

Freedom at the fringes? Slave flight and empire-building in the early modern Spanish borderlands of Essequibo–Venezuela and Louisiana–Texas

Bram Hoonhout & Thomas Mareite

To cite this article: Bram Hoonhout & Thomas Mareite (2018): Freedom at the fringes? Slave flight and empire-building in the early modern Spanish borderlands of Essequibo–Venezuela and Louisiana–Texas, *Slavery & Abolition*, DOI: [10.1080/0144039X.2018.1447806](https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1447806)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1447806>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 13 Mar 2018.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Freedom at the fringes? Slave flight and empire-building in the early modern Spanish borderlands of Essequibo–Venezuela and Louisiana–Texas

Bram Hoonhout  and Thomas Mareite 



ABSTRACT

In spaces of contested sovereignty, self-emancipated slaves exploited imperial rivalries to attain freedom, based on the Spanish religious sanctuary. However, the status of foreign escaped slaves always remained subject to issues of empire-building. This article focuses on fugitive slaves from the Dutch colony of Essequibo and territorial Louisiana looking for freedom at the southern and northern borderlands of the Spanish empire, respectively, in Venezuela and Texas. In the former, increased Spanish control over the borderland created more opportunities for ‘runaways’. In the latter, improvisation led to erratic policies, related to pressure from US planters.

Introduction

As early modern European empires pushed their territorial claims further in the Americas, their agents came into contact with indigenous groups as well as with other Europeans. These moments of contact could result in war, commercial cooperation and various other forms of coexistence. When territorial claims clashed, the result was the creation of a borderland, otherwise known as border zone, contact zone, middle ground or zone of entanglement.¹

In these areas of contested sovereignty, empires were porous, and so were their regimes of slavery. Enslaved people could try to cross borders in order to escape bondage, and the Spanish empire in particular encouraged such flight, promising freedom to fugitives from Protestant empires. Here, slavery and empire-building interacted with each other. In a competition over scarce labour, it was beneficial to try and draw workers from another empire to the Spanish side. Besides undermining the enemy’s economic base, it could also cause potential unrest in their system of plantation slavery. Offering freedom to fugitives was thus a useful tactic for the Spanish, but only as long as it could be reconciled with other imperial interests.

CONTACT Thomas Mareite  t.j.f.mareite@hum.leidenuniv.nl  Institute for History, Leiden University, Postbus 9515, Leiden, RA 2300, The Netherlands

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

This Spanish sanctuary policy started as a patchwork of local provisions and grew more extensive over time.² It began with the island of Trinidad in 1680, Florida in 1693 and Venezuela in 1704. Freedom for enslaved fugitives was usually conditioned on their conversion to Roman Catholicism. On 24 September 1750, this policy was extended by a Royal Decree to the entire American empire (and confirmed once more in 1789), stating that slaves from Protestant empires would be declared free in Spanish domains on conversion to Catholicism. While enslaved people had fled to Spanish areas before, this declaration offered better prospects for the enslaved. Instead of having to rely on informal freedom – freedom in hiding, with the fear they might be discovered and returned to their former masters – the enslaved could now aspire to formal freedom: being declared free according to law.³

However, the exact implementation of this policy was subject to local power dynamics. In general, Spanish officials had a significant amount of authority to adjust official policy to local conditions and such flexibility contributed to the effective governance of the empire.⁴ This room for improvisation was of great importance in border zones, where governors had to navigate between multiple interests: complying with royal orders, securing supplies from neighbours, defending the empire, expanding the empire and preventing escalation that might trigger war.

The implication is that empire-building in the Spanish American borderlands was to a large extent improvised on the ground rather than designed in the metropolis. Tamar Herzog recently demonstrated how borders in Iberian America were not simply created by treaties and wars but arose out of the activities of agents on the ground.⁵ In fact, peace-time interactions could prove more influential than military confrontations because of the centrality of claim-making. Encroachment during peace-time would strengthen an imperial claim on the land, as long as no opposition was encountered. Furthermore, the relationship with native American populations was often crucial, as indigenous communities could either be barriers to expansion or allies in extending territorial claims.

To analyse such borderland dynamics, we will rely on the distinction – made by Jeremy Adelman and Stephon Aron – between ‘borderlands’ and ‘bordered lands’.⁶ Borderlands are defined as ‘contested boundaries between colonial domains’. From the eighteenth century onwards these were increasingly turned into ‘bordered lands’, when international treaties between nation states established clear border lines.⁷ In both our cases, the transition from borderland to bordered land was in process but far from completed. This begs the question how this transition process affected fugitive slaves, and whether their opportunities to attain freedom increased or decreased.

The relationship between slave resistance and inter-imperial relations in the early modern Spanish borderlands has been discussed for several places. This development marks a shift from the literature of the 1970s–1980s, when

studies on slave flight largely focused on classic ‘maroons’, that is, on escaped slaves forming communities *within* the limits of colonial empires, though usually at their geographical edges.⁸ Recently, however, historians have turned towards border regions. Linda Rupert has analysed the close connections between mainland Spanish America and the Dutch island of Curaçao. Many enslaved Africans managed to cross the short distance to apply for freedom in Coro (Venezuela), either through flight or as sailors. Carrying ‘temporary man-mission papers’, they were able to work in the lively border zone trade but could also desert once on Spanish ground.⁹ Another maritime border zone was located between the Danish Virgin Islands and Spanish Puerto Rico.¹⁰ Yet, the northern borderlands of Spanish Florida remain the most analysed case study, especially through Jane Landers’ work. The peninsula became a free-soil area as early as 1693, hurting the interests of British planters in the North American colonies. While it indeed led to the establishment of sizeable communities of escaped slaves, the Spanish empire eventually ‘temporarily revoked’ such asylum in 1790. Pressure by the British colonies of North America and the fear of revolutionary contamination following the French revolution led to a suspension of the sanctuary policy.¹¹ Finally, other scholars have looked at slaves absconding across clear borders, towards free states.¹² This article seeks to contribute to this scholarship by looking at less clearly delineated borders, investigating the southern and northern border zones of the Spanish empire.

At these fringes, Spanish claims were confronted by similar claims by the Dutch and the United States. In the south, a contact zone was formed in the area connecting modern-day Venezuela and Guyana, with the Spanish settling along the Orinoco River and the Dutch along the Essequibo River (see [Map 1](#)). This border zone emerged during the seventeenth century but became more important in the eighteenth century. Spanish missionaries started to extend their territorial claims further towards the Dutch side, where an increased number of enslaved Africans viewed fleeing to the Spanish as a way out of bondage. In the north, the contact zone ran along the Sabine River, separating Spanish Texas and the territory of Orleans (becoming the state of Louisiana from 1812 onwards) acquired by the US in 1803 (see [Map 3](#)). This borderland emerged for the most part in the early eighteenth century, with the gradual development of French colonisation and related introduction of slaves in Louisiana in the first third of the eighteenth century. At the same time, Spain gradually established a sparse military and civilian presence on the eastern fringes of Texas. Afterwards, between 1762 and 1803 Louisiana was integrated in the Spanish empire. Its acquisition by the US provided an unprecedented impulse to the expansion of cotton and sugar production in the Mississippi delta region, bringing numerous enslaved newcomers to the territory.¹³

By looking at both borderlands, this article sheds light on a remarkable form of slave resistance, while also paying attention to the precarious nature of seeking



Map 1. The borderland between the Orinoco and Essequibo rivers, overlaid with the modern-day borders and showing Dutch outposts.

freedom across the border. In both cases, local improvisation and negotiation were often more important than official decrees, while escaped slaves' rights were used as bargaining chips in the rivalry between different empires. Fugitive slaves turned imperial competition to their advantage by illegally switching jurisdictions. However, in both these contact zones, self-liberated slaves were as much the collateral victims of imperial rivalries as their beneficiaries, as their status was always conditioned by constantly evolving balances of power in the

borderlands. Exploring this line of investigation will contribute to a more complex understanding of processes of ‘grand marronage’ (a permanent disappearance and settlement beyond the master’s control) as opposed to ‘petit marronage’ (a temporary absence) – beyond the restrictive prism of national borders.¹⁴

The first part of this article analyses the case of the Venezuela-Essequibo borderland, with a broad look at the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The second part focuses on the Texas–Louisiana borderland from 1803 to 1812, the period spanning from Louisiana’s purchase by the US to its admission as a US state. The final part draws conclusions from the comparison.

