# Conditional freedom : free soil and fugitive slaves from the US South to Mexico's Northeast, 1803-1861

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# PART 1

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## FLEEING SLAVERY

# I
# Experiencing Slavery, Imagining Freedom.

## *Introduction*

In his memoirs, former borderlands pioneer and unionist Noah Smithwick recalled his encounter one night in 1857 with "a powerful black fellow" who was absconding from Texas to the Mexican border. Smithwick, along with five other vigilantes, had previously noticed "a bright light like a campfire" that they deemed suspicious. His "storming column" reached the place, and a fierce fight ensued with a group of "runaway negroes, which were not desirable additions to the neighborhood". The "powerful black fellow" was, according to Smithwick, "as brave a man as [he] ha[s] ever met". The fugitive spectacularly repelled the assailants: "singlehanded – his companion being unarmed – he had whipped six white men, all armed, and as many fierce dogs". Some days later, the escaped slaves were detected further south, where they forced a man named Jim Hamilton to "give them directions for reaching Mexico". Despite several patrols pursuing them, the runaways eluded arrest and successfully reached Mexican soil.[1]

Written in the late nineteenth century, Smithwick's account resembles many other dramatic tales of daring enslaved men and women fleeing to the Mexican border. Together, these came to form part of the Texas frontier's folklore during the last decades of US slavery. Apart from travellers and local chroniclers, newspapers also pointed out the exceptional character of some fugitive slaves in their columns, portraying the absconders as extraordinarily strong, intelligent and enterprising. The southern press was prone to sensationalize stories on runaways, emphasizing the physical prowess as well as the special dangerousness of the absconders. In this regard, the "powerful black fellow" described by Smithwick arguably stood as the archetypal figure around which a half-romantic, half-terrifying narrative for a white audience was commonly built. Clearly, self-liberated slaves absconding to Mexico were without doubt "intrepid, dynamic, adaptable, self-reliant and self-confident risk-takers", as historian Sylviane Diouf has put it.[2] However, thrilling depictions of enslaved absconders such as Smithwick's hardly shed light on who the real men and women were, the deeper motivations that drove them to abscond to the Mexican border, and the characteristics and backgrounds that determined who among the enslaved population of the US South was able to attain self-emancipation and freedom.

Who fled to Mexico's Northeast and why? How did Mexico come to represent a beacon of freedom for runaway slaves from the US South? What were the demographic and occupational profiles of runaways in the borderlands? This chapter analyzes the profiles and backgrounds of enslaved refugees to Mexico, such as the abovementioned

[1] Noah Smithwick, *The Evolution of a State, Recollections of Old Texas Days by Noah Smithwick (Nonagenarian)* (Austin: Gammel Book Company, 1900), 324-327.
[2] Sylviane Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: the Story of the American Maroons* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 305.

"powerful black fellow". It addresses the usual motives as to why so many of the latter were ready to defy slave patrols and a series of mortal dangers in order to reach the border that separated freedom from slavery. The first part of the chapter will briefly retrace the decades-long formation of an idealized image of Mexico as a racial Eldorado for both free and enslaved African Americans, and its effect on slave flight in the US southwestern borderlands. The second part will address the diverse motives that commonly underlay these escape attempts. Finally, the chapter will examine the salient characteristics (in terms of personal experiences and sociological markers) of fugitive slaves absconding to the Mexican borderlands.

### *"A Spirit of Great Insubordination": Mexico as Imagined Land of Freedom for African Americans*

In the early nineteenth century, New Spain constituted a relatively ambiguous site of asylum for foreign runaway slaves. For the most part, its attractiveness as a beacon of freedom was limited to the enslaved population residing in Louisiana's western borderlands close to the Sabine River. Yet by the eve of the US Civil War, the image of Mexico as a land of freedom for African Americans had become thoroughly entrenched in the minds of the enslaved. In fact, the growing "liberationist significance" of the Mexican border paralleled the expansion of the plantation economy and the Second Slavery into the Deep South during the antebellum period.[3] As American slavery extended its tentacles further west, enslaved people increasingly imagined the Mexican borderlands as a refuge from slavery, especially among slave communities in Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi. Significantly, the Mexican republic increasingly took steps to eradicate slavery throughout its national territory during the same period, and rumors of Mexico as not only a refuge from the United States, but also as a land of legal freedom, racial equality, official color-blindness and social mobility spread throughout communities of enslaved people living within reach of its border. While early testimonies by fugitive slaves revealed a loose understanding of official Mexican racial and slavery-related policies, along with usually imprecise expectations about their future existences in Mexico, later accounts demonstrate a sophisticated understanding and knowledge of an increasingly binary landscape of slavery and freedom. Growing tensions between the US and Mexico after the Texas Revolution of 1836 – in particular their discrepancy on slavery – drew a more and more conspicuous line between slavery and freedom for enslaved African Americans. The simultaneous rise of militant abolitionism in the US North from the 1830s onwards further reinforced Mexico's appeal as a sanctuary for African Americans, especially for fugitive slaves. Abolitionist leaders increasingly depicted the country as a racial haven and promoted plans for black emigration to Mexico. Furthermore, the closure of alternative beacons of freedom on a continental scale strengthened Mexico's reputation. In particular, the

[3] Sean M. Kelley, "Mexico in his Head: Slavery and the Texas-Mexican Border, 1810-1860", *Journal of Social History*, 37:3 (2004), 710.

passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 – jeopardizing freedom for fugitive slaves in the northern cities – reinforced this image of Mexico as ideal asylum.[4]

*The Genesis of an Imagined Sanctuary (1803-1836)*

In the aftermath of the US purchase of Louisiana in 1803, enslaved laborers in the Territory of Orleans (after 1812 redubbed the state of Louisiana) increasingly endeavored to obtain freedom through self-emancipation by reaching the Spanish province of Texas. The acquisition of new territories for the US South at the turn of the nineteenth century (Mississippi becoming part of the federation in 1798) had dramatically expanded the scale of plantation slavery west of the seaboard states, and spurred a massive slave trade that forcibly displaced almost a million slaves from the Upper South (especially Virginia, Maryland and Delaware at that time) and countless more from foreign lands to the new southern frontier. These forced migrants, however, did not arrive in a vacuum, but rather entered a Mississippi delta region already famous for its history of slave resistance under French and Spanish rule. Massive slave uprisings had broken out in 1795 in Spanish Louisiana, for example, inspired by the Haitian Revolution (some of the rebel bondspeople were natives of the former French colony). After 1803, planters in the now American territory still feared slave insurrection with the same anxiety as they had under Spanish rule. Urban marronage in the city of New Orleans, meanwhile, started to become endemic, adding to the fear that runaway slaves in the city would collaborate with the enslaved population there to rise up against the white population. In September 1804, several settlers from the Crescent City petitioned the territorial authorities regarding an alleged plot among enslaved people that they likened to the events of Saint-Domingue.[5]

In this explosive context, the new boundary between American Louisiana and Spanish Texas – although contested by both governments – provided a new impulse to slave resistance in the western part of the Orleans Territory, especially around Natchitoches on the Red River. Slavery in the former French outpost had substantially expanded under Spanish rule during the last third of the eighteenth century. The enslaved population of Natchitoches amounted to slightly more than half of the town's residents in the first decade of the nineteenth century, in great part due to the introduction of *bozales*, mostly from the Congo region.[6] As petitions and Spanish and

[4] Richard J.M. Blackett (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[5] NARA, RG 59 T-260 State Department Territorial Papers, Orleans Series, reel 5, "Pétition des habitants et colons de la Louisiane, New Orleans, 17 Sep. 1804"; Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations and Slave Control in Spanish and Early American New Orleans" in Peter J. Kastor and François Weil (ed.), *Empires of the Imagination: Transatlantic Histories of the Louisiana Purchase* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 204-238.

[6] On slavery in Natchitoches: H. Sophie Burton, F. Todd Smith, *Colonial Natchitoches: A Creole Community on the Louisiana-Texas Frontier* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 55-88. On the relationship between the new political and commercial landscape of the Lower South and slave flight to New Spain: Peter J. Kastor, *The Nation's Crucible: the Louisiana*

American diplomatic correspondence testify, the new border with Texas placed slavery in this region under pressure. As early as the fall of 1804, rumors began to proliferate in slave quarters that crossing the border to Nacogdoches – the nearest town in Spanish Texas – was tantamount to becoming free. Residents of Natchitoches grew alarmed as they accused the Spanish military commandant in Nacogdoches of having spread the word that a Royal Decree guaranteed asylum to foreign escaped slaves.[7] About thirty slaves from plantations along the Cane River, some miles south of Natchitoches, left for Texas in October 1804, though only nine of them reached Nacogdoches. Enslaved people from deeper inside Louisiana soon heard about the rumor of Spain's asylum policy, such as in the district of Pointe Coupée, a hotspot of slave rebelliousness. In November, local officials became fearful that, with news of the escape attempt at Cane River, enslaved people might launch an insurrection at Pointe Coupée, as they reported to governor William C.C. Claiborne. Concerned about the maintenance of peaceful US-Spain relations, the Marqués de Casa Calvo – a Cuban slaveholder and former Spanish governor of Louisiana – stressed that "the inhabitants should have kept that information secret, and not have made it known before their Blacks, who [he] presume[d] learned it in no other way". The diplomat condemned the planters' "lack of precaution" in disseminating rumors about free soil in Spanish Texas that had to "be kept confidential". Claiborne quickly warned district commandants across the Territory that new prospects of freedom across the Sabine River had inspired a "spirit of great insubordination" among enslaved African Americans. To Edward D. Turner, military commandant at Natchitoches, he underscored "the late unpleasant movements among the negroes at Point Coupée" that reports from Nacogdoches had generated.[8]

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*Purchase and the Creation of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 62-69; Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 100.

[7] AGI, Guadalajara, 398, "Residents of Natchitoches to Ugarte, 14 Nov. 1804", "Casa Calvo to Ceballos, 20 Aug. 1804"; AGI, Cuba, 73, f.1180-1181, "Ugarte to Casa Calvo, 11 Sep. 1804"; Dunbar Rowland, *Official letter books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816* (Jackson: State Department of Archives and History, 1917), v.2, 315-316, "Claiborne to Casa Calvo, 1 Sep. 1804"; *ibid.* 319-320, "Casa Calvo to Claiborne, 4 Sep. 1804"; *ibid.* 326-327, "Claiborne to Casa Calvo, 7 Sep. 1804"; Francis A. McMichael, *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 72-73; Luis García Navarro, "Las Provincias Internas en el Siglo XIX", *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, n°21 (Jan. 1964), 294. It remains unclear whether commandant Ugarte was accused of communicating the *Real Cédula* of 24 Sep. 1750, or the one issued on 14 April 1789, and whether these accusations were grounded or not. Ugarte denied them.

[8] NARA, RG 59 T-260, reel 5, "Petition to Claiborne, Post of Pointe Coupée, 9 Nov. 1804"; *ibid.*, reel 5, "Claiborne to Butler, 6 Nov. 1804"; Clarence Edwin Carter, *The Territorial Papers of the United States* (Washington DC: United States, Government Printing Office, 1940), v.9, 323 (6 Nov. 1804), 325 (8 Nov. 1804) 331 (10 Nov. 1804); Rowland, *Official Letter Books*, v.3, 6-7 (Claiborne to Turner, 6 Nov. 1804). For a contemporary's account of slavery at Pointe Coupée: Claude C. Robin, *Voyage dans l'intérieur de la Louisiane, de la Floride Occidentale, et dans les isles de la Martinique et de Saint-Domingue* (Paris: F. Buisson, 1807), v.2, 242-248. On the fear of US authorities of mass slave desertion to New Spain during Louisiana's territorial period: Eric Herschtal, "Slaves, 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*, n°36 (2016), 283-292.

