

[39] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. IV, 46.

[40] "Transaction In Rio Berbice & Demerary from good Authority which happened In December 1763," TNA CO 116/33.

[41] 1764 Testimony from Berbice Rebellion Trial Transcript, TNA CO 116/33.

[42] *Proceedings Against the Late Rev. J. Smith*, 86 fn.

[43] *Proceedings Against the Late Rev. J. Smith*, 24.

[44] *Proceedings Against the Late Rev. J. Smith*, 65.

[45] May 2, 1763 letter from Essequibo governor Storm van s' Gravesande, TNA 137/14.

[46] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. I, 39.

[47] November 30, 1800 letter from Major M'Creaph to the Duke of Portland, TNA CO 111/4.

[48] May 2, 1763 letter from Essequibo governor Storm van s' Gravesande, TNA CO 137/14.

[49] Storm van s' Gravesande *The Rise of British Guiana: Compiled from His Despatches Vol. II*, C. A. Harris and J. A. J. de Villiers, eds. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1911), 442 cf.

[50] Jean-Pierre Jessenne, "The Social and Economic Crisis in France at the End of the *Ancien Regime*" in Peter McPhee, ed., *A Companion to the French Revolution* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[51] Richard Mackey, "American Revolutionary Influences on the French Revolution," in *Conspectus of History, Vol. 1, Number 1: Focus on Biography* (Muncie: Ball State University, 1974), 57.

[52] Morton C. Kahn, "Notes on the Saramaccaner Tribe of Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana," November 8, 1927, American Museum of Natural History, New York, 15

[53] The prosecutor chastised an earlier witness for not staying with his master when the rebellion broke out.

[54] Hartsinck, "Berbice Revolt of 1763," Pt. VI, 61.

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