Amerindians and enslaved Africans in the Essequibo–Venezuela borderland

The Essequibo–Venezuela borderland actually remains contested today, but the contact zone emerged during the seventeenth century.¹⁵ In that period, the Dutch and the Spanish colonial presences were weak and the many indigenous groups (with an estimated population of 100,000) controlled the borderland.¹⁶ The English, under Sir Walter Raleigh, were trying to find El Dorado and the Dutch, establishing themselves in 1616, were still fighting a war of independence against their arch enemy, Spain. In the first half of the seventeenth century, various coalitions of English, Dutch and different Amerindian groups would attack and destroy the main Spanish settlement, Santo Tomé, multiple times. However, the settlement was rebuilt every time (see [Map 1](#)). By 1648, open warfare ended, as Spain recognised the Dutch presence in the region in the peace treaty of Münster. For a decade, the Spanish and the Dutch even maintained peaceful trade relations, as they benefited from each other’s support. In violation of Spanish decrees, local governors found it opportune to condone trade with the Dutch to their mutual advantage.¹⁷

By the seventeenth century, plantation slavery had not yet played a large role. The Spanish part of the Guiana region (Venezuela) represented only a peripheral part of the empire. On the Dutch side, the West India Company (WIC), which administered the colony of Essequibo, operated several plantations, but it was mostly preoccupied with the trade in foodstuffs, hammocks and particularly annatto (a food colorant and condiment).¹⁸ In addition, the Dutch also traded in so-called ‘red slaves’ – enslaved Amerindians – to use them in small numbers on plantations, for fishing, hunting or growing cassava.¹⁹ These enslaved Amerindians came from the Spanish hinterland, where they were captured by Carib slavers (sometimes together with Dutchmen) who transported the captives across the borderland to sell them to the Dutch.²⁰

Understandably, these slave raids were a major source of friction in the region. Under Spanish law, all indigenous people were royal subjects and therefore could not be slaves.²¹ In 1686, the Dutch also declared the four main

Amerindian groups living nearby exempt from slavery (the Arawak [Lokono], Akawaio, Warao and Caribs [Kalina]). However, the Dutch continued to buy people from other groups who had been carried as slaves from the Orinoco region by the Caribs.²² As a result, tensions between Spaniards and Carib groups increased, with the latter seeking closer contact with the Dutch.

In the meantime, the Spanish settlers also had conflicts with other Amerindian groups living in their vicinity. They tried to gain more control over their immediate surroundings by resettling Amerindian groups in missionary villages, the so-called *reducciones*. During the seventeenth century, many indigenous people successfully resisted this imposed way of life. Yet the situation changed after the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1713) which led to a new attempt to expand the empire. In 1728, the *Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas* (the Caracas Company) was founded to stimulate the expansion of the tobacco sector.²³ Additionally, more settlers and soldiers were sent as well as missionaries. Consequently, after 1732 the number of missionary villages steadily increased, stimulated by competition among the three religious orders involved: the Jesuits of Santa Fé, the Franciscans of Piritu and the Capuchins of Trinidad.²⁴

In the first part of the eighteenth century, the number of people fleeing from the Dutch to the Spanish side had started to increase. For instance, 23 ‘red slaves’ fled from Pieter la Rivière’s plantation to Orinoco in 1726. When his son went to reclaim the enslaved Amerindians the following year, his vessel was intercepted by the Spanish – as he was also smuggling – and he was killed.²⁵ However, in general, enslaved Amerindians did not flock to the Spanish in great numbers, possibly because they were likely to end up in a missionary village, if they even managed to traverse the Carib territory in between. In parallel, the number of African ‘runaways’ increased markedly in the 1720s.²⁶ The Dutch plantation sector, while still in its infancy, had grown significantly and by 1735 there were 30 plantations in Essequibo.²⁷ Consequently, the number of people who tried to escape bondage by running towards Orinoco increased further.

The Dutch tried to retrieve the absconders. In 1729, they issued a proclamation of amnesty for those that had fled to Orinoco. Seeing that it had no effect, the pardon was extended to October 1730, after which the ‘deserters’ would be heavily punished.²⁸ Previously, the Dutch *commandeur* (the head of the colonial government) had made contact with the Spanish governor of Trinidad and Orinoco, soliciting his permission to get their enslaved Africans back, as the colonists’ previous attempts to reclaim their slaves had failed. The *commandeur* indicated that he would send the complaint to Madrid, via the Dutch Republic, as he had no other means of pressure.²⁹

While the effect of this particular request is unclear, a form of cooperation developed afterwards. The two European powers still needed each other’s support, so there was some room for negotiation: Dutch authorities connived

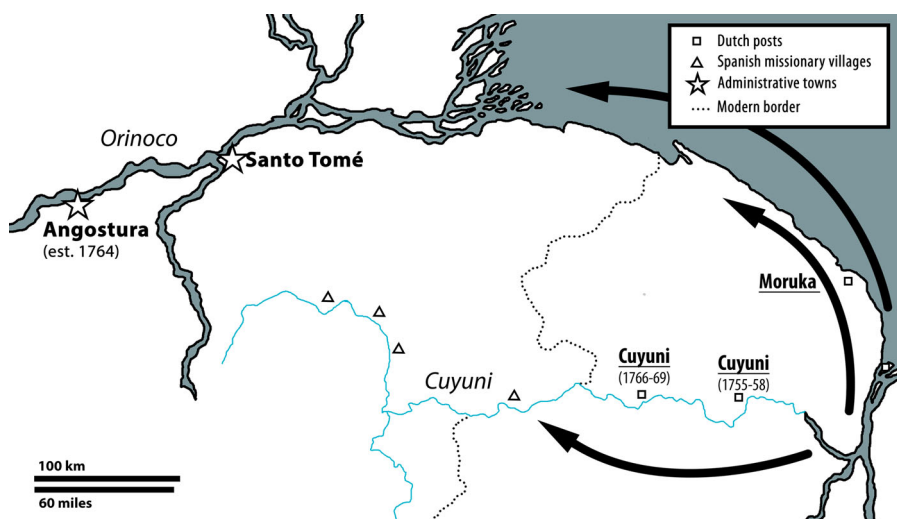
at illicit Spanish trading voyages coming to Essequibo, while the Spanish, albeit refusing to deliver 'runaways', were willing to offer financial compensation to the Dutch by sending them part of the proceeds of the frequent sale of fugitive slaves into the local slave market. This way, inter-imperial relations were fostered on the back of 'runaway' slaves. The Dutch were quite content with this system, since they sometimes received more than the value they placed on the runaway slaves themselves.³⁰

In 1749, the Dutch even attempted to establish a 'cartel' – an agreement to return each other's 'runaways'. The Spanish had little to gain from such a deal, considering that there were hardly any deserters from the Spanish to the Dutch side. The Spanish governor, by then in Cumaná, nevertheless expressed a willingness to be a good neighbour. However, the plan apparently failed because the Spanish demanded that the Dutch deliver any deserters in person, while they, in turn, would offer only monetary compensation.³¹ While this idea of a cartel resurfaced several times in the following decades, it was only in 1791 that it actually materialised.

In fact, the borderland balance changed dramatically after mid-century, as several developments came together. Firstly, the Spanish declared a free-soil policy in 1750 for fugitives from the Dutch side who were willing to become Catholics. This must have made absconding much more attractive for the enslaved in Essequibo. Another parallel development was the growth of a Dutch plantation sector (particularly from the 1760s onwards), boosted by a system of plantation mortgages.³² Finally, the Spanish had succeeded in bringing their immediate surroundings under control and were now pushing further into the borderland.³³

In this process, locally improvised decisions were clearly the most important for the Spanish. In 1754 and 1759 – in clear violation of the sanctuary policy – Spanish authorities were still delivering the proceeds of re-sold 'runaways' to the Dutch.³⁴ During the 1760s, this cooperation stopped. The Dutch Director-General believed the 'runaways' were still sold back into slavery, with the only change that the Spanish commandants now pocketed the money themselves.³⁵ Unfortunately, the fate of the 'runaways' remains unclear.³⁶ It seems that some people ended up in the missionary villages among the Amerindians, where they might perhaps be legally free, but were still subjected to a forced labour regime.³⁷ Several Capuchin fathers at least testified that some fugitives were sold, but that converted people were all set free.³⁸

Regardless, the decreased cooperation was part of a broader policy in which the Spanish, by now on a stronger footing, became more confrontational towards the Dutch and the Amerindians. Regarding the latter, the efforts to subdue the Carib groups living in the borderland proved difficult, as they were not willing to be re-settled in the missionary villages.³⁹ In fact, they fought back, destroying several Spanish missions in 1751 and 1752 and killing the inhabitants.⁴⁰ Feeling threatened, the Caribs turned for help towards their



Map 2. The three main desertion routes from Essequibo to Venezuela.

long-time trading partners, the Dutch. However, the Dutch authorities were careful not to get embroiled in a conflict with the Spanish. Consequently, Storm van 's Gravesande, the Director-General, noted how important it was not give or sell guns to the Caribs and previously had tried to get Carib leaders to abstain from the attacks.⁴¹

These conflicts centred on the Cuyuni River, which connected the two sides of the borderland where many Carib groups lived. As [Map 2](#) shows, the Cuyuni also offered the best connection for fugitive slaves from the Dutch areas to the Spanish – other routes went via the ocean, or via the coast, passing by a Dutch post along the Moruka River. Consequently, the Dutch had established an outpost along the Cuyuni River in 1755, partially to prevent any more enslaved Africans from making their way to Orinoco. However, in 1758 a Spanish raid destroyed the post, leaving the road wide open again. Furthermore, the attack also led local Caribs to leave the area and settle elsewhere. Consequently, Storm van 's Gravesande declared in 1762: ‘no negroes can get away unless the Indians connive at their escape or unless they go over to the Spaniards, which, since the occurrence at Cuyuni, can scarcely be prevented’. The post was re-established further up the river in 1766 but seemed to have had little effect on curbing desertion. Not only was the post in bad shape and routes around it existed, but also the Caribs had vacated the area.⁴²