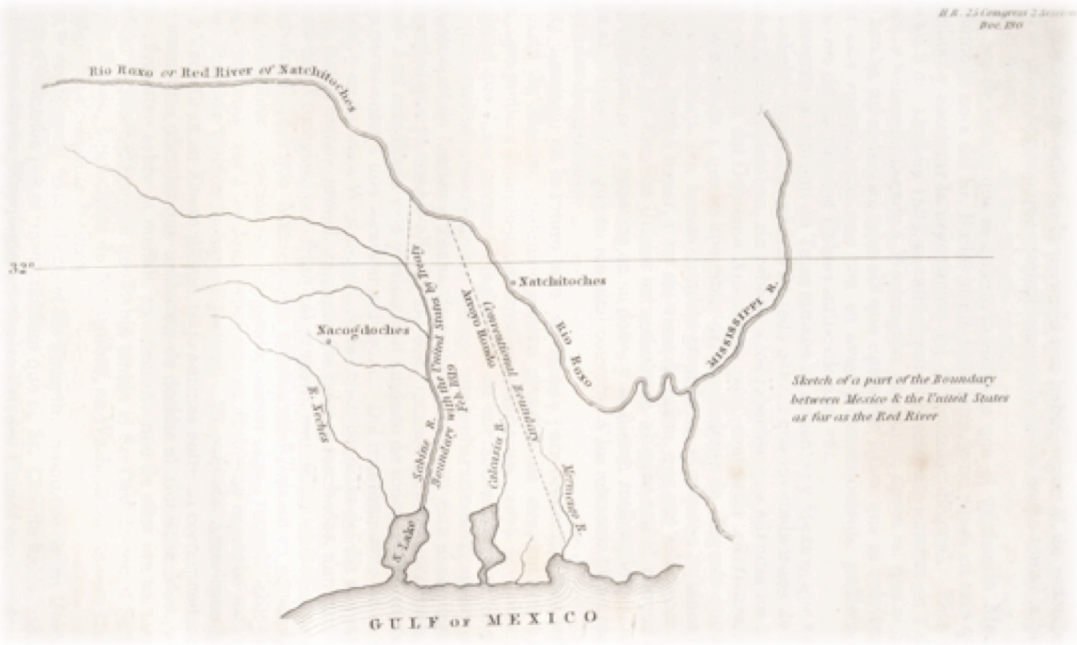


**Figure 1**: the Louisiana-Texas borderlands after 1803.
Source: Sketch of a part of the Boundary between Mexico & the United States as far as the Red River. 1838. From Rice University http///hdl.handle.net/1911/35335.

As between Natchitoches and Pointe Coupée, enslaved people in the US South maintained active communication networks regarding the evolving geopolitics of slavery and freedom throughout North America. The Cane River flight stimulated a series of similar escape attempts from Louisiana, mainly from the regions of Natchitoches, Opelousas and even further east. Escaped slaves sought refuge in Texas with increasing frequency during the 1800s, highlighting the particular harshness of frontier slavery in the Mississippi delta as well as the rising hope of finding free soil in Spanish Texas. During these early years, the latter point was not entirely clear, especially since slavery continued to exist throughout New Spain, including on the Texan side of the border. Runaways from west of the Sabine River occasionally crossed into Louisiana, in the opposite direction to runaway slaves from the US. In September 1807, an enslaved man named Santiago absconded from Nacogdoches, although he eventually fled back in the opposite direction, to San Antonio.[9] In general, however, the lands west of the Sabine River continued to attract Louisiana's enslaved population, a process only partly interrupted by the Mexican war for independence (1810-1821). An enslaved freedom-seeker named Andrés who absconded from Louisiana in 1817 declared that, apart from his imminent sale to another enslaver, he had been motivated by the ideal of "benefiting from his freedom under the [Spanish] Government". Some months later, the fugitive Pivi stated that besides mistreatment, she journeyed to San Antonio assuming that "the Spaniards would treat her better".[10]

[9] Lance Blyth, "Fugitives from servitude: American Deserters and Runaway Slaves in Spanish Nacogdoches, 1803-1808", *East Texas Historical Journal*, v.38/2 (2000), 11.
[10] UT(A), Briscoe, BA, reel 58 frames 97-105 (10 March 1817) and 108 (13 March 1817); UT(A), Briscoe, Charles Ramsdell Collection, Box 2Q238, "Negro Slaves in Spanish America, 1563-1820",

As early as 1819, abolitionists Stratford Gowen and Benjamin Lundy approached the former slave James C. Brown – a native from Virginia once forcibly brought to Kentucky through the interregional slave trade – for a mission "to find shelter and suitable situations for free people of color" in Texas.[11] The liberal antislavery discourses that accompanied Mexico's separation from Spain in 1821 further reinforced its image as a land of freedom for African Americans. The following year, residents of Natchez, Mississippi, were already complaining that some local enslaved people were crossing the Sabine River in search of asylum.[12]

Matters were complicated by the spread of US-style slavery across the Sabine River into Mexican Texas during the 1820s and 1830s, which ironically coincided with Mexico's first attempts at gradually eradicating slavery within the new republic. Starting in 1821, the official opening of Mexican Texas to Euro-American settlers triggered an unprecedented expansion of slavery into the northern fringes of the new nation. As Texas became a new frontier of slavery-based plantation, the contradiction between the emerging fronts of free soil and the Second Slavery in the US-Mexico borderlands grew all the more acute. Rumors of emancipation – both stemming from state and federal authorities – began circulating among people held in slavery in northeastern Mexico during the 1820s, as for instance during the drafting of Coahuila y Tejas's state constitution (1824-1827).[13] By the late 1820s, on the eve of abolition, former settler Noah Smithwick recalled that enslaved people in Texas "became aware of their legal status in Mexican territory, and it was probably owing to their ignorance of the language and country that more of them did not leave". On John McNeel's plantation along the San Bernard River, Smithwick reminisced, a slave named Jim "threw down his hoe and started away", hoping to free himself under Mexican rule, before being shot by his enslaver's son, the ill-named Pleasant.[14] Tom, a "very black" slave from the colonies of central Texas, likewise "started for the Interior" in May 1828. In fact, because Texas was on its way to becoming a slaveholding territory at the time, enslaved freedom-seekers began to conceive the Rio Grande as a more unequivocal line of freedom.[15]

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"Fugitive slaves from the United States, captured in Texas by the expedition against Long, trial at Monterrey, 1820".

[11] Benjamin Drew, *A north-side view of slavery. The refugee: or, the narratives of fugitive slaves in Canada. Related by themselves, with an account of the history and condition of the colored population of Upper Canada* (Boston: J.P. Lewett and Co., 1856), 241.

[12] *American Journal*, 27 Feb. 1822.

[13] Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire. Cotton, Slavery and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 91-92 and 104.

[14] Smithwick, *The Evolution of a State*, 37; James D. Nichols, *The Limits of Liberty: Mobility and the Making of the Eastern U.S.-Mexico Border* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 57-58. On McNeel's plantation: Mary Austin Holley, *Texas. Observations, Historical, Geographical and Descriptive: in a Series of Letters written during a visit to Austin's Colony, with a View to a Permanent Settlement in that Country, in the Autumn of 1831* (Baltimore: Armstrong and Plaskitt, 1833), 44.

[15] The Portal to Texas History (online), Austin Papers: series IV, 1828-1829, "Transcript of a letter from Robert H. Williams to Stephen F. Austin, 18 May 1828" [accessed 8 Nov. 2017].

Mexico's abolition of slavery (15 September 1829) encouraged "large numbers of slaves from Louisiana" (according to the *Niles's Register*) to cross the border, drawn by the promise of "freedom and equality" that Mexico was thought to offer to black people in its territory. It also considerably altered the precarious balance upon which a fast-developing plantation economy rested in Texas. Rumors of abolition agitated both slaveowners and bondspeople, before Texas received an exemption from the decree in December 1829 as a result of intense lobbying efforts by the Euro-American planters, backed by Bexar's *Jefe Político* Ramón Muzquiz and José María Viesca, governor of Coahuila y Tejas. José de las Piedras, military commandant at Nacogdoches, delayed the decree's publication, out of concern that some colonists might otherwise stage an uprising against Mexico.[16] As Andrew Torget has noted, confusion as to whether or not Texas would be included in the abolition decree emboldened slaves, some of whom fled, concerned that this window of opportunity might later be shut (as it effectively was). An unnamed woman and a man named Robert, both in their mid-twenties, fled alongside sixteen-year-old John to the small village of Guerrero (Coahuila). All were Creole slaves born in New Orleans, brought to the new frontier of Texas by their master, and explained that they had absconded out of fear of being deported back to Louisiana by their enslaver in the case that the decree were to be enforced in Texas.[17]

As the Mexican state began articulating a more definitive rejection of racial slavery and openly defied the US for its abidance to the institution, freedom-seekers escaping to Mexican settlements became less and less exceptional between 1829 and 1836. As underlined by Sean M. Kelley, enslaved people in the lower Brazos region in particular – a thriving hub for the illegal slave trade in the early 1830s – began imagining the new republic as an ally for their emancipation.[18] When inspector Juan Francisco Lombraño visited the colonies of *empresarios* Austin and DeWitt during the summer of 1831, local slaves informed him that some Euro-Americans were contemplating a revolt against the Mexican state to ensure that their interests prevailed. Lombraño urged his informants to resist alongside Mexicans in case of war, promising them they would "be free and qualified for any office of honor". Francisco Pizarro Martínez, Mexico's consul in New Orleans, forecasted in 1832 the ruin of the colonies in Texas since, among the slaves, "the word begins to spread that according to the laws, they are free". Two years later, inspector Juan Nepomuceno Almonte was sent to Texas with secret instructions "to inform the slaves of their liberty under Mexican

[16] TBL, Bolton, 46:8, "De las Piedras to Elozua, 9 Dec. 1829"; "Elozua to Mier y Terán, Béjar, 17 Dec. 1829"; "Secretaría de Guerra y Marina to Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 22 Jan. 1830" and "Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores to Secretaría de Guerra y Marina, 6 March 1830"; Marion Gleason McDougall, *Fugitive Slaves (1619-1865)* (Boston: Ginn and Co. 1891), 25; Paul D. Lack, "Slavery and the Texas Revolution", *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 89 (October 1985), 187; Raúl A. Ramos, *Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Ethnicity in San Antonio, 1821-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 117-118; Nichols, *The Limits of Liberty*, 57.

[17] AGEC, FSXIX, c.12 f.8, "Lombraña to the Governor of Coahuila-Texas, 19 Dec. 1829"; YU, Beinecke, LAGP, box 3, "Notes on 1829-1830"; Torget, *Seeds of Empire*, 147.

[18] Kelley, "Mexico in his Head", 709-723; Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 39.

law and to promise them land as freemen".[19] When open conflict between Mexico and the Euro-American colonists eventually broke out, the official *Diario del Gobierno de la República Mexicana* contended that "black slaves" and "embattled Mexicans" now stood together as enemies of the Euro-Americans.[20]

Simultaneously, representations of Mexico as a haven for African Americans blossomed within abolitionist circles in the US North, for instance through reports of Mexico's refusal to extradite US fugitive slaves from 1825 onwards.[21] US abolitionism as a political movement experienced a profound revival and transformation during the late 1820s and early 1830s. A new generation, led by William Lloyd Garrison in Massachusetts, came to prominence with more radical objectives – carried out through popular and combative methods of action – than those of the Pennsylvanian generation. This new abolitionism provided more explicit support for violent resistance against slavery, at a time when David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) incited black people throughout the Union to unite and resist racial oppression and Nat Turner's revolt in Virginia (1831) emphasized US slavery's agonistic nature.[22] By contrast, the image of Mexico (along with Canada and Haiti) as a racial haven spread in the abolitionist press, which began promoting black emigration to the new republic. In 1831, Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation* – founded in 1821 – led a campaign promoting Mexican Texas as "that fine region where the rigors of winter are unknown, and where man, without distinction of color or condition, is looked upon as the being that Deity made him – free and independent". Mexico, more generally, was considered as "an asylum for hundreds of thousands of our oppressed colored people". The American Colonization Society (1817) was subjected to fierce criticism and many African Americans viewed emigration to West Africa with growing "discontent and uneasiness", in Charleston merchant William Turpin's words: in fact, "great numbers [were] seeking an asylum in Canada and Mexico" instead. When Garrison's *Liberator* published a few articles on emigration in 1832, drawing especially upon testimonies from free blacks in Cincinnati (where racial discrimination and violence was escalating), many stressed they would "never remove to Africa" but instead to "Canada or Mexico, as countries far more congenial to our constitutions, and where our rights as freemen are secured". Such plans were under way. The attendees of the third annual "Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Color" held in June 1833 (Philadelphia)

[19] RBBC, NA, v.12, 253-254, "Governor of Coahuila and Texas to Múzquiz, 16 July 1831"; SRE, AEMEUA, 20/9, f.43, "Pizarro Martínez to Encargado de Negocios de los EU Mexicanos, 23 March 1832"; Paul D. Lack, *Texas Revolutionary Experience: a Political and Social History, 1835-1836* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 240-241.
[20] *Diario del Gobierno de la República Mexicana*, 11 Aug. 1836.
[21] *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, v.2/14, 2 Jan. 1827, "Runaway slaves in Mexico"; *ibid*. v.4/12, 27 Nov. 1829, "Glorious News from Mexico", 90.
[22] Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Sarah E. Cornell, "Citizens of nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and Free African Americans in Mexico, 1833-1857", *Journal of American History*, 100:2 (2013), 360; John Hope Franklin, Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.

contemplated projects of emigration to Mexico. Abolitionists Samuel Webb and David Lee Child maintained an active correspondence with Mexican officials on plans for black colonization. However, the most active in this regard was undoubtedly Benjamin Lundy. [23]

Lundy made three trips to Mexico during the first half of the 1830s, looking for a tract of land on which to settle a colony of black migrants in a country where, in his words, "one complexion is as much respected as another". In September 1833, the abolitionist met in San Antonio "a black Louisiana creole" named Felipe Elua. Born a slave, the man had purchased his own freedom and migrated with his family to Texas in 1807, where he now owned "five or six house or lots, besides of fine piece of land". In Nacogdoches, Lundy became acquainted with the family of David Town, a white slaveowner from Georgia who had settled in Eastern Texas during the mid-1820s with his enslaved wife and their children, all of whom he emancipated after crossing the border. According to Lundy, the family was now living "here in harmony" and made "a very respectable appearance", with local residents being "very sociable with them". In Matamoros (Tamaulipas), Lundy met "two young mulatto men, formerly of New Orleans", who had become prosperous as a cabinet-maker and an engineer. Both of them expressed "great aversion to returning to the United States". Lundy concluded from his journeys into northeastern Mexico that there was "no distinction in this place as to freedom, or condition, by reason of color".[24] In March 1835, he finally signed a contract with the state of Tamaulipas for the settlement of about 250 African American families in the Nueces Strip over a period of less than two years. Abolitionist Lydia Maria Child expressed confidence in Lundy's project – "several hundred miles from the scene of difficulty in Texas" – which however collapsed as the first shots of the Texas Revolution were fired. Nonetheless, Lundy's travel accounts represented the most prominent abolitionist essays promoting Mexico as a land of racial equality, social

[23] *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, Oct. 1831 (87) and Dec. 1831 (Supp., 114); "William Turpin to James Madison, 4 July 1833", Madison Papers, Founders Online (LOC); *The Liberator*, 4 Feb. 1832; SRE, LE 1057, f.56, "Samuel Webb to Legación Mexicana, 31 March 1832"; *L'Abeille*, 15 May 1833 and *Niles Weekly Register*, 18 May 1833 (in SRE, LE 1057, f.68-69 and f.72); TBL, Bolton, 46:15, "David Lee Child to Juan Almonte, New Rochelle, 15 Sep. 1835"; Benjamin Lundy, *The War in Texas; a Review of Facts and Circumstances, Showing that this Contest is a Crusade Against Mexico* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1837), 5; E.S. Abdy, *Journal of a residence and tour in the United States of North America, from April 1833 to October 1834* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969 [1835]), 12; Carlos Bosch García, *Documentos de la relación de México con los Estados Unidos (31 de diciembre de 1829-29 de mayo de 1836) II - Butler en persecución de la provincia de Texas* (México: UNAM, 1983), v.1, 299-300; Elena K. Abbott, "Beacons of Liberty: Free-Soil Havens and the American Anti-Slavery Movement, 1813-1863", PhD Diss. (Washington DC: Georgetown University, 2017), 141-147; Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism,* 132.

[24] Thomas Earle, *The Life, Travels and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy, including his Journeys to Texas and Mexico, with a Sketch of Contemporary Events, and a Notice of the Revolution in Hayti*, (Philadelphia: W.D. Parrish, 1847), 54, 63, 116 and 142-143; SRE, AEMEUA, 20/9, f.21, "Encargado de Negocios to Pizarro Martínez, 25 Feb. 1832"; Leroy P. Graf, "Colonizing Projects in Texas South of the Nueces, 1820-1845", *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, v.50, n°4 (April 1947), 440-444.

integration, economic mobility and political rights for African Americans, free and enslaved alike.[25]

In the wake of Lundy's colony project, other abolitionists began to take an interest in Mexico as a beacon of freedom for enslaved and free African Americans. Jonathan W. Walker, a Massachusetts-born ship captain – who came to be known subsequently as "the man with the branded hand", after he was branded with the sign "S.S." for "slave-stealer" during his trial in Pensacola in 1844 for helping seven slaves to escape to the Bahamas – "had some correspondence" with Lundy himself. Lundy and Walker were supposed to meet in Texas to discuss colonization plans. The latter endeavored "to establish a refuge for blacks who wished to escape slavery and prejudice", including fugitive slaves, in 138.000 acres of the grant recently acquired by Lundy. With this purpose in mind, Walker left for Matamoros in November 1835 aboard his *Supply of New Bedford* with his twelve-year-old son John and a young mechanic, Richard Marble, a friend of the family in New Bedford. As they reached the Mexican coast, Walker "found the country in a very unsettled state". He sustained himself for some months by shipping goods for mercantile houses between New Orleans and Matamoros, while "expecting to be joined by others" in his project. In the course of a journey between the two ports in June 1836, pirates attacked Walker's ship as it lay ashore on the coast of Texas. The captain received two gunshot-wounds in the arm and the stomach, before escaping with his son by swimming through the ocean, while the young Richard was murdered. Later, Mexican villagers rescued the two bleeding and starving victims, but just like Lundy's project, Walker's ideal colony never came to fruition.[26]

*"The land of his fellows" (1836-1861)*

After 1836, the separation of Texas from Mexico created a sharp boundary between lands of slavery and non-slavery in the US-Mexico borderlands. The "peculiar institution" dramatically expanded north of the Nueces River, spurred by slave-grown

[25] LOC, Benjamin Lundy Papers, 1814-1906 ("Lundy to his father Joseph, Mouth of the Mississippi, 4th mo. 13th, 1835"); Patricia G. Holland, Milton Meltzer, *Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817-1880* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 43-44 and 48-49; Nicholas Guyatt, "The Future Empire of Our Freedmen: Republican Colonization schemes in Texas and Mexico, 1861-1865", in Adam Arenson and Andrew R. Graybill, *Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 97; Nichols, *The Limits of Liberty*, 64-67.

[26] Jonathan Walker, *Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker, at Pensacola, Florida, for aiding slaves to escape from bondage. With an appendix, containing a sketch of his life* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 108-110; Frank Edward Kittredge, *The Man with the Branded Hand: An Authentic Sketch of the Life and Services of Capt. Jonathan Walker* (Rochester: Frank Edward Kittredge, 1899), 12-14; Julius A. Laack, "Captain Jonathan Walker, abolitionist", *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, v.32, n°3 (1949), 313; Alvin F. Oickle, *The Man with the Branded Hand: the life of Jonathan Walker, Abolitionis*t (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westhome Publishing, 2011), 26-33; Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 125.

cotton exports. Galveston's annual cotton exports, for instance, rose from 65.809 bales in 1853 (worth $2.701.500) to 148.362 bales by 1859 (worth $8.139.910).[27] Simultaneously, enslaved people standing in-between competing political entities in the borderlands grew aware of their leverage as a third party and often embraced Mexico's cause for their own emancipation.[28] James Silk Buckingham noted that "the emancipation of all slaves in Mexico, [was] known to them [US bondspeople]". Through Mexican peons and abolitionists active on the southern frontier after the Texas Revolution, news of Mexico's refusal to extradite runaways reached slave quarters. Travelling from Kentucky during the late 1830s, journalist Charles Wilkins Webber met in Texas a planter from the Brazos, who had lost one of his slaves fleeing to the border and who observed that "escaping to Mexico is a favorite scheme of the slaves of Texas", since "they have the impression that their condition is very greatly bettered by the change".[29]

Increasingly, Mexico began to permeate the abolitionist's mental landscape of asylum territories for fugitive slaves and oppressed free blacks.[30] Laudatory (and often romanticized) depictions of Mexico blossomed in the northern abolitionist press after 1836. The *Colored American*, for instance, framed the new nation as an inspiration for black emancipation, noting that "with all her wars and commotions, [she] has never yet had cause to regret that she bestowed the boon of freedom to her slaves".[31] "Let the emancipated negro find himself on the borders of Mexico and the states beyond, and his fate is no longer doubtful or gloomy", enthusiastically exclaimed an editor from Illinois: Mexico was "the land of his fellows, where equal rights and equal hopes await him and his offspring".[32] Mormon leader Joseph Smith advocated for the annexation of Texas on the ground that emancipated slaves could be sent "from Texas to Mexico, where all colors are alike".[33] Just as the relationship between Mexico and the United States became increasingly strained over Texas, the causes of African Americans and Mexico became closely intertwined. In May 1839, Jabez Delano Hammond put forward plans to establish military academies in Mexico (as well as in Canada), aimed at training escaped slaves from the US South for the eradication of American slavery