Indeed, the Amerindians were the main recourse against ‘runaways’.⁴³ A 1758 plan proposed that the planters from the civil militia pursue the fugitives, but that proved ineffective. The whites were reluctant to go after the ‘runaways’, especially in the dense rain forests.⁴⁴ In contrast, for Amerindian groups, chasing ‘runaways’ became an increasingly attractive way of acquiring European goods.⁴⁵ Their slave raiding expeditions in Spanish territory had become more

difficult due to the expansion of the missions, but as slave catchers the Caribs became even more important to the Dutch. While relations with indigenous people were certainly not always smooth, the WIC regularly underlined the importance of maintaining good relations.⁴⁶ Consequently, the Dutch were alarmed at the retreat of the Caribs. Storm van 's Gravesande noted that in 1768, a Spanish raid in the Cuyuni area 'when a large part of Indians were captured and taken away, has filled the rest with terror, and they are gradually drawing off'.⁴⁷ The Spanish, on the other hand, insisted they were just freeing Amerindians enslaved under the Dutch.⁴⁸ In 1769, two more Spanish missions were established in the Cuyuni area, prompting van 's Gravesande to remark fatalistically:

It is finished now, Your Honours; neither Postholders nor Posts are of any use now. The slaves can now proceed at their ease to the Missions without fear of being pursued, and we shall in a short time have entirely lost possession of the River Cuyuni.⁴⁹

With the Cuyuni route thus open to 'runaways', guarding the other routes became more important. In 1760, a large conflict broke out on one of the WIC's own plantations. Two sugar cane mills had been burned and 15 persons had deserted, and the authorities feared further escalation. They believed that the insurgents would flee to Orinoco and therefore hired Carib forces to patrol the coast to prevent them from taking the route via the Moruka River.⁵⁰ However, in 1774, the Spanish also attacked the Moruka post, again causing the local Amerindians to flee.⁵¹ The post would only be re-established 10 years later, leaving fugitive slaves with the opportunity to escape in the meantime.⁵²

With few means to stop desertion themselves, the Dutch again placed their hopes in agreements with Spain. One option was sending people directly to Orinoco. In 1776, a German man, Charles Teuffer, was sent to Angostura, with the aim of reclaiming both black and 'red' slaves and with the offer of paying any costs or ransom involved.⁵³ However, like previous missions, it proved expensive but also ineffective, as the Spanish governors refused to cooperate.⁵⁴ Channels in Europe constituted an alternative. The Dutch colonial authorities repeatedly underlined the importance of a cartel to the WIC, urging the States-General to conclude an agreement with Spain, but to no avail.⁵⁵ In 1769, an official plea was sent to the Spanish court, but six years later it had not yet received a reply.⁵⁶ In fact, the Dutch ambassador in Madrid acknowledged that a cartel was unlikely to materialise, considering that fugitive slaves were only a problem for the Dutch.⁵⁷

The scale of desertion is unfortunately impossible to determine since Spanish sources are silent on the issue, and the Dutch archives do not provide a full picture either. Officially, planters were obliged to notify the colonial government when an enslaved person absconded, but they often did not.⁵⁸ The seat of government could be several days sailing away, and there was little to gain for the

planter. In fact, he might draw scorn from others as it signified he was a cruel master.

Nevertheless, the rate of desertion was far from marginal. It even took place in groups of up to 30 people, although they were probably more likely to get caught. Examples includes a plot of 20 people who tried to escape from the Director-General's own plantations, and a group of close to 30 that were caught in 1784 in a boat trying to get to Trinidad.⁵⁹ There must have been more absconders from van 's Gravesande plantation, as he wrote to the WIC in 1772 that several of his own slaves resided in Orinoco, besides seven fugitives from one of the Company's own plantations. Furthermore, he stated that '[t]hose belonging to private colonists are innumerable. The numbers of 'runaways' increasing daily, this matter will end in the total ruin of a great many plantations, unless efficacious remedies be adopted'.⁶⁰ His successor also remarked that 'no week passes' without desertions, which would soon lead to the 'total ruin' of the colony.⁶¹ Finally, the fear for further desertions was clearly manifest in the repeated calls for a cartel, and in statements that Essequibo should beware of ending up like a 'second Surinam' – where 'runaways' settled in the forest to become an undefeatable counterforce to the plantation society.⁶²

In this atmosphere, the role of Amerindian slave catchers only increased, and so did their bargaining power. Both the Dutch and the Amerindians had an incentive to renew their bonds each year. As the colonies were temporarily occupied by the British and later the French during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784), the Dutch afterwards felt the need to assert that they were still important players.⁶³ For the Amerindians, renewal could be beneficial as well, as it meant they could come to the Dutch fort and demand presents and rum in exchange for their promise to help in times of need.⁶⁴ In addition, the Amerindians would also receive rewards if they retrieved a 'runaway', and by the 1780s could even demand to have guns for the duration of the search.⁶⁵ Finally, when the British took over the colonies from the Dutch in 1796, they were oblivious of these important alliances at first, but soon changed course and spent large amounts on providing the desired 'presents'.⁶⁶

By then a cartel had been established as well: in 1791, in the Treaty of Aranjuez, Spain and the Dutch Republic promised to return each other's deserters, whether white or black. This agreement applied to all their American colonies. Returned absconders would not be punished for their desertion or forced to reverse a possible conversion.⁶⁷ This treaty had become possible because of the revolutionary developments around the Caribbean. Rather than an asset or a way to harm rival powers, harbouring deserters now became a liability, as they might be revolutionary instigators. This had already prompted the Spanish empire to issue a 'temporary' revocation of its free-soil policy for foreign fugitives in May 1790.

Yet it is doubtful how much effect this treaty had. In 1796, Essequibo (with Demerara and Berbice) was taken over by Britain, which went to war with

Spain in the same year, likely hindering cooperation. Furthermore, when the colonies were briefly restored to the Dutch in 1802, the Dutch authorities noted that the cartel did not help much: the procedures were expensive and time-consuming.⁶⁸ It is thus likely that the border zone continued to provide opportunities for enslaved Africans who tried to escape slavery, as the transition from borderland to bordered land was far from complete.⁶⁹

Self-liberated slaves in territorial Louisiana and Spanish Texas

As in the Essequibo–Venezuela borderland, cross-border interactions proved a clear challenge to processes of empire-building in the Louisiana–Texas borderlands. Municipal archives and diplomatic records for northeastern New Spain and the US Southwest regularly reveal the porousness of the boundaries separating the state of Louisiana and Texas. This fluid border proved a recurring source of conflict between the Spanish empire and the US in the years following the Louisiana Purchase (1803). The Adams-Onís treaty (1819) concluded between both states (and confirmed by independent Mexico in 1821) provided the deceptive impression that a clear line had eventually been reached along the Sabine River. But the treaty did not imply a smooth transition from borderlands to bordered lands, since the incipient Mexican state proved powerless to stop countless illegal settlers, smugglers and fugitives from entering. In this context, slaves absconded from Louisiana to Spanish and Mexican Texas both before and after the specific period on which this article focuses (1803–1812). Yet the existence of southern escape routes from US slavery has been largely overshadowed by the historical focus on northern escape routes. Furthermore, the growing recent literature on slave flight from the US South to the northeastern borderlands of New Spain/Mexico has largely focused on the four decades spanning Mexican independence to the outbreak of the US Civil War, with a particular emphasis on the Texas–Mexico borderlands from 1836 onwards.⁷⁰ By contrast, the first third of the nineteenth century has received far less scrutiny, and the interaction between slave flight and state-building in the context of Louisiana–Texas borderlands remains understudied.⁷¹