[27] W.&D. Richardson, *Galveston City Directory, 1859-1860* (Galveston: "News" Book and Job Office, 1859), 82.
[28] Pekka Hämäläinen, Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands", *Journal of American History*, 98 (2011), 338; Andrés Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Sean M. Kelley, *Los Brazos de Dios: a Plantation Society in the Texas borderlands, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2010).
[29] James S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (London: Fisher, 1842), v.2, 433; Charles W. Webber, *Tales of the Southern Border* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1887), 48-49.
[30] See for instance: Henry B. Stanton, *Remarks of Henry B. Stanton, in the Representatives' Hall, on the 23nd (sic) and 24th of February: before the Committee of the House of Representatives, of Massachusetts, to whom was referred sundry memorials on the subject of slavery* (Boston: Knapp, 1837), 62 (SJMASC).
[31] *Colored American*, 16 Nov. 1839.
[32] *The Ottawa Free Trader*, 9 Aug. 1844.
[33] B.H. Roberts (ed.), *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lack City: Deseret News, 1912), v.6, 243-244; Michael Von Wanegen, *The Texas Republic and the Mormon Kingdom of God* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 26.

through armed force.[34] Likewise, Juan Nepomuceno Almonte – now Mexican minister in Washington – reported in 1844 that some free blacks in the US had offered their services to the Mexican government in case of war with the Union, assuring him that the African American population would take the side of the southern republic.[35] In the wake of the annexation of Texas in 1845, even slave refugees in Canada clearly identified Mexico as their ally for black emancipation in North America. In September 1845, "the head-quarters for the runaway slaves" in Canada urged African Americans to support Mexico "in the anticipated war, and render that government all the assistance they can", tentatively predicting that about 100.000 men would respond to its call to take arms in defense of the foreign nation. Solomon Northup "well remembered the extravagant hopes that were excited" among his fellow bondspeople in Louisiana during the war itself, whereas by contrast, Mexico's final defeat "produced only sorrow and disappointment in the cabin".[36] In a similar vein, from the late 1840s onwards, free blacks in Louisiana increasingly conceived of Mexico as a suitable land – along with Haiti and Jamaica – to which to emigrate as they faced growing racial discrimination. During the 1850s, several colonies of free African Americans from Louisiana (and to a lesser extent Florida) blossomed in the coastal state of Veracruz. As argued by Mary Niall Mitchell, would-be migrants now entertained high expectations about life in the southern republic and seemed to strongly believe in the presumed inexistence of racial discrimination in Mexico. This was far from the uncertainties expressed by free blacks in Philadelphia in the early 1830s.[37]

After the US-Mexican war, the promotion of Mexico as a safe haven for African Americans in antislavery networks and newspapers – especially in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* and *The Liberator* – reached its pinnacle. The *National Era*, for instance, dedicated several articles to Mexico's free-soil policy and its protection of foreign runaway slaves, as reasserted by the 1857 liberal Constitution.[38] While the brothers John Mercer and Charles Henry Langston were contemplating setting up an emigration scheme in some part of the Mexican Cession lands, abolitionist Martin Robison Delany's *Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of*

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[34] Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: a History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 419-420.

[35] SRE 4-12-6280, "Negros de los Estados Unidos de América en favor de México en caso de guerra, informes de la Legación de México en dicho país y memorial presentado por los citados negros"; TBL, Bolton, 47:6, "Arrangoíz to Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores, 28 March 1842".

[36] *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1 Sep. 1845; Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997), 249.

[37] Alexandre Barde, *Histoire des Comités de Vigilance aux Attakapas* (Saint-Jean-Baptiste: Imprimerie du Meschacébé et de l'Avant-Coureur, 1861), 336-338; Carl Christian Sartorius, *Mexico: Landscape and Popular Sketches* (London: Trübner & Co. 1859), 82; Bosch García, *Documentos de la Relación de México (...) II - Butler en persecución de la provincia de Texas*, v.1, 299-300; Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 29-38. On free blacks from Pensacola migrating to Tampico in the spring and summer of 1857 aboard the schooners *Pinta* and *William*: Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*, 67.

[38] *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 9 March 1848; *National Era*, 21 Aug. 1851, 19 Oct. 1854, 16 April 1857; *The Liberator*, 15 May 1857.

*the United States* (1852) incited "all colored persons who can, to study, and have their children taught Spanish", with the prospect of "going South" to Mexico. Delany, the correspondent of Henry Bibb's *Voice of the Fugitive* in Pittsburgh, represented Mexico as a land of freedom, equal rights and opportunities, in contrast to the more skeptical opinions expressed by Frederick Douglass and Mary Ann Shadd on the subject. As with Garrison two decades earlier, Delany's pamphlet stemmed both from a criticism directed at the American Colonization Society's emigration plans to Liberia as well as a reaction to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (FSA) in September 1850.[39] The FSA, passed under the aegis of Virginia senator James M. Mason, strengthened legal provisions on the rendition of escaped slaves from the US South taking refuge in the North, making the status of slave refugees *within* the US even more precarious than before. Consequently, the attractiveness of Canada and Mexico as spaces of formal freedom for enslaved asylum-seekers was enhanced.[40]

The "National Emigration Convention of Colored People" held at Cleveland (Ohio) in August 1854 noted that self-emancipated slaves "already find their way in large companies to the Canadas" and advised would-be fugitives to consider Mexico as well, underscoring that "there is as much freedom for them South, as there is North, as much protection in Mexico as in Canada". The attendees who supported self-emancipation to Mexico further argued that, by contrast with the North and Canada, "the fugitive slave will find it a much pleasanter journey and more easy to access, to wend his way from Louisiana and Arkansas to Mexico". Regarding the FSA, they asserted that once on Mexican land, self-liberated bondspeople would not be threatened by "miserable, half-starved, service Northern slave-catchers by the way, waiting cap in hand, ready and willing to do the bidding of their contemptible southern masters".[41] Both Delany and the Convention attendees drew similar conclusions after 1850. Enslaved people now had to seek freedom across national borders, even though the FSA's provisions remained loosely implemented and often

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[39] Martin Robison Delany, *Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993 [1852]), 178; Mary Ann Shadd, *A Plea for Emigration, or Notes of Canada West, in its Moral, Social and Political aspect: with Suggestions respecting Mexico, West Indies, and Vancouver Island, for the Information of Colored Emigrants* (Detroit: George W. Pattison, 1852), 40-42. Shadd had a rather negative view on emigration to Mexico. Although she noted that an antislavery culture predominated among Mexicans, she argued that black migrants' prospects in Mexico would be doomed by internal social and political instability, as well as the threat of US imperialism. Cornell, "Citizens of Nowhere", 359-360; Guyatt, "The Future Empire of Our Freedmen", 98; Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 70.

[40] Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: an Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 231-251; Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedom Seekers*, 25 and 30. Kerr-Ritchie asserts in particular that, by contrast with fugitives absconding to the northern states, "those who crossed either the southern border into Mexico or the northern border into Canada were guaranteed greater security". We will discuss this assertion more thoroughly in ch.3-4.

[41] National Emigration Convention of Colored People, *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of Colored People: held at Cleveland, Ohio, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, the 24th, 25th and 26th of August 1854* (Pittsburgh: A.A. Anderson, 1854), 69 (SJMASC).

inoperative, while spaces of informal freedom persisted even at the heart of the US South.[42] The years following the passage of the FSA represented the heyday of slave flight to Mexico and arguably some fugitives who would have previously ran away to the North now opted for Mexico (table 1).

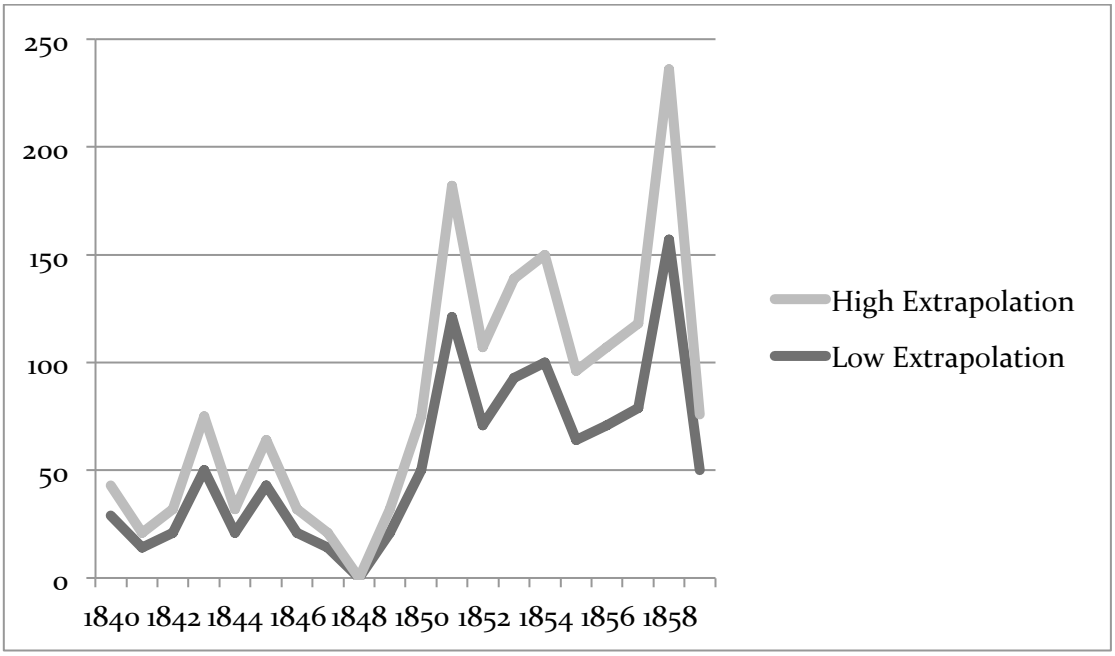


**Table 1**: High and low extrapolations of yearly numbers of self-emancipated slaves to Mexico (1840-1859).[43]

Following the US-Mexican War, Texas's slave community gradually came to associate Mexico with non-slavery, and the enslaved population of Texas rose from about 58.000 in 1850 to 182.000 only ten years later. As a result, escape attempts from

[42] Damian A. Pargas, "Urban Refugees: Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Informal Freedom in the American South", *Journal of Early American History*, 7 (2017), 262-284; Viola F. Müller, "Illegal but Tolerated: Slave Refugees in Richmond, Virginia, 1800-1860", in Damian A. Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018), 137-167.