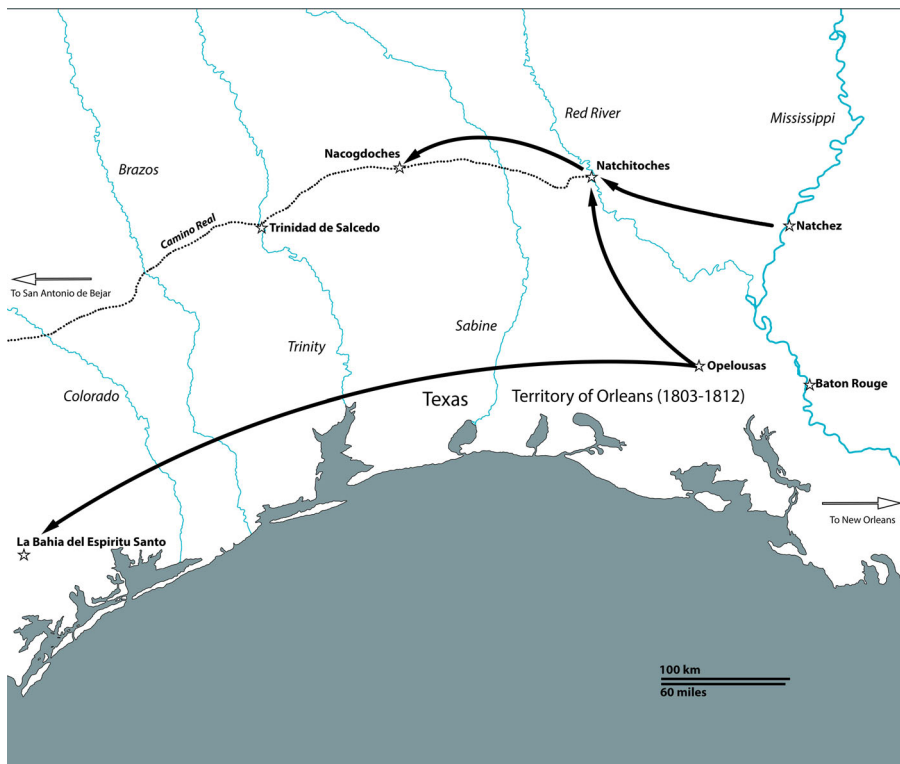
From the late seventeenth century onwards, the French empire settled in ‘Basse-Louisiane’ (corresponding vaguely to present-day Louisiana) and as slaves were introduced in the province in the early eighteenth century, escaped bondpeople took refuge in swamps, forests, among native Amerindian populations and in incipient urban environments. They also occasionally crossed the Sabine River (especially from the post of Natchitoches in northwestern Louisiana) to Spanish Texas, in an attempt to reach freedom through *grand marronage*. Nonetheless, no provision officially granted freedom to these fugitives, as the Royal Decree of 1750 did not include escaped slaves from the French possessions. Between 1762 and 1803 (the period of Spanish rule over

Louisiana), slaves absconding from Louisiana to Texas were actively pursued by Spanish administrators and sent back to their masters, at a time when large-scale plantation agriculture developed in Louisiana, paving the way for the cotton and sugar boom generated by its purchase by the US.⁷²

As the first slaves from the US territory of Orleans (or territorial Louisiana) started appearing after 1803 in Spanish Texas, local administrators wondered about which piece of legislation should prevail. Was the 'temporary' free-soil policy revocation of 1790 still in legal force, undermining the protective dispositions of Carlos IV's Royal Decree of 1789? Was it applicable to Texas at all? Were foreign 'runaways' to be protected or not and, if so, under which terms? In July 1803, Nemesio Salcedo, the general commandant of the Eastern Internal Provinces (*Provincias Internas de Oriente*) decided to base his policy on the Royal Decree of 1789, either ignoring or dismissing the Royal Order issued a year later. The Spanish empire's acceptance of foreign escaped slaves in eastern Texas also stemmed from several practical motives. First, protecting fugitive slaves from the US could weaken the rival's fast-growing plantation slavery in the Mississippi delta region, which was the cornerstone of US economic and political westward expansion and thereby threatened Spanish sovereignty on eastern Texas, where development had stagnated in the eighteenth century. Second, as new settlers, 'runaways' from the US would contribute to the economic development of the borderlands and strengthen the demographic presence of the empire in the province. This was important since migrants from the heart of New Spain came in chronically insufficient numbers to the northeastern part of the Viceroyalty.

Following Aron and Adelman's terminology, the 'borderland' that stretched between Natchitoches to Nacogdoches did not form a 'bordered land' yet (Map 3). In the first decade of the nineteenth century, transgressors of national laws could easily find refuge on either side of the Sabine River, especially given that in 1806 a 'neutral ground' was constituted in part of the borderlands (whereby no state could claim sovereignty) as the two governments could not agree on clear boundaries. Army deserters from the US, for instance, regularly absconded to the Spanish side, while frontier bandits, criminals, smugglers and squatters soon inhabited this grey zone, accompanied at times by 'runaway' slaves.⁷³ Apart from this quest for informal freedom, fugitive slaves also attempted to gain formal freedom from the agents of the Spanish empire in eastern Texas, and settled especially in the towns of Nacogdoches and Trinidad de Salcedo, employed mostly in cultivation work, stock raising and domestic service.⁷⁴

Nacogdoches (a town developed around the foundations of an old mission established in 1716) represented the gateway to Spanish Texas. Its settlers maintained intense cross-cultural and economic ties with western Louisiana, eluding restrictions set by the Spanish empire on trade with foreign powers. Complementing agriculture and ranching, contraband trade (including with



Map 3. The Texas–Louisiana borderland along the Sabine River after the Louisiana Purchase by the US (1803).

Amerindians) flourished along the Sabine River. As slave traders from New Orleans and Natchez expanded their networks across the border, at the turn of the nineteenth century Nacogdoches had twice as many slaves as the rest of the province (enslaved African Americans numbering 56 out of 811 inhabitants by 1805, apart from free blacks). Escaped slaves from Louisiana thus settled in a small, albeit visible, black community.⁷⁵ Further west, the *villa* of Trinidad de Salcedo was founded in January 1806 with the purpose of settling an intermediary military and civilian post between San Antonio de Béxar, the province's capital, and Nacogdoches. It regularly received re-settled fugitive slaves from the eastern fringes of Texas. In May 1808, *comandante general* Salcedo, for instance, ordered the transfer of 27 escaped slaves from Nacogdoches to the *villa*. This decision stemmed from a concern to de-escalate border tensions by discouraging groups of US slave hunters and Amerindians dispatched to retrieve fugitives.⁷⁶

In Spanish Texas, Salcedo's free-soil policy soon received its first challenge, as the first groups of slaves began crossing the Sabine River. A posse led by tobacco planter Alexis Cloutier from Natchitoches that was pursuing nine fugitives, arrived at Nacogdoches on 23 October 1804, and threatened the Spanish military commandant José Joaquín Ugarte to continue the search westward if

necessary.⁷⁷ The military commandant in Natchitoches urged his counterpart to act for the ‘good understanding’ of both nations. A former Spanish governor in Louisiana also suggested returning the fugitives following the Royal Order of 17 May 1790, in the hope that the restitution would prevent border conflicts.⁷⁸ Under pressure from diverse fronts, Ugarte on his own initiative ordered the arrest of the escaped slaves. After a first unsuccessful search, two inhabitants saw the fugitives along the Attoyac River, and a second expedition formed by six soldiers was dispatched to arrest and deliver them to Cloutier.⁷⁹ Once in Natchitoches, some of the former absconders were confined in the town’s jail (in particular fugitives who had stolen property from their masters), as according to Claiborne ‘their liberation would give alarm to the good Citizens’.⁸⁰

Ugarte’s improvised decision brought him into conflict with his superior, *comandante general* Nemesio Salcedo, who disapproved of the restitution. From Nacogdoches, Ugarte advocated ignoring the royal order of 1789, and added that the restitution of fugitive slaves from Louisiana prior to its purchase by the US in 1803 had been the custom. For Salcedo, by contrast, military commandants in the frontier were to keep hold of foreign escaped slaves until receiving a clear resolution by the Spanish King on the subject.⁸¹ Ugarte’s arguments did not convince Salcedo, and the following month, Dionisio Valle replaced him and received strict orders not to return foreign ‘runaways’.⁸²

Salcedo’s asylum policy stood firm during the following years. In January 1808, Salcedo (who was still waiting for orders from Spain and the Viceroy) instructed Governor Antonio Cordero that the planned expulsion of undocumented foreigners from eastern Texas did not ‘include nor ought to include the negro slaves who present themselves in order to obtain their freedom’.⁸³ An exception to the rule came in 1806. Eight slaves absconded from Opelousas (western Louisiana) to Nacogdoches in the summer. Military commandant Francisco Viana initially denied restitution to their master, yet the prospect of fuelling an already tense geopolitical situation eventually prompted Nemesio Salcedo to order their delivery.⁸⁴

As Ugarte’s unilateral initiative and the latter example illustrate, whether or not foreign escaped slaves were to receive *amparo* (protection) remained closely tied to the evolving balance of power in the Texas–Louisiana borderlands in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Securing the border along the Sabine River and preserving the few settlements Spain had in eastern Texas stood as the primary concern of the local colonial administrators. The protection provided to foreign fugitive slaves could jeopardise the territorial integrity of the Spanish empire in its northernmost province by encouraging illegal expeditions launched to retrieve the ‘runaways’. Under pressure, Ugarte judged the situation precarious and prioritised the maintenance of sovereignty and peace over sheltering fugitive slaves at the risk of antagonising neighbouring planters.

The frequent escape of slaves from western Louisiana to eastern Texas generated rising resentment among US planters. As early as the autumn of 1804,

settlers in Natchitoches accused Ugarte of inciting their slaves to flee.⁸⁵ The new proximity of free-soil territories for lower Mississippi's slaves, and a growing uncertainty regarding the slave trade's future in Louisiana (peaking with the federal ban on slave importation to the US in 1807), fuelled this discomfort.⁸⁶ In this context, slaveowners in Louisiana felt increasingly uncomfortable with the frequent flight of their enslaved workforce beyond the Sabine River. For instance, settlers in Opelousas grew extremely upset in June 1808 by the escape of some slaves to Texas, according to governor Claiborne, and were awaiting 'with much impatience the interference of the General Government' on the issue.⁸⁷ With the number of fugitive slaves increasing, planters in Louisiana oscillated between an adherence to legal solutions and the temptation of informal means to retrieve their 'property'. Over time, however, the planters became increasingly assertive.

In early September 1807, three settlers from Natchitoches led by tobacco planter François Rouquier petitioned the Spanish side with the assistance of parish judge John C. Carr for the recovery of some slaves who had escaped from their estates. The planters expressed confidence in reaching a legal agreement, though they also hinted at resorting to force in case of the failure of the negotiations. As Salcedo refused to grant the request, officials on both sides of the Sabine River feared that 'a force of 250 men' might storm eastern Texas searching for escaped slaves (though it remained merely a threat).⁸⁸

When petitioning the Spanish officials did not work, Louisiana planters turned to their own government. From the autumn of 1807 onwards, several planters from Natchitoches – most of them French-speaking Creole residents – directly petitioned the territorial government of Louisiana for this purpose. Some of the petitioners had previously engaged in ineffective inter-personal negotiations with the military authorities of Nacogdoches. For instance, one of them, André Rambien, had first sent his son-in-law, Michel Chamard, to Nacogdoches to negotiate for the return of 19-year-old Louis, who had absconded from Natchitoches in July 1807. As in Guiana, the planters attempted to pressure the territorial government of Louisiana into exerting its influence to conclude an agreement with Spanish representatives in Texas, for either the delivery of the slaves or financial compensation. For instance, settler Marie-Louise Rouquier requested 1000 *piastres* (the word used by most French-speaking colonists in Louisiana to designate a US dollar at the time) for 35-year-old Narcisse, a man who had deserted in September 1807, along with 30 *piastres* per month for the net economic loss due to his flight.⁸⁹ Yet no records exist suggesting that these petitions did indeed bear fruit. As state governments seemed unable or unwilling to conclude an agreement on the return of escaped slaves, slaveowners began contemplating other means of action. For example, those in western Louisiana favoured the use of armed force to kidnap escaped slaves.

Again, as in the Essequibo–Venezuela borderland, some Euro-American settlers hired native Americans (especially Caddoes, Choctaws and Coushattas) to abduct ‘runaways’ in eastern Texas. Both groups maintained strong commercial and political ties, exactly as on the Spanish side of the Sabine River. For instance, three enslaved asylum-seekers living in Nacogdoches requested their relocation to Trinidad de Salcedo or San Antonio de Béxar in April 1808, arguing that some *indios* commissioned by their owners with ‘large offers’ might otherwise come to capture them. Whether their fear was grounded or not, the threat seemed plausible enough for Nemesio Salcedo to transfer the three petitioners to the *villa* of Trinidad.⁹⁰

At times, planters also endeavoured to abduct escaped slaves in Texas themselves by organising armed expeditions. Although these borderland raids were rare, small detachments of slave hunters commissioned by western Louisiana residents occasionally roamed eastern Texas looking for fugitives. For instance, in March 1812, two men named Paterson and McLunamhan reached San Marcos de Neve, where they abducted two fugitives named Abraham and Bill.⁹¹ Besides, the threat of violent invasion was frequently used as a bargaining chip. Following the escape of about 30 slaves from Natchitoches in October 1808, planters contemplated sending 200 armed men to Trinidad de Salcedo, as they expressed a lack of trust in their state and federal governments to act for their interests.⁹² In this context, the territorial government grew concerned about the loyalty to the US of northwestern Louisiana’s planters and urged federal authorities to arrange the return of escaped slaves in Texas.⁹³ In addition to pressures exerted from below by angry Louisiana planters, the Spanish agents in Texas faced threats of overt conflict by the Louisiana territorial government should Texas fail to revise its asylum policy on foreign escaped slaves.⁹⁴

While in the end US planters got their way, it was only because of reasons related to the stability of the Spanish empire. Despite increasing tensions, the political authorities on both banks of the Sabine River always maintained an extensive correspondence on the subject of restitution. In March 1808, Nemesio Salcedo made clear to Claiborne that he was not entirely opposed to restoring US fugitive slaves. However, he had a condition: in case of a future ruling by the Spanish Crown favouring freedom to foreign ‘runaways’, Louisiana would have to send the slaves back to Texas – a condition that Claiborne found ‘wholly inadmissible [*sic*]’. As a result, their correspondence on the issue lapsed for some months.⁹⁵ Yet by November 1808, Claiborne had underlined to secretary of state Madison his belief that – given the current crisis of the Spanish monarchy after the King’s forced abdication – Spain’s agents in Texas would be inclined to ignore free-soil policies and take the initiative to deliver foreign escaped slaves out of a concern to maintain peaceful relations with the US.⁹⁶

Claiborne proved right as Salcedo agreed on 18 November 1808 to restore fugitive slaves (without any royal backing), provided that their masters could document their property rights, and on the condition that the fugitives would

not be injured when returning to Louisiana.⁹⁷ Military commandants in Nacogdoches and Trinidad de Salcedo received instructions regarding restitution: the idea was to transfer the freedom-seekers in several groups of 15 individuals in order to prevent the possibility of a large collective revolt, while potential rebels could be identified. In Nacogdoches, ‘Jacques’ and ‘Julian’ were described as the leaders of the local escaped slaves community, while in Trinidad de Salcedo, the *mulato* ‘Remigio’ was designated as the *caudillo* of ‘seventeen of the last fugitives’. Regardless, some asylum-seekers did resist restitution. In Trinidad de Salcedo, Jean-Louis and Marguerite absconded from the guards by riding a horse and a mare, crossing the Brazos River and following a southward route to La Bahía del Espíritu Santo.⁹⁸ Despite such spontaneous acts of resistance, officer Pedro López Prieto in Trinidad deported 41 escaped slaves to Nacogdoches for their restitution to Louisiana between January and February 1809, while 14 others were jailed awaiting expulsion.⁹⁹ Claiborne interpreted the decision as evidence of New Spain’s ‘friendly disposition’, and instructed parish judges across Louisiana in May 1809 to ensure that ‘an entire pardon of the offence of Desertion’ was granted to the fugitives who ‘were lately deliver’d [sic] to their owners’.¹⁰⁰

The accord between the Spanish side and Louisiana on escaped slaves was effective for some months.¹⁰¹ Yet, on 7 August 1809, Salcedo unexpectedly rescinded the restitution policy after receiving instructions from the *Junta Central* in Spain, and Spanish Texas once again welcomed foreign slaves escaping from the US, though the restitution agreement continued to be held as an argument in discussions on enslaved asylum-seekers in the Texas–Louisiana borderlands after its repeal.¹⁰² In November 1811, Claiborne attempted to revive it, when requesting the delivery of two fugitive slaves by reminding the Spanish side of the ‘amicable arrangements’ concluded some years before. Likewise, in February 1812, John C. Carr backed a woman’s request for the return of the fugitives Jean-Louis and Marguerite, and argued that ‘in consequence of this order, the whole of the slaves with the exception of those of the unfortunate widow Besson were delivered to their masters’, as both had escaped from the restitution caravan.¹⁰³ In this particular case, a compromise was eventually found between both parties, even though the accord was not re-implemented. Through the mediation of Nacogdoches settler Pedro Samuel Davenport and in exchange for 10 *pesos*, the couple was eventually brought back to Natchitoches, years after they had found refuge in eastern Texas.¹⁰⁴

Concluding comparisons

Both the Essequibo–Venezuela and the Louisiana–Texas contact zones experienced a relatively incomplete transition from borderlands to bordered lands. While a clear boundary between Louisiana and Texas was reached only in

1819, the border line between present-day Guyana and Venezuela still remains contentious. The lack of clarity of imperial boundaries went in hand with relatively loose territorial controls. In this context, self-liberated African slaves took advantage of inter-imperial rivalries for their own emancipation, in particular after the Royal Decree of 1750. Yet prospects of formal freedom in the Spanish empire could prove delusory, as local administrators regularly ignored, dismissed or disobeyed the sometimes contradictory set of instructions regarding free soil.