[43] These yearly estimates of the number of enslaved people fleeing to Mexico are based on statistical data retrieved from a sample of 153 individual or collective escape attempts collected from runaway slave advertisements, arrest notices and other archival material on slave refugees to Mexico, from 1840 to 1859. The cases included in this sample were selected according to the consistency and reliability of the information they provided on criteria such as escape time, geographical origin, age, gender, physical and personal description. This sample provided a basis for extrapolating Douai and Kapp's 1854 estimates (see introduction) for this whole period. An extrapolation of Douai's low estimate provides a total estimate of 1.090 freedom-seekers, while an extrapolation of Kapp's high estimate provides a total estimate of 1.638 freedom-seekers. (The year 1848 has been left out of the sample/extrapolation due to numerical insignificance). The graph is consistent with claims by other historians regarding a substantial increase in escape attempts during the 1850s. See especially: Nichols, *The Limits of Liberty*, 127. The relative decrease of escape attempts to Mexico registered for the second part of the 1850s (except for 1858) seems to corroborate William D. Carrigan's assertion that "slave flight became a less realistic option" after the mid-1850s. William D. Carrigan, "Slavery on the Frontier: the Peculiar Institution in Central Texas", *Slavery & Abolition*, 20:2 (August 1999), 82-83.

the US Southwest increased in a spectacular way.[44] As underlined by James D. Nichols, former refugees from slavery in Mexico who were abducted and re-enslaved in the southwestern borderlands incited other enslaved American Americans to abscond. The *Texas Monument*'s editor, for instance, considered these tales of freedom circulating in slave quarters as especially explosive. "One recaptured fugitive who has been in a free State or Mexico for a few years will corrupt a whole community of slaves", he remarked.[45] Such narratives of freedom were indeed influential and the appeal exerted by the Mexican border on enslaved people provoked the ire of many Southerners. While self-liberated slaves residing across the border generally did not leave written accounts of their experiences, post-Reconstruction testimonies by former slaves born in antebellum Texas suggest that the enslaved community increasingly associated self-emancipation with Mexico. When he was interviewed during the mid-1930s about his experience as a former slave in Texas, Felix Haywood recalled that "sometimes someone would come 'long and try to get us to run up North and be free. We used to laugh at that. There wasn't no reason to run up North. All we had to do was to walk, but walk South, and we'd be free as soon as we crossed the Rio Grande. In Mexico you could be free. They didn't care what color you was, black, white, yellow or blue". James Boyd likewise argued that "most in general 'round our part of the country, iffen a nigger want to run away, he'd light out for ole Mexico. That was nigger heaven them days, they thought".[46] Walter Rimm stated that by the eve of the US Civil War, Mexico had come to be seen as the land "where a lot of de slaves runs to".[47] Most slaveholders understood that an enslaved person born or brought to the US Southwest would soon conceive of Mexico as "his El Dorado for accumulation, his utopia for political rights, and his Paradise for happiness". They grew increasingly alarmed by this, at a time when slavery's apologists felt that the lower South was on the verge of "becom[ing] Bostonized with Abolition".[48] A resident writing to the *Washington American* in November 1855 expressed concern at the rising "geopolitical literacy" of enslaved people in the borderlands. In his words, "nearly all the negroes of Texas, have some ideas, more or less extensive, of the general disposition of the Mexican people toward them, and, I believe, it is only a matter of expediency with more than half of the slave population of Texas; that they do not raise in a body and go over to the Mexican side of

[44] Omar Valerio-Jiménez, *River of Hope: Forging Identity and Nation in the Rio Grande Borderlands* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 184.
[45] *The Texas Monument*, 12 March 1851; Nichols, *The Limits of Liberty*, 137-138.
[46] FWP, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of the United States of America from Interviews with Former Slaves*, v.16/2 (Washington: Works Progress Administration, 1941) 132; Andrew Waters (ed.), *I was born in slavery: personal accounts of slavery in Texas* (Winston-Salem: John Blair, Real Voices, Real History Series, 2003), 6.
[47] FWP, *Slave Narratives,* v.16/3, 262. Rimm himself settled in Mexico after the US Civil War, where he married a certain "Martina" in Matamoros in 1869. Rimm had four children in Matamoros, before coming back to Texas. His experience illustrates the long-lasting effect of Mexico's appeal for African Americans from the US South, even after the abolition of slavery.
[48] *The Northern Standard*, 25 Dec. 1852; Randolph Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: the Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 180. The last quote is from *New Orleans Delta*, 3 Dec. 1856.

the Rio Grande".[49] The coincidence of Mexico's liberal stance on foreign escaped slaves with frontier slavery's violence inspired enslaved rebels: in 1856, local settlers on the Colorado River thwarted the alleged preparations of about 100 slaves "to fight their way to Mexico".[50] Similarly, during the so-called "Texas Troubles" of 1860, slaves across Texas were suspected of staging plots to kill whites and flee in large numbers to Mexico. Not all of these suspicions were ungrounded: some detained runaways in Bastrop for instance stressed that "their intention was to enter Mexican territory, where they expected to be free after their arrival there". One of them had made "two attempts to reach Mexico, but has been thwarted in his plans both times, by being caught en route".[51]

Fully aware of the developing reputation of Mexico as a land of freedom for runaway slaves, southwestern slaveholders increasingly viewed Mexico's antislavery appeal as a threat to their social and economic interests. Moreover, they also sought to portray Mexico's abolition of slavery as a sign of national decadence.[52] During the early 1800s, civilian and military officials in western Louisiana attempted to sow doubt regarding New Spain's rumored openness to foreign runaways. However, by the eve of the US Civil War, Mexico's reputation as a beacon of freedom among slaves and abolitionists could no longer be concealed, as Mexico's criticism of slavery grew increasingly outspoken. Thus, after the Texas Revolution, influential slaveholders, journalists, writers and chroniclers committed to the defense of the "peculiar institution" developed proslavery narratives with the hope – conscious or otherwise – of stemming the flow of self-liberated blacks to Mexico and of reassuring slaveholders who were contemplating settlement in the Southwestern frontier. These counter-narratives usually depicted the slavery of the US South as benevolent, while liberty across the border was presented as a mere illusion.[53] Guides for prospective settlers in frontier Texas, for instance, frequently introduced frontier slavery as idyllic, such as in A.B. Lawrence's *Emigrant Guide to the New Republic* (1840). Newspapers denounced Mexican peonage as a labor regime far more destructive than the supposedly patriarchal southern slavery, while self-emancipated slaves in Mexico were described as being trapped in "the most squalid wretchedness, poverty and starvation", as argued by the Clarksville's *Standard*.[54] The *Telegraph and Texas Register*, for instance,

[49] *The Washington American*, 22 Nov. 1855. The concept of "geopolitical literacy" is borrowed from: Phillip Troutman, "Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 *Creole* Revolt", in Walter Johnson (ed.), *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 203-233.
[50] Kelley, *Los Brazos de Dios*, 100. See ch.2 on the Colorado rebellion of 1856.
[51] *Galveston Weekly News*, 21 Aug. 1860.
[52] Consult for instance: *De Bow's Review, Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources,* v.25 (Jul.-Dec. 1858), 624, "Acquisition of Mexico – Filibustering".
[53] James D. Nichols, "The Limits of Liberty: African Americans, Indians, and Peons in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1820-1860", PhD Diss. (State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2012), 71. "Proslavery writers pointed to the allegedly sharp contrast between the destitution of the hacienda system and the benignity of Southern slavery".
[54] A.B. Lawrence, *Texas in 1840: or the Emigrant's Guide to the New Republic, being the result of Observations, Inquiry and Travel in that Beautiful Country* (New York: W.W. Allen, 1840), 54; *The Standard*, 21 Oct. 1854. Lawrence's guide fits into what historian Graham Davis has termed

published in January 1837 commentaries on the "relative evils of negro and white slavery", which asserted that in Mexico, "half of the population are in a state of slavery intolerable compared with that of most of the southern negroes". Many fugitives "would be glad to get back to their old homes", argued another editor.[55] In 1858, a press correspondent in Laredo reported how a man named Bartlett allegedly met in Nuevo Laredo a "little girl belonging to him", who "came up to him crying, saying that she wanted to go home and wanted something to eat", being "nearly starved".[56] Southwestern newspapers published stories of slaves who allegedly returned voluntarily to their masters, thus preferring slavery in Texas to freedom in Mexico. Willis, a former slave refugee, was said to have deemed "slavery in Texas far preferable to peonage in Mexico".[57] However, the vast majority of former runaways did not choose to return voluntarily but were rather abducted in Mexican territory. Therefore, such "testimonies", presenting enslaved people as relieved and joyful to return to bondage, should not be taken at face value. Instead, they should be understood as part of a larger concern among slavery's supporters about Mexico's effect on slave resistance. These accounts give an idea of just how effective an idealized conception of Mexico as a land of freedom had become in inspiring escape attempts, and how this in turn prompted proponents of slavery to develop counter-discourses that twisted the very meanings of the words freedom and slavery. Nevertheless, ideals and representations alone can hardly account for why slaves increasingly fled across the Mexican border. A closer look at the social experiences of bondspeople *within* the US Southwest's regime of slavery is therefore necessary.

The issue of assessing exactly *why* a slave would attempt to escape from his or her enslaver always remains fairly slippery for scholars of North American slavery. In fact, being held in slavery was an experience traumatic enough in itself to induce any bondsperson to abscond. Nonetheless, as Eric Foner has argued, for most self-

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"exercises in promotion" of Texas to a public of potential new recruits. These presented the western frontier as an Arcadian and racial utopia, in which the myths of abundant land and providential slavery worked in tandem. Graham Davis, *Land! Irish Pioneers in Mexican and Revolutionary Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 14. Additionally, diaries of military officers, soldiers and militiamen who fought in Mexico often featured narratives that reversed the liberal imaginary regarding slavery and freedom in the US-Mexican borderlands. See for instance: Thomas J. Green, *Journal of the Texian Expedition against Mier* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1845), 427-429; George C. Furber, *The twelve months volunteer, or, Journal of a private, in the Tennessee regiment of cavalry, in the campaign, in Mexico, 1846-7* (Cincinnati: J.A. & U.P. James, 1849), 209. In a similar vein, for travellers: Ashbel K. Shepard, *The land of the Aztecs, or two years in Mexico* (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1859), 72; Ashbel K. Shepard, *Papers on Spanish America* (Albany, NY: Munsell, 1868), 45.

[55] *Telegraph and Texas Register*, 3 Jan. 1837; *Fayetteville Observer*, 5 March 1857. Actual (as opposed to represented) settlement experiences for fugitive slaves in Mexico will be analyzed in ch.3-4.

[56] *Nueces Valley Weekly*, 13 Feb. 1858.

[57] *The Northern Standard*, 25 Dec. 1852. Traveller Carlo Barinetti also argued that during the Texas Revolution, "General Filisola told [him] that some negroes from Texas, who he had taken prisoners, requested, as soon as the campaign was over, to go back to their owners": Carlo Barinetti, *A Voyage to Mexico and Havanna, including some General Observations on the United States* (New York: C. Vinton, 1841), 126.

emancipated slaves, "even if the desire for freedom was the underlying motive, the decision to escape usually arose from an immediate grievance".[58] In particular, scholars have emphasized that cruelty, concerns over the maintenance of family ties, poor material and sanitary conditions, scarcity of food, precarious housing, as well as multiple forms of violence, deprivation and broken promises, all pushed slaves to abscond from their enslavers in North America. In the specific context of the borderlands, which was defined by a clash between the Second Slavery and emerging free-soil policies, however, much remains to be written about how exactly such frustrations, humiliations and violence prompted desertion to northeastern Mexico between 1803 and 1861.[59] The following sections touch upon the particular motives and personal experiences that underlay slave flight to Mexico.