The unevenness of the dynamics of colonisation, economic expansion, and empire-building on both sides of the borderlands influenced the Spanish side's colonial management of Dutch and US fugitive slaves as refugees. In the Essequibo–Venezuela borderland, the Spanish side gradually acquired strength. While negotiation was necessary until the early eighteenth century, afterwards the Spanish saw less need to accommodate Dutch desires to return runaways or provide financial compensation. In addition, opportunities for escape increased for the enslaved, as the Amerindians progressively retreated from the contact zone, clearing the routes for escape to the Orinoco region. By contrast, an opposite trend animated Spanish Texas. Mounting pressure from planters from Louisiana combined with expansionist US views over the province, increased border tensions, eventually forcing Texas into restitution. The fate of escaped slaves in the edges of the Spanish empire, therefore, rested largely on day-to-day improvisation by local administrators, as unconditional protection would endanger an always-fragile equilibrium between competing states in the borderlands. Spain's colonial agents navigated in a continuum between confrontation and cooperation depending on relative geopolitical strength, foreign slaveholders' aggressiveness, and the will to prevent and de-escalate border conflicts. In the midst of European politics, Amerindians acted as influential middle-men through their leverage as *ad hoc* slave hunters, like the Caribs in the Essequibo–Venezuela borderland.

In their efforts to retrieve 'runaways', planters employed various methods, ranging from legal to illegal. States and private citizens occasionally negotiated the restitution of 'runaways' or financial compensations. In the Essequibo–Orinoco zone, agreements between local governors collapsed and prompted the demand for a 'cartel' between states. In the more troubled Louisiana–Texas borderland, planters and slave hunters regularly launched (or threatened to launch) armed raids. As a result, while in the Orinoco region no substantial territorial threat compelled the Spanish agents to deliver 'runaways', the agents of Spain in Texas felt under increasing pressure from the east.

The respective motives for the restitution agreements of 1791 (in Essequibo–Venezuela) and 1808 (in Louisiana–Texas) diverge accordingly. For the former case, the decision was part of a larger closing of asylum policy for slaves from Dutch colonies and a reaction to the circulation of the news of the French revolution in the Atlantic world. For the latter case, by contrast, the local restitution

agreement passed between Nemesio Salcedo and governor Claiborne directly resulted from increasing local border conflicts over fugitive slaves and a related concern over Spanish sovereignty in northeastern New Spain. After years of consistent free-soil policy, the agents of the Spanish empire in Texas were eventually forced to adopt a more compliant attitude towards the opposite side than their counterparts in the Orinoco region. Consequently, the conditions of enforcement of sanctuary policy from the Spanish side in Texas and Venezuela varied according to their respective perceptions of local balances of power. As such, both cases illustrate the contingency of empire-building in the early modern Americas, and the precarious nature of freedom for refugees from slavery in the Spanish possessions.

Freedom for escaped slaves settled in Spanish Texas and Venezuela thus remained highly contingent, and flight across borders was a double-edged sword with often-unpredictable consequences for absconders. Their status as asylum-seekers on the fringes of the Spanish empire was never fully secured, as the shared story of Spanish colonial administrators and Dutch/US escaped slaves was primarily a story of imperial interests. Even during the years when free-soil applied, the prospect of re-enslavement or deportation still hung over their heads, in the form of slaveowners' legal or illegal incursions, Amerindians acting as unofficial slave patrols, or Spanish military commandants' shifting attitudes on *amparo* (protection).

Notes

1. For a good overview regarding borderlands, see: Fabricio Prado, 'The Fringes of Empires: Recent Scholarship on Colonial Frontiers and Borderlands in Latin America', *History Compass* 10, no. 4 (2012): 318–33. For contact zones, see: Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 7–8. For entanglement, see: Eliga H. Gould, 'Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery', *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (2007): 764–86. For the more specific concept of the 'middle ground', see: Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and the discussion in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 2006, including Richard White, 'Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2006): 9–14. We prefer to avoid the term 'frontier', which carries different connotations across national context. For the classic version, see: Frederick J. Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', in *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History*, ed. David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1994), 1–18. For the more nuanced Latin American connotations, see Prado, 'Fringes of Empires', 318–19.
2. Manuel Lucena Salmoral, *Leyes para esclavos. El Ordenamiento jurídico sobre la condición, tratamiento, defensa y represión de los esclavos en las colonias de la América española* (CD-ROM; Madrid: Colección Proyectos Históricos Tavera, 2000); Manuel Lucena Salmoral, *Regulación de la esclavitud en las colonias de América española (1503–1886): documentos para su estudio* (Madrid: Universidad de Alcalá; Murcia:

- Universidad de Murcia, 2005); Linda M. Rupert, “Seeking the Water of Baptism”. Fugitive Slaves and Imperial Jurisdiction in the Early Modern Caribbean’, in *Legal Pluralism and Empires, 1500–1850*, ed. Richard J. Ross and Lauren Benton (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 199–232.
3. Maria Verónica Secreto, ‘Asilo: direito de gentes. Escravos refugiados no Império espanhol’, *Revista História* (São Paulo, no. 172, Jan.–June 2015): 197–219; Linda M. Rupert, ‘Marronage, Manumission and Maritime Trade in the Early Modern Caribbean’, *Slavery & Abolition*, no. 3, (2009): 361–82. For an analysis of Spain’s asylum policy in the context of eighteenth-century Spanish Florida, see Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 24–45 and 75–83. For informal and formal freedom, see Damian Pargas, ‘Urban Refugees: Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Informal Freedom in the American South’, *Journal of Early American History* 7, no. 3 (2017): 262–84.
 4. Regina Grafe and Alejandra Irigoin, ‘A Stakeholder Empire: The Political Economy of Spanish Imperial Rule in America’, *The Economic History Review* 65, no. 2 (2012): 609–51; Lauren A. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24.
 5. Tamar Herzog, *Frontiers of Possession: Spain and Portugal in Europe and the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.
 6. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, ‘From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History’, *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814–16.
 7. *Ibid.*, 815–16.
 8. The classic work on maroons is Richard Price, *Maroon Societies. Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). For Dutch Guiana, see: Frank Dragtenstein, ‘*De ondraaglijke stoutheid der wegloopers: Marronage en koloniaal beleid in Suriname, 1667–1768* (Utrecht: Centrum voor Latijns-Amerikaanse en Caraïbische Studies; Instituut ter Bevordering van de Surinamistiek, 2002); H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen and Wim S.M. Hoogbergen, *Een zwarte vrijstaat in Suriname: De Okaanse samenleving in de achttiende eeuw* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Alvin O. Thompson, *Maroons of Guyana: Problems of Slave Desertion in Guyana, c.1750–1814* (Georgetown: Free Press, 1999).
 9. Rupert, ‘Marronage, Manumission and Maritime Trade’; *Idem*, “Seeking the Water of Baptism”, in Benton and Ross, *Legal Pluralism*; *Idem*, *Creolization and Contraband: Curaçao in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), chapter 4.
 10. Neville A.T. Hall, ‘Maritime Maroons: Grand Marronage’, in *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, ed. B.W. Higman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 124–38.
 11. Jane Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 4, 9, 11, 98–9; Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*.
 12. See especially: James David Nichols, ‘The Line of Liberty: Runaway Slaves and Fugitive Peons in the Texas–Mexico Borderlands’, *Western Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2013): 413–33. On self-emancipated slaves across borders: Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedom Seekers: Essays on Comparative Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).
 13. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana, the Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New Orleans: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763–1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press,

- 1999); David J. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi 1720–1835* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).
14. Prado, 'Fringes of Empires', 318–33.
 15. The transition to 'bordered land' is thus not fully completed. In 1898, the United States acted as arbiter to settle the dispute. During this process, both sides presented archival sources to back up their claims, and the so-called British Guiana Boundary Books (BGBB) form the basis of this section. The final outcome, however, was opposed by Venezuela and the dispute continues (Betty Jane Kissler, 'Venezuela-Guyana Boundary Dispute: 1899–1966' (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1971), 14–36).
 16. Neil L. Whitehead, *Lords of the Tiger Spirit: A History of the Caribs in Colonial Venezuela and Guyana, 1498–1820* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1988), 2, 36; Mark Meuwese, *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595–1674* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 106–8.
 17. Whitehead, *Lords*, 87–91.
 18. L.A.H.C. Hulsman, 'Nederlands Amazonia: Handel met indianen tussen 1580 en 1680' (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2009), 128, 137, 158–9.
 19. James Rodway, *History of British Guiana, from the Year 1668 to the Present Time. Volume 1: 1668–1781* (Georgetown: J. Thomson, 1891), 226; Alvin O. Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in Guyana: 1580–1803* (Bridgetown: Carib Research & Publications Inc., 1987), 179.
 20. Whitehead, *Lords*, 188; Hulsman, 'Nederlands Amazonia', 179.
 21. Timothy J. Yeager, 'Encomienda or Slavery? The Spanish Crown's Choice of Labor Organization in Sixteenth-Century Spanish American', *Journal of Economic History* 55, no. 4 (1995): 845; Whitehead, *Lords*, 2.
 22. It is important to note, though, that more Amerindian groups lived further inland, and that the ethnic groups lived in separate groups, with their own leaders. See: Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment*, 5–9, 36.
 23. Roland Dennis Hussey, *The Caracas Company 1728–1784: A Study in the History of Spanish Monopolistic Trade* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934); Robert J. Ferry, *The Colonial Elite of Early Caracas: Formation & Crisis, 1567–1767* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 4–5.
 24. Whitehead, *Lords*, 110; Report of Commandant of Guayana to the King, 11 November 1773, no. 517 in Great Britain, *British Guiana Boundary. Arbitration with the United States of Venezuela: Appendix to the Case on Behalf of the Government of Her Britannic Majesty. Volume IV. 1769–1781* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1898), 109. Hereafter referred to as: BGBB, BC app.
 25. Court of Policy in Essequibo to WIC, 1 March 1727, no. 177 in BGBB, BC app., 2: 6.
 26. Secretary Gelskerke, Essequibo, to WIC, 25 April 1729, no. 180 in BGBB, BC app., 2: 8.
 27. E.W. Van der Oest, 'The Forgotten Colonies of Essequibo and Demerara, 1700–1814', in *Riches from Atlantic Commerce: Dutch Transatlantic Trade and Shipping, 1585–1817*, ed. Victor Enthoven and Johannes Postma (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 329.
 28. Verlenging van het pardon (...), Essequibo, 2-4-1730, *Plakaatboek Guyana (Guyana Ordinance Book), 1670–1816*, ed. J.Th. de Smidt, T. van der Lee and H.J.M. van Dapperen (The Hague: Huygens Instituut for Netherlands History, 2014), <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/retroboeken/guyana> (accessed July 21, 2017).
 29. Secretary Gelskerke, Essequibo, to WIC, 25 April 1729, no. 180 in BGBB, BC app., 2: 8; Idem to Governor of Trinidad and Orinoco, 27 February 1728, no. 180 in *ibid.*, 8–9.
 30. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 19 February 1754, no. 292 in BGBB, BC app., 2: 91.
 31. Commandeur to Director's Committee of Ten, 27 March 1749, no. 249 in BGBB, BC app., 2: 60–1.