### *Relatives and loved ones*

*Uprooted Fugitives*

The historiography on fugitive slaves in North America has thoroughly addressed the role played by the maintenance and the (re)formation of family ties among enslaved people in fostering escape attempts in the decades leading up to the US Civil War.[60] Interestingly, in the US-Mexico borderlands, the *absence* of family ties also spurred bids for self-emancipation across the border. Throughout the US South, many individuals who had been forcibly transported to the receiving societies of the interstate slave trade, through a process which Ira Berlin has termed a "second middle passage", were separated from their relatives in the Lower or Upper South, the Caribbean or even Africa, with reunion being virtually impossible.[61] In Texas, the disproportionate importance of the domestic slave trade after the Texas Revolution

[58] Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: the Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W.W.Norton and Company, 2015), 197.
[59] John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19; Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 134-143; Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 152; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana, the development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 142; Torget, *Seeds of Empire*, 1-2. Child mortality provides an indication of poor sanitary condition. For instance, the fugitive George from Peach Point Plantation lost his first daughter Valentine (born in January 1851) in 1852. UT(A), Briscoe, James F. and Stephen S. Perry Papers, Box 2J43.
[60] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves,* 49-74; Damian A. Pargas, *The Quarters and the Field, Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010); Damian A. Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 163-164; Sylviane Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles: the Story of the American Maroons* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 77-78; Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 218-219, Harriet C. Frazier, *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those who Helped Them, 1763-1865* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2004), 100.
[61] Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: a History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 161. For a comprehensive discussion of slave family formation in the Brazos region: Kelley, *Los Brazos de Dios*, 72-82.

accounted for the presence of so many uprooted fugitives in the borderlands. According to Michael Tadman, between 1840 and 1859, the net balance of enslaved people imported to Texas through the interstate slave trade reached 127.812.[62] A painful legacy of the interstate slave trade and the south- and westward migrations of American planters, "information wanted ads" published in the Reconstruction press shed light on countless formerly enslaved African Americans, who had been held in bondage in the US Southwest, and who were now looking for relatives and acquaintances scattered throughout the Old South.[63] By that time, others had already left for Mexico. Indeed, many uprooted bondspeople who had been separated from their relatives and who were unable to recreate family ties in the US Southwest ran away to Mexico. Judging the prospect of reunion with loved ones to be unrealistic, they adapted their strategy for self-emancipation. By absconding across the Mexican border to achieve freedom, escaped slaves knew that they were leaving behind almost any hope of reunion with relatives. Remarkably, the lack of reference to runaways harbored by relatives in the borderlands speaks volumes about the uprooted character of many self-liberated slaves in Mexico. Among them, previously arrested fugitive slaves throughout the US South, such as the famous self-liberated Nelson Hackett from Arkansas, were frequently sold into the new borderlands of slavery.[64] Consequently, many escape attempts to the Mexican border represented the culmination of a *carrier* (in Erving Goffman's sense), in which rootlessness, shattered family life and fugitive antecedents came together.[65]

Particularly illuminating are the experiences of South Carolina-born Martin and Juan Pedro (as written in Mexican sources), two men who fled in 1819 from the borderlands of Louisiana to San Antonio. During the 1810s, the Carolinas had become significant suppliers of the domestic slave trade. Both Martin and Juan Pedro were young men, the class of slaves preferentially traded to the Lower South.[66] Martin, a twenty-seven-year-old blacksmith, was raised on the plantation of a certain Jesse Koonthree, who inflicted two scars on his face in retaliation for a first escape attempt ("to the English") when Martin was a young slave. Martin was then sold to Koonthree's

[62] As a comparison, this figure represents more than the net balance of enslaved people transported to Louisiana between 1800 and 1859 (124.001). Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 12. Personal communication, Sean M. Kelley, 5 February 2019.

[63] Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery (accessible through informationwanted.org); Heather A. Williams, *Help me to Find my People: the African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 139-168.

[64] Karolyn Smardz Frost, Veta Smith Tucker, *A Fluid Frontier: Slavery, Resistance and the Underground Railroad in the Detroit River Borderland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2016), 71-72.

[65] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo and Singapore: Simon & Schuster Inc., Touchstone Edition, 1986 [1963]).

[66] Andrew J. Torget, "Cotton Empire: Slavery and the Texas Borderlands, 1820-1837", PhD Diss. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2009), 47-48; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 161; Sean M. Kelley, "Blackbirders and Bozales: African-born Slaves on the Lower Brazos River of Texas in the Nineteenth Century", *Civil War History*, v.54, n°4 (Dec. 2008), 408; Kelley, *Los Brazos de Dios*, 35-38.

nephew, before he was removed to Louisiana, in order to work as a slave for planter James Kirkham. When questioned in Monterrey (Nuevo León) in April 1820 by captain Francisco Bruno Barrera, Martin stressed the "very bad treatment" he had received from Kirkham as the motive for which he had "passed the line to request his protection in the domains of Spain". Martin's flight was thus embedded in long experience of mistreatment and forced displacement from South Carolina to Louisiana. Isolation and despair were the outcome. When asked by Barrera whether he was aware of "the insult and damage" he had done to Kirkham by escaping, Martin replied that he had suffered a much deeper loss after he was separated from his relatives, who had remained in the possession of Koonthree. In Louisiana, Martin did not reconstruct the family ties he had lost in the turmoil of the interstate slave trade (while the Mississippi Delta was booming as a receiving area during the 1810s), if he ever tried at all. He neither married nor had children. His testimony to Spanish frontier officials provides a glimpse of a past strained by separation, and by physical and psychological violence. It illustrates how the lack of family ties in receiving societies prompted many slaves to flee. Like his fellow runaway Martin, Juan Pedro was also a particularly alienated man, whose family ties and sense of geographical stability had been destroyed by forced migration to Louisiana. Unlike Martin, Juan Pedro had married an enslaved woman from a neighboring plantation in Kentucky in 1814, although she died soon after their union. Juan Pedro was later sent by his deceased master's widow to the vibrant slave market of Natchez, in Mississippi. Simon Mares, a planter from Opelousas in western Louisiana, bought him from the slave pen. Some hundreds of miles away from home, Juan Pedro chose to abscond across the Sabine River.[67]

*"To Save his Family from Slavery"*

Black bondspeople uprooted and scattered by the interstate slave trade were not the only enslaved African Americans to populate the new frontiers of the Second Slavery. Slaveholders migrating from the Upper to the Lower South frequently brought their entire enslaved workforce with them, while many bondspeople quickly recreated family ties anew far from home. As in the US South in general, slaves in the borderlands sought to preserve such bonds. In this context, anticipation of forced separation represented a significant motive for flight to Mexico, as did actual removals,

[67] UT(A), Briscoe, Charles Ramsdell Collection, Box 2Q238, "Negro Slaves in Spanish America, 1563-1820", "Fugitive slaves from the United States, captured in Texas by the expedition against Long. Trial at Monterrey, 1820"; RBBC, NA, v.10, 212-3 (23 Dec. 1820); RBBC, NA, v.16, 136 (10 Dec. 1819); RBBC, NA, v.17, 323 (1 Dec. 1819); Torget, *Seeds of Empire,* 47; Cornell, "Citizens of nowhere", 356; Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves,* 12. Journalists sometimes expressed surprise at escape attempts to Mexico by such slaves. In 1860, when two slaves "recently brought" from South Carolina to Texas were arrested near Rio Grande City, the editor of *The Ranchero* deemed it "strange that they should attempt to make their way to Mexico, being entirely ignorant of the geography of the country" (*The Ranchero*, 17 March 1860). See ch.2 on geography.

as Damian Pargas has argued for the US South more generally. In sum, family ties also inspired escape attempts to the Mexican border in a positive sense.[68]

Although they were relatively unusual in the US-Mexican region, instances of entire families escaping in a southward direction drew the attention of contemporaries. David Thomas, a slave from Texas, introduced himself to the municipality of Allende (Coahuila) in April 1849, along with his daughter and three nephews, intending "to save his family from slavery". Similarly, an enslaved couple and their two children fled twice from the surroundings of Corpus Christi during the summer of 1861, heading to the Rio Grande delta along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The three Gordon brothers (Albert, Isaac and Henry), who absconded together from slavery in Texas, provide another example of a family escape. The eldest, Albert, described as a "strong, healthy man" by the *Western Texan*, initially escaped alone to the Mexican borderlands around 1852. Arrested in San Antonio, Albert absconded from the upper part of the county jail with other prisoners, after they "made a hole in the wall" and "let themselves down by the aid of blankets". Once in Mexico, he joined the *mascogos* in Coahuila. Apparently pleased with his new life across the border, he decided after two years to come back to Texas in order to encourage Isaac and Henry to join him. Albert was arrested again, but managed to abscond once more, and the brothers successfully sought refuge among the Black Seminoles.[69]

The desire to secure matrimonial bonds against separation often prompted slaves to flee to Mexico's Northeast, especially as laws in the US South traditionally offered no solid legal support for unions among bondspeople.[70] During the first decade of the century, numerous slave refugees absconding to New Spain from the US South sought the validation of their marriage ties. "*Hacer vida maridable*" (to live a matrimonial life) under Catholic benediction – implying the will to convert, if necessary – constituted a frequent motive as to why slave refugees had fled across the Sabine River. In the early nineteenth century, the asylum from slavery available in New Spain for bondspeople stemmed from the policy of granting religious sanctuary to foreign Catholics from Protestant territories. Fugitives were well aware of this connection and adapted their rhetoric, as Matthew Restall has argued in relation to enslaved people fleeing from the mahogany logging camps of British Honduras ("*Negros de Walix*") to Yucatán's settlements of Bacalar, Campeche and Mérida before

[68] Damian A. Pargas, "The Gathering Storm: Slave Responses to the Threat of Interregional Migration in the Early Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Early American History* 2/3 (2012), 286-315.
[69] AGEC, FSXIX, c.2 f.8 e.3, 23 April 1849; *The Ranchero*, 8 June 1861 and 6 July 1861; *The Western Texan*, 15 April 1852; *The Texas Monument*, 21 April 1852; *The Independent Press*, 13 Oct. 1854; Kenneth W. Porter, *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 162. As with the Gordon brothers, some runaways who had experienced non-slavery under Mexican law came back to the US South (voluntarily or not) and assisted other slaves in fleeing across the Rio Grande.
[70] Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 154.

the British Abolition Act of 1833.[71] The stated motive of preserving matrimonial bonds by formalizing marriage under Catholic rule should not be interpreted as merely instrumental, however. Jean-Louis ("Juan Luis") and Marguerite ("Margarita"), two slaves from Louisiana who had spent fifteen years as *de facto* wife and husband before their master decided to sell Marguerite, underlined their desire to formalize their union under Catholic rule.[72] A couple that arrived a year later in Nacogdoches from Opelousas justified their request for freedom in a similar way, although with the noticeable difference that only the woman declared herself Catholic.[73]

Past experience of forced removals, combined with the fear that upcoming sales might result in the definitive separation of one's family, also motivated many runaways to abscond across the Mexican border. In January 1819, two young couples, Hope and Nancy, along with George and Rachel, escaped from Bayou Boeuf (Louisiana), along with a fifth refugee, Jack, from the town of Alexandria, on the Red River. The fugitives had "successively belonged to Mr. Davenport of Nachitoches, Mr. David Pannill, Mr. Byoym and Judge Johnson, from which they were last purchased", and realistically anticipated another removal. Pregnancy represented an important trigger for escape. The wish to spare children the infamous label of "slave" for the rest of their lives, to raise them in a bondage-free environment in which racial equality and social mobility were (at least theoretically) attainable and to circumvent the threat of having children abruptly taken away by traders or heirs, prompted couples and single women to abscond to the Mexican borderlands. Sarah – a pregnant slave – fled with three other enslaved persons to the Rio Grande in 1839. Likewise, two refugees from Missouri, "a man with long grey hair and beard, about sixty years old" and his pregnant companion (unsuccessfully) attempted to reach Mexico overland through Texas during the winter of 1855-1856.[74]