32. J.P. van de Voort, *De Westindische plantages van 1720 tot 1795. Financiën en handel* (Eindhoven: Drukkerij de Witte, 1973), chapter 4.
33. Whitehead, *Lords*, 123–9.
34. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 19 February 1754, no. 292 in BGBB, BC, app., 2: 91; Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 9 February 1762, no. 365 in BGBB, BC app., 2: 211–12.
35. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 6 September 1767, no. 431 in BGBB, BC app., 3: 150–2.
36. The Spanish sources are largely silent on the issue. Instead, mentions of fugitives (*fugitivos*), *cimarrones* or deserters (*desertores*), refer to Amerindians fleeing the *reducciones*. See Report of Fray Fidel de Santo, Prefect of the Catalonian Capuchins of Guayana, as to the Missions, 25 February 1761, no. 28 in *Venezuela-British Guiana boundary arbitration. The counter-case of the United States of Venezuela before the tribunal of arbitration to convene at Paris, under the provisions of the treaty between the United States of Venezuela and Her Britannic Majesty signed at Washington, Feb. 2, 1897.* (hereafter: BGBB, VCC) *Volume 3, appendix parts 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7* (New York: The Evening Job Printing House, 1898), 71–2; Fray Joachin Moreno Mendoza to Fray Joseph de Guardia, 17 April 1765, no. 32 in *ibid.*, 79; Extract from letter of the Prefect of the Catalonian Capuchins to the Commissary General, 6 July 1769, no. 33 in *ibid.*, 79–80; Declaration of the Capuchin Father Josef Antonio de Zervera, no.482.6 in BGBB, BC app., 4: 55.
37. It is noted that some fugitive Africans from Essequibo (*Morenos fugitivos de Esquibo*) laboured on cotton plantations on the Caura River (Discripcion Corografico-mixta de la Provincia de Guayana (...), no date [around 1770], no. 70 in BGBB, VCC app., 3: 120; Diary of Matheo Beltran, commander of the revenue cutter in the Orinoco, 1785, no. 438 in *ibid.*, 332–3.
38. Declaration of Fray Benito de Garriga, no. 482.4 in BGBB, BC app., 4: 47–50.
39. Don José de Iturriague to Don José de Carvajal y Lancaster, 5 December 1753, no. 288 in BGBB, BC app., 2: 90.
40. Acting Commander of Essequibo to WIC, 6 March 1751, no. 263 in BGBB, BC app. 2: 70; Director-General to WIC, 4 August 1752, no. 269 in *ibid.*: 75–6.
41. Director-General to WIC, 4 August 1752, no. 269 in *ibid.*: 75–6. C.A. Harris and J.A.J. de Villiers, *Storm van 's Gravesande. The Rise of British Guiana Compiled from his Despatches* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1911), 1: 229; *Ibid.*, 2: 405.
42. Harris and Villiers, *Storm van 's Gravesande*, 1: 72, 101; *Ibid.*, 2: 405, 603.
43. They were also crucial in putting down revolts, such as during the famous 1763 revolt in Berbice. See Marjoleine Kars, “‘Cleansing the Land’: Dutch-Amerindian Cooperation in the Suppression of the 1763 Slave Rebellion in Dutch Guiana”, in *Intercultural Alliance, Imperial Expansion, and Warfare in the Early Modern World*, ed. Wayne E. Lee (New York: New York University Press, 2011).
44. Boete voor wie nalaat de voor fortificatiewerkzaamheden gerekwireerde slaven te zenden (...), Essequibo, 4-12-1758, *Guyana Ordinance Book*.
45. Rafael Gasson, ‘Quiripas and Mostacillas: The Evolution of Shell Beads as a Medium of Exchange in Northern South America’, *Ethnohistory* 47, no. 3–4 (2000): 591.
46. Verbod om oneerbiedig te spreken over regenten (...), Essequibo & Demerara, 1-10-1764, *Guyana Ordinance book*; Instructie voor de posthouder aan de Cuyuni, Essequibo & Demerara, 29-11-1757, *ibid.*; Instructie voor de posthouder van Boven-Essequibo, Essequibo, 8-14-1764, *ibid.*
47. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 3 March 1769, no. 454 in BGBB, BC app., 4: 4–5.

48. Declaration of Capuchin Father Thomas de San Pedro, no date [around 1770], no. 482.5 in BGBB, BC app., 4: 51–54.
49. Harris and De Villiers, *Storm van 's Gravesande*, 2: 601.
50. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 8 September 1760, no. 350 in BGBB, BC app., 2: 186.
51. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 30 September 1774, no. 529 in BGBB, BC app., 4:127–8.
52. Minutes of the Court of Policy of Essequibo, 5 November 1784, no. 602 in BGBB, BCC app., 5: 27.
53. Commissie voor Charles Teuffer (...), Essequibo, 7-8-1776, *Guyana Ordinance Book*.
54. Director-General to WIC, 6 January 1772, no. 505 in BGBB, BCC app., 4: 100–1; Gedrukte resoluties van de Staten-Generaal, Dutch National Archives (NL-HaNA), States-General, 1.01.02, inv. nr. 3832, 8 April 1777, at 225–6.
55. Courts of Policy and Justice of Essequibo to WIC, 31 January 1773, no. 523 in BGBB, BCC app., 4: 122–3; Idem to WIC, 10 July 1775, no. 538 in *ibid.*, 137; Memorial of Burgher Officers to the Court of Policy in Essequibo, 2 January 1772, no. 531 in *ibid.*, 129.
56. A.R.F. Webber and Harry Perot Christiani, *Centenary History and Handbook of British Guiana* (Georgetown: 'The Argosy' Company, 1931), 75; Court of Policy in Essequibo to WIC, 10 July 1774, no. 514 in BGBB, BCC app., 4: 108–9.
57. Ambassador of the Dutch Republic in Madrid to the States-General, 12 February 1784, no. 595 in BGBB, BCC app., 5: 22.
58. Boete voor wie nalaat (...), Essequibo, 12-4-1758, *Guyana Ordinance Book*; Lichten van grondbrieven (...), Essequibo & Demerara, 17-6-1766, *ibid.*
59. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 6 September 1767, no. 431 in BGBB, BCC app., 3: 150–2; Commander of Demerara to WIC's Amsterdam Chamber, 3 April 1784, no. 596 in BGBB, BCC app., 5: 22–3.
60. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 6 January 1772, no. 505 in BGBB, BC app., 4:100–1.
61. Director-General, Essequibo, to WIC, 6 April 1773, no. 516 in *ibid.*, 108–9; Court of Policy to WIC, 31 January 1773, no. 523 in *ibid.*, 123; Trotz to WIC, 30 September 1774, no. 529 in *ibid.*, 127–8; Idem to WIC, 30 June 1784, no. 598 in BGBB, BC app. vol. 5: 23.
62. Letter from Dutch administrator in Essequibo, 15 June 1783, no. 591 in BGBB, BC app., 5: 11–12; Rapport bestemd voor erfstadhouder Willem V opgesteld door zijn commissarissen naar West-Indië, W.H. van Grovestins en W. Boeij, NL-HaNA, Tweede West-Indische Compagnie, 1.05.01.02, inv.nr. 915B, f. 78.
63. Proceedings of the Gentlemen X, 30 September 1784, no. 601 in BGBB, BC app., 5: 24–6.
64. Webber and Christiani, *Handbook of British Guiana*, 92–3; Extract from the diary of the Director-General, 30 July 1785, no. 610 in BGBB, BC app. 5: 35–6.
65. Extracts from the government journal, 2 October 1785, 7 October 1785, 11 October 1785, 8 December 1785, no. 615 in BGBB, BC app., 5: 40.
66. Extract from the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Court of Policy of Essequibo, 30 April 1805, no. 689 in *ibid.*, 187.
67. Verdrag tussen Spanje en de Republiek over de uitwisseling van weglopers en deserteurs, Demerara, 23-6-1791, *Guyana Ordinance Book*.
68. Memorie over de verbeteringen in Essequibo en Demerary (...), NL-HaNA, Raad der Amerikaanse Bezittingen, 2.01.28.02, inv.nr. 168M.
69. See note 15.