Escape attempts were also undertaken with the aim of preserving unions between slaves and free people that had been forged in the US Southwest. Both in Mexico's Northeast and the US Southwest's periphery, inhabitants of the frontier tended to subvert existing racial norms emanating from core territories. In Texas, unions across legal and racial lines originated in the earliest days of Spanish colonization, out of both demographic realism and a lesser disciplinary pressure from the state. This legacy of relative racial flexibility, inherited from the colonial period, persisted well into the nineteenth century. In many cotton, sugarcane and tobacco plantations across the US South – especially in post-1836 Texas – proximity between Mexican peons and enslaved African Americans (both marginal social groups) favored

[71] Matthew Restall, "Crossing to Safety? Frontier Flight in Eighteenth-Century Belize and Yucatán", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 94/3 (2014), 381-419.
[72] UT(A), Briscoe, BA, reel 37 frame 503 (22 Jan. 1808). Jane Landers similarly stressed the importance of conversion to Catholicism in gaining asylum as a foreign slave refugee in colonial Florida. Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 24.
[73] UT(A), Briscoe, BA, reel 38 frame 71 (1 May 1808); Blyth, "Fugitives from servitude", 10.
[74] *Louisiana Herald*, 25 March 1819; *Telegraph and Texas Register*, 31 July 1839; *The Galveston News Tri-Weekly*, 20 March 1856.

the development of casual and formal interracial relationships. During the summer of 1842, a Mexican peon fled from Texana with "a negro girl belonging to a citizen of that place, and with whom he had been living as a wife". In subsequent years, the image of Mexican laborers absconding with enslaved women became a cliché of the Southwestern press, usually through derogatory narratives meant to criminalize both peons and slaves. This Black-Mexican connection was complemented by other amorous relationships between free and enslaved people that also generated attempts to escape to Mexico's free soil. The environment of the plantation, in particular, created daily contacts between white overseers or laborers and enslaved workers, giving rise to relationships that transgressed racial divides. For example, the young Thomas Short from Fayette County recalled – in a confession pronounced in the summer of 1849 – that "some time this last season a Mr. Carrington, overseer for Mr. Hill, carried off a woman slave and two children to Mexico", the children being Carrington's.[75]

Apart from preserving family bonds, slave flight to Mexico also aimed at re-creating lost ties with relatives in a new setting, as municipal archives demonstrate. In January 1808, Trinidad de Salcedo's military commander Pedro López Prieto reported the arrival of a slave named "Rechar" (Richard), his wife and three of their children from Louisiana. Richard's whole family (including seven children) had been brought to and scattered throughout the Territory of Orleans, embodying the symbiosis between the colonization of the Mississippi valley and the domestic slave trade. Himself sold to a planter from Opelousas, Richard declared that defending his family's unity had prompted his escape, along with his knowledge that Spanish laws on slavery compared favorably to the "harshness of American laws". Richard did not abscond alone, but instead endeavored to rescue his wife and all of their children from slavery (succeeding only in three cases) before heading to the Sabine River. Likewise, in 1825, a fifty-year-old slave with a "grey beard and grey head" named Paul escaped with some other bondspeople from the steamboat Florence, "while lying to in the north side of Red River, four miles above Bayou Rouge in the Parish of Avoyelles" (Louisiana). His master, from Alexandria (Louisiana), reported that Paul had a wife in Mexican Texas, and that this was the reason why he was attempting to cross the Sabine River. Given that Euro-Americans settling in northeastern Mexico after 1821 often carried their entire enslaved workforce away from the US South, Paul's attempt to reunite his separated, enslaved relatives by fleeing across the border was not unique.[76]

As a result, most slaveholders conceived of family ties as the main device by which to stabilize their enslaved workforce. Indeed, this accounts for the public declarations by some buyers at slave auctions that they would prefer to avoid separating relatives in order to prevent flight.[77] Olmsted, in his *Journey in the Back*

[75] *The Red-Lander*, 7 July 1842; *Texas State Gazette*, 25 Aug. 1849.
[76] UT(A), Briscoe, BA, reel 37, frame 495 (21 Jan. 1808); *The Ariel*, 7 Nov. 1825.
[77] Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters and Slaves: the Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 22; Douglas Richmond, "Africa's

*Country*, reminisced that while journeying through the lower Mississippi region, a local planter ("a Mr. S., from beyond Natchez") questioned him about whether or not "slave property" was secure in western Texas. As a connoisseur of the southwestern borderlands, Olmsted replied negatively. "Mr. S" then expressed his faith in the family unit as the "only way" to keep slaves from fleeing. "Negroes have such attachments", he felt. Yet the (re)formation and maintenance of family units among slaves did not always deter escape attempts to the Mexican borderlands, and numerous fugitives left relatives behind, with little to no hope of reunion. For instance, a slave from Louisiana named "Marcos" (in Spanish colonial sources) renounced his wife and children when he absconded to New Spain in 1808. Several decades later, George left his wife Betsy and their children Ellen, Clarissa, Clara and George W., aged between three to seven years old, when he escaped from Peach Point plantation in Brazoria.[78] As these examples suggest, the wish to maintain family units sometimes clashed with more compelling factors for flight.

### *"Por maltrato": the Second Slavery's Violence and Serial Runaways*

Apart from preserving or reconstituting family units, finding protection from the physical and psychological violence of slavery motivated black freedom-seekers in the Mexican borderlands.[79] The description of Charles, a fugitive from Austin in 1854, speaks volumes regarding the destructive effects of a life spent in slavery. His enslaver underlined that Charles was often "subject to attacks of convulsion". He warned readers "to be on their guard in approaching him" while Charles was in this condition, since he was then "unmanageable and dangerous".[80] The damage inflicted on Charles by slavery was by no means exceptional: stammering, stuttering and other (small or serious) mental disorders were frequent among bondspeople in the US-Mexico borderlands. Many stemmed from physical abuse – an omnipresent and dreadful prospect for slaves across southwestern plantations – as evidenced by the multiple wounds, injuries and deformities (mainly caused by whippings, beatings, branding, cropping practices and burn marks) that many slave refugees bore on their bodies. Intentional violence by masters, overseers or third parties complemented industrial accidents generated by plantation labor – for instance amongst so-called receivers in sugar mills – in a general context of limited medical care against diseases and injuries. An increasingly brutal regime of slavery in the US southwestern borderlands led many bondspeople to abscond across the Mexican border. Slaves running away to Mexico from violent masters sought to preserve their physical integrity and to gain a sense of

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Initial Encounter with Texas: the Significance of Afro-Tejanos in Colonial Texas, 1528-1821", *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 26:2 (2007), 215-217.

[78] UT(A), Briscoe, BA, reel 37, frame 495 (21 Jan. 1808); Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country in the Winter of 1853-4* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1860), 22; UT(A), Briscoe, James F. and Stephen S. Perry Papers, Box 2J43.

[79] On violence and escape attempts: Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 84; Pargas, "The Gathering Storm", 294-295.

[80] UT(A), Briscoe, Texas Slave Laws, Box 2J186.

self-respect and personal worth, dignifying them as human beings rather than commodities at the mercy of slaveholders.

As Lance Blyth has argued, fugitive slaves from territorial Louisiana who sought refuge in New Spain usually emphasized that mistreatment had motivated them to abscond to Spanish land.[81] In December 1807, Nemesio Salcedo, the commandant general of the *Provincias Internas de Oriente* (Eastern Internal Provinces), ordered captains Pedro López Prieto and Francisco Viana – respectively at Trinidad de Salcedo and Nacogdoches – to conduct a thorough inquiry into the slave refugees, mostly francophone Creoles, residing in both settlements. Their report ("*Relación general de los negros esclavos fugitivos*") underscored that most escapes had originated in experiences of abuse ("*maltrato*") in Louisiana. Juan Luis and Margarita had fled in August 1807 from the brutality of their deceased master's widow. Narciso had absconded from planter François Rouquier's frequent beatings as well as from extreme hunger. Once, after having asked in vain for food, Rouquier's son-in-law had beaten him so harshly that Narciso saw no other choice than "to look for protection" in Texas. The body of Ambrosio, from Opelousas, likewise bore abundant scars running from his back to his knees, the result of frequent punishments for failing to pick a hundred pounds of cotton per day. Luis had fled from Natchitoches following his wife's death during a barbaric whipping. Beaten "with much tyranny" as well, and fearing for his own life, he executed an escape that he had already been contemplating for months.[82]

Far from decreasing over time, the violence and intrinsic harshness of frontier slavery continued well into the nineteenth century, contributing to the Southwest's reputation among enslaved people as a land of cruelty.[83] Some slaveholders notorious for their violence, such as Jared Kirby, Pleasant D. McNeel and Jesse Burditt in Texas, frequently experienced escape attempts to Mexico by enslaved people from their

[81] Blyth, "Fugitives from servitude", 9-10.

[82] BA, reel 37, frames 465 (14 Jan. 1808), 495 (21 Jan. 1808), 503 (22 Jan. 1808) and 643 (9 Feb. 1808). The lack of concern among territorial Louisiana's authorities regarding mistreatment of slaves further motivated bondspeople to abscond. A slave named Luis, for instance, explained that he had absconded due to the extremely harsh punishments he received from his master in Natchitoches and the lack of concern displayed by the local Civil Judge (when Luis approached him), who argued that the treatment of slaves remained a merely domestic issue. Mentions of abuses committed against slaves were common. Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon, a planter from Saint-Domingue, for instance, argued that French Creoles in Louisiana were "vulgarly familiar with their equals, insolent towards their inferiors, cruel to their slaves, and inhospitable to strangers". Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon (tr. John Davis), *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas, in the Year 1802, giving a Correct Picture of those Countries* (New York: Riley and Co., 1806), 62.

[83] The harshness of frontier life for slaves during the early years of Mexican Texas can be grasped through the description of Jared Groce's enslaved workforce by official Víctor Blanco: SRE, LE 1075, "Blanco to López, 9 Dec. 1822" ("Muchos que han traído sus negros no han podido mantenerlos con la caza, y uno que trajo ciento ha gastado mucho en pagar cazadores, y no siendo suficiente la cíbola y el venado han comido caballos, y otros se han ido estrechados del hambre").

estates.[84] Arrested fugitive slaves often bore harrowing proofs of the humiliations and physical barbarities inflicted upon their persons, something which contradicts the assertion that high prices on the slave market implied better treatment for slaves in the southwestern frontier.[85] A slave baker named David was arrested in 1840 in Liberty County (Texas) while heading to Mexico with "three scars on his breast, and many on his back". William Woodward, a planter from Eastern Mississippi, had hired him out to William Brandon, a colonist residing a few miles east of Nacogdoches, who badly mistreated him. Instead of going back to Mississippi, David decided to flee to the Mexican border. When jailed in Texas in April 1853, Grant, a twenty-five-year-old fugitive slave from Holly Springs (Mississippi), had a body that had been mutilated with "a scar over his right eye, another on his right cheek, and another one on the back of his neck".[86] Drawn for identification purposes, the detailed descriptions of scarred and injured bodies by masters provided a glimpse into their harsh dominion and indirectly acknowledged that abuses and brutality had triggered escape attempts.[87] Corporal marks as scars and swellings left by the whip were occasionally mentioned. A forty-eight-year-old blacksmith slave (named alternatively as Tom or Martin), who had absconded from Attakapas (Louisiana) in March 1854, was described as "marked with the whip" and had "marks of cupping on both temples and back of neck". During the fall of 1858, Charlie escaped from the Stevenson plantation (North Texas) with "a scar about one and a half inches long, immediately under one eye, extending from the nose". [88] The not-so-seldom mention of crooked and missing body parts reveals the extreme violence of the Second Slavery in the region.[89] In 1859, Brad escaped from Clarksville (Texas) with "one of his thumbs cut close to the hand", while a young slave fled from Seguin during the same winter with his right arm "cut off just below the elbow". Such mutilations represented grim reminders of the violent environment created by plantation society in the new frontiers of the Second Slavery. They were

[84] To take one example, Pleasant D. McNeel, the man who had shot dead the refuge-seeker Jim who fled seeking asylum under Mexican rule during the 1820s, faced numerous escape attempts at different stages of his life as slaveholder. Kelley, "Mexico in his Head", 712; Lack, *Texas Revolutionary Experience*, 246; *The Western Texan,* 6 March 1851; *The San Antonio Ledger*, 11 Sep. 1851. The occasional repetition in primary sources of the names of certain enslavers affected by slave flight to Mexico reflects the particular harshness of some plantations in the US Southwest, and suggests that a first absconder could inspire other flights from the same estate.