70. Rosalie Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom: US Negroes in Mexico* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1975); Sean M. Kelley, 'Mexico in His Head: Slavery and the Texas-Mexican Border, 1810–1860', *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 3 (2004): 709–23; Nichols, 'The Line of Liberty', 413–33; Sarah E. Cornell, 'Citizens of Nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and Free African Americans in Mexico, 1833–1857', *Journal of American History* 100, no. 2 (2013): 351–74.
71. Exceptions include: James Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas: The Occupation and Abandonment of Nacogdoches, 1779–1821' (PhD diss., University of Nebraska, 1980); Lance Blyth, 'Fugitives from Servitude: American Deserters and Runaway Slaves in Spanish Nacogdoches, 1803–1808', *East Texas Historical Journal* 38, no. 2 (2000): 3–14; Christina Marie Villarreal, 'Colonial Border Control: Reconsidering Migrants and the Making of New Spain's Northern Borderlands' (master thesis, University of Texas, 2015); Eric Herschtal, 'Slave, Spaniards and Subversion in Early Louisiana: The Persistent Fear of Black Revolt and Spanish Collusion in Territorial Louisiana, 1803–1812', *Journal of the Early Republic* 36, no. 2 (2016): 283–311.
72. Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 98–118, 142–8, and 202–36; Francis X. Galan, 'Last Soldiers, First Pioneers: The Los Adaes Border Community on the Louisiana–Texas Frontier, 1721–1779' (PhD diss., Southern Methodist University, 2006), 117–9.
73. Blyth, 'Fugitives from Servitude', 4; Adelman and Aron, 'From Borderlands to Borders', 814–1. On the 'neutral ground': J. Villasana Haggard, 'The Neutral Ground between Louisiana and Texas, 1806–1821', *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 28 (1945): 1001–128.
74. Bexar Archives (BA) – microfilm edition, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History – University of Texas at Austin, reel 37, frame 493, 'Report of Gadiana, 21 Jan. 1808'; Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas', 213.
75. Felix D. Almaraz Jr., *Tragic Cavalier: Governor Manuel Salcedo of Texas, 1808–1813* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 11; Matthew Babcock, 'Roots of Independence: Transcultural Trade in the Texas–Louisiana Borderlands', *Ethnohistory* 60, no. 2 (2013): 249–50.
76. Bradley Folsom, 'Trinidad de Salcedo: A Forgotten Villa in Colonial Texas, 1806–1813', *East Texas Historical Journal* 52, no. 2 (2014): 49–78; Jean I. Epperson, *Lost Spanish Towns: Atascosito and Trinidad de Salcedo* (Woodville, TX: Dogwood Press, 1996): 42–71.
77. Dunbar Rowland, *Official Letter books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801–1816* (Jackson, MI: State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 2: 382–7.
78. BA, reel 32, frames 743–4; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC, RG 59 T-260, State Department Territorial Papers, Orleans Series, reel 5, 'Turner to Ugarte, 15 October 1804'; Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas', 208; Herschtal, 'Slave, Spaniards and Subversion in Early Louisiana', 290.
79. BA, reel 32, frames 707 and 786; Robert Bruce Blake Collection (RBBC), BA, v.20, 242–4; Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas', 208–10; Herschtal, 'Slave, Spaniards and Subversion in early Louisiana', 289–90; Galan and De Leon, 'Comparative Freedom in the Borderlands', 32. On Alexis Cloutier: H. Sophie Burton, F. Todd Smith, *Colonial Natchitoches: A Creole Community on the Louisiana–Texas Frontier* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 160.
80. Clarence Edwin Carter, *The Territorial Papers of the United States* (Washington, DC: United States, Government Printing Office, 1940), 9: 335 and 388.

81. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Provincias Internas, v.200, expediente 3, 'Memorandum of Nemesio Salcedo to Viceroy Iturrigaray, 23 January 1805'; BA, reel 33, frames 361 and 538–9; Babcock, 'Roots of Independence', 249.
82. BA, reel 33, frames 8, 15 and 23–4; Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas', 209–10.
83. Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4: 166–7.
84. BA, reel 34, frames 777, 880 and 947; Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Estado, 35, n.91, 'Cartas del Comandante General de Provincias Internas (nº21, undated 1806)'; Archivo Histórico Militar – Secretaria de Defensa Nacional, Mexico City, Expediente 1191, 'Correspondencia de d. Antonio Cordero, Gobernador de Texas, con el Gral. José J. Wilkinson [...] Año de 1806'; Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (BRBML), New Haven, CT, Henry Raup Wagner Collection of Texas Manuscripts (WS MSS S-339), box 1 folder 22, 'Expediente sobre ocurrencias de la frontera hasta la retirada a Natchitoches del exercito Americano, 1806'; Yale University, BRBML, Jean-Louis Berlandier Papers (WA MSS S-300), box 15, volume 1, 'Wilkinson in the border with Texas'; Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (Mexico City), Archivo de la Embajada de México en los Estados Unidos de América, Legajo Encuadrado no. 1075.
85. Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 2: 385–6.
86. John Craig Hammond, "'They Are Very Much Interested in Obtaining an Unlimited Slavery": Rethinking the Expansion of Slavery in the Louisiana Purchase Territories, 1803–1805', *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 3 (2003): 353–80; Ernest Obadele-Starks, *Freebooters and Smugglers: The Foreign Slave Trade in the United States After 1808* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 2007).
87. Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4: 135–6 and 179–80.
88. BA, reel 36, frames 843–5 and 897–99; *ibid.*, reel 37, frames 140 and 327; Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas', 212–3, Villarreal, 'Colonial Border Control', 64. The settlers based their claim on article 20 of the 'treaty of friendship, limits and navigation between Spain and the United States' (27 October 1795) stating that inhabitants of both nations would 'be permitted to prosecute suits for the recovery of their properties, the payment of their debts, and for obtaining satisfaction for the damages which they may have sustained'.
89. NARA, RG 59 T-260, reel 9, 'Claiborne to Madison, 14 March 1808, with in appendix: declarations of André Rambien, Dominique Davion, Jean-Baptiste Besson, James Bludworth, Marie-Louise Rouquier'; Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4: 163–4.
90. BA, reel 38, frame 71.
91. BA, reel 50, frame 856; Hatcher, *The Opening of Texas*, 125.
92. NARA, RG 59 T-260, reel 9, 'Parish Judge of Natchitoches John C. Carr to Governor Claiborne, 21 Oct. 1808' and 'Claiborne to Carr, 6 Nov. 1808'; Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4: 244–5 and 258; Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas', 212.
93. Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4: 283; Herschtal, 'Slave, Spaniards and Subversion in early Louisiana', 285.
94. Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 3: 383–6 and 393.
95. Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4: 162–3; Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas', 215.
96. NARA, RG 59 T-260, reel 9, 'Claiborne to Madison, 27 May 1808' and 'Claiborne to Madison, 6 Nov. 1808'.
97. BA, reel 39, frames 489–94, 588–95, 677–84, 687–95, 750 and 758; Folsom, 'Trinidad de Salcedo', 55, Harrison, 'The Failure of Spain in East Texas', 215; Almaraz Jr., *Tragic Cavalier*, 28–9; Villarreal, 'Colonial Border Control', 68.

98. BA, reel 40, frame 266; *ibid.*, reel 42, frames 720 and 788; Almaraz Jr., *Tragic Cavalier*, 10.
99. BA, reel 40, frames 380–4.
100. Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 4: 299, 336 and 350.
101. BA, reel 41, frames 193, 885 and 909; *ibid.*, reel 42 frame 511; RBBC, BA, 20: 325–6.
102. BA, reel 42, frames 500–3, 737–9, 757, 838 and 946; Harrison, ‘The Failure of Spain in East Texas’, 216; Luis García Navarro, ‘Las Provincias Internas en el Siglo XIX’, *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 21 (1964): 295.
103. BA, reel 50, frame 306.
104. BA, reel 49, frame 524; *ibid.*, reel 50 frame 281; Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, 5: 388.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Karwan Fatah-Black, Viola Müller and the reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Bram Hoonhout  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1414-8845>

Thomas Mareite  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5077-5731>

Notes on contributors

Bram Hoonhout is at the Institute for History, Leiden University, Postbus 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands. Email: b.m.hoonhout@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Thomas Mareite is at the Institute for History, Leiden University, Postbus 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands. Email: t.j.f.mareite@hum.leidenuniv.nl