[85] The ungrounded assertion that high prices for enslaved people constituted an incentive for better care by their owners is argued for instance in: Earl Wesley Fornell, "The Abduction of Free Negroes and Slaves in Texas", *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, v.60, n°3 (Jan. 1957), 379.

[86] *The Morning Star*, 15 Aug. 1840; *Texas State Gazette*, 21 May 1853.

[87] Foner, *Gateway to Freedom*, 23.

[88] UT(A), Briscoe, Texas Slave Laws, Box 2J186; *Dallas Herald*, 15 Sep. 1858.

[89] Though mutilation usually originated from white people or was purely accidental, self-mutilation also very occasionally represented a "strategy" by slaves to diminish their value as "property" on the market. Besides mistreatment, some physical deformities were also legacies of diseases, such as the so-called Guinea worm. James Doswell from Mississippi, for instance, reported in 1836 the flight of Solomon, a thirty-eight-year-old "dark brown" slave, who had "his toes turn in somewhat pigeon toe" (RBBC, NA, v.15, 150).

tangible hints as to why so many bondspeople seemed willing to risk their life by fleeing to the border.[90]

Plantation labor in itself greatly contributed to the special harshness of the Southwest's regime of slavery. Seasons of intensive work gave rise to an exceptionally high number of escape attempts to Mexico, as contemporaries recognized (table 2).[91] During the fall of 1854, for instance, the Opelousas *Courier*'s editor advised slaveholders to keep an eye on their slaves, as "we approach the harvest works [for sugarcane] and everyone knows that this is the moment which the Negroes generally choose to run away".[92] Flight to Mexico from cotton-producing plantations – the main crop in the US Southwestern borderlands – noticeably increased both before and during the fall harvest, from July to October. As with the grinding season for sugar, this surge represented a reaction to the hardships involved in the picking season for cotton, which required an extensive and mostly unskilled workforce, as Sean M. Kelley has noted. Cotton harvests constituted an especially painful task for enslaved people. The repetitiveness of the work often led to severe back pain, while the thorny plants made workers' hands bleed. The stifling, warm and humid late-summer climate further added to the difficulty of the work. Moreover, because harvest times involved the imposition of very strict standards of productivity, slaves were subjected to greater scrutiny, and punishments for failing to produce the expected daily amount of bales were routine. As such, many slaves from cotton plantations fled during the summer, as they anticipated the difficulties related to the upcoming picking season and took advantage of the relatively relaxed period between planting and harvest.[93]

| **Period of the year** | Jan-Feb. | Mar.-Apr. | May-Jun. | Jul.-Aug. | Sep.-Oct. | Nov.-Dec. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Occurrence percentage** | 14,5% | 10,5% | 16,1% | 24,2% | 24,2% | 10,5% |

**Table 2:** Periodicity of escape attempts to Mexico (1840-1859)[94]

Many bondspeople in the borderlands made repeated attempts to abscond to Mexico, convinced that fleeing to the border was the only way to achieve self-emancipation. Frederick Law Olmsted, for instance, heard about a particularly determined runaway "who had been three times brought from beyond the Rio Grande" while visiting Piedras Negras (Coahuila). Likewise, Frank, a slave from Montgomery

[90] *The Standard Gazette*, 22 Jan. 1859 and 3 March 1860; *State Gazette,* 2 April 1859; *San Antonio Texan*, 6 Jan. 1859.
[91] On the periodicity of slave flight: Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 231; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 219-220.
[92] *Le Courrier des Opelousas (The Opelousas Courier),* 4 Nov. 1854 ("nous approchons des travaux de la roulaison et chacun sait que c'est le moment que les nègres choisissent généralement pour partir marrons").
[93] Kelley, *Los Brazos de Dios*, 106-120; Torget, *Seeds of Empire*, 83-84.
[94] On data: see table 1.

County (Texas) unsuccessfully absconded to Mexico in 1839 with three other bondspeople. Ten years later, Frank escaped south again, this time alone.[95] One night in January 1851, John fled from a plantation on the Colorado River to the Rio Grande. Aged twenty, John already had a solid fugitive record. He had escaped at least once to Nuevo Laredo from Lavaca, before being arrested. Yet his enslaver was firmly convinced that, far from being discouraged by this failure, John would capitalize on his experience and "endeavor to get to Mexico by the way of Quero, San Antonio and Laredo".[96]

Most "repeat offender" runaways in the US Southwest had originally and unsuccessfully attempted to flee from slavery within the US South or to the North before finally opting for Mexico. The story of Matthew Gaines (elected to the Texas State Senate in 1869) illustrates the relationship between slave flight to Mexico and previous (smaller-scale) escape attempts. Born a slave in 1840 near Pineville (Louisiana), Matthew grew up in Bernardo Martin Despallier's plantation, where English, French and Spanish were spoken. Gaines quickly became literate and escaped to Arkansas when aged ten, trying to avoid his imminent sale. Six months later, he headed to New Orleans, hoping that the manhunt aroused by his flight would now have come to an end. However, he was soon arrested in the Crescent City. Sold to a planter of Robertson County (Texas), he then fled to the Mexican border during the US Civil War, before being arrested by some Texas Rangers about 150 miles northwest of San Antonio. In Eastern Texas, Olmsted met a settler looking for "a mighty resolute nigger" that he had bought in Mississippi, despite having been informed that the man "was a great runaway". He had absconded from his previous enslaver at least three times, always to Illinois, yet his new Texan master was initially confident that he "could break him of running away by bringing him down to this new country". The "great runaway", though, adapted his strategy for self-emancipation. After three failed escape attempts to the North, he now headed for Mexico's Northeast. As Matthew Gaines, the "great runaway", now understood, freedom was more likely to be obtained by fleeing south than anywhere else. Thus, escaping to Mexico often represented the culmination of repeated attempts to seek refuge from slavery.[97] Remarkably, the numbers of serial runaways had significantly increased by the last decade of American slavery, giving a sense of the rising determination of many bondspeople to escape from the clutches of the Second Slavery. Sandy, a slave from Big Cypress Creek who "had lately run away and was retaken at Columbus", once again deserted during the fall of

[95] *Telegraph and Texas Register*, 31 July 1839; *Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register*, 1 March 1849; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey through Texas: or a Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier* (New York: Dix. Edwards & Co., 1857), 323-329; *The Crayon*, v.3-4 (New York: W.J. Stillman & J. Durand, 1856).
[96] *The Western Texan*, 9 Oct. 1851.
[97] Ann Patton Malone, "Matt Gaines: Reconstruction Politician", in Alwyn Barr and Robert A. Calvert, *Black Leaders: Texans for Their Times* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2007), 49-82; Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: a Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), v.2, 7. I agree here with Randolph Campbell's comments on serial runaways in Antebellum Texas: Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 182.

1858 "to make his way to Mexico". In the meantime, Gin, a slave blacksmith, escaped from Galveston, but soon got "lost and nearly starved", eventually surrendering himself to a Dutchman near San Antonio. Looking for a reward, the settler commissioned another man to carry Gin to the city jail. He "returned stating that negro, horse and gun were all gone".[98]

### *"Más mal que lo corriente": Paternalism, (Broken) Compromises and Conflicts*

Although violence was a predominant feature of slavery in the US-Mexico borderlands, masters often conceived their role in southern society and their relationship with their slaves through the discourse of paternalism.[99] As underlined by the existing literature, most slaveholders sought to project an image of themselves as the household's benevolent and intransigent *paterfamilias*. Paternalism as an emotional regime imposed certain amendments to the daily routine of slavery, since the "affection" and the "protection" provided by the enslaver were conceived as natural counterparts to a total subordination of the enslaved. "Care" from masters and absolute servility from bondspeople were thought to function in symbiosis. But paternalism also implied that, to some extent, slaveowners should reach compromises with their slaves, thus demonstrating their benevolence. Sean M. Kelley has argued that in Texas, such "negotiations" essentially revolved around community time, control over labor conditions and basic material wellbeing. Nonetheless, the endeavor to gain small concessions from their owners should not be interpreted as evidence of an acceptance of slavery on the part of slaves. Bondspeople appropriated and manipulated the language of paternalism used by their masters to their own benefit. Incidentally, the southwestern press denounced excessive paternalism as an expression of leniency and an incentive to resistance. When Brenham planter Thomas Erwin – known to be "a kind master" – and his wife were shot in bed by two of their slaves absconding to Mexico in 1860, the *Brenham Ranger* deemed the event "a lesson to those who permit undue privileges to slaves", further adding that "a strict discipline should be observed to preserve a proper subordination".[100] Yet, in Texas, the plantation system's relative proximity to Mexico inevitably altered master-slave relationships. While some enslavers intensified their violence, others sought to negotiate the terms of their enslaved people's servitude, hoping to thereby curtail their resistance.[101] Thus, slaves used the border as a bargaining chip. For instance, Anthony, an enslaved blacksmith

[98] *The Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, 13 Oct. 1858; *Galveston Weekly News*, 19 Oct. 1858; *The Texas Monument*, 29 Jan. 1859.
[99] Richard J. Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Martin, *Divided Mastery*, 151; David J. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 80. The ideology of paternalism has been deeply analyzed by the historiography, from Eugene D. Genovese, *The World Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Vintage, 1971) to Eugene D. Genovese, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[100] *The True Issue*, 2 Aug. 1860.
[101] Kelley, *Los Brazos de Dios,* 79.

from Chappell Hill (Texas), fled during the autumn of 1861 across the Rio Grande after he had made "repeated threats to go to Mexico". Like Anthony, many bondspeople did not hesitate to abscond when their enslavers broke off "negotiations" in a way that violated the imagined ethos of paternalism.[102]

For instance, Juan Pedro, the aforementioned refugee from Louisiana, informed his interrogators that he "would never have thought of such a flight, if [his] master had given [him] the treatment that commonly is given to slaves, as [his] previous master had done". Like Juan Pedro, who fled because his master treated him "worse than normal" ("*más mal que lo corriente*"), many slaves considered customary rights and minimal standards of treatment to be indispensable.[103] The escape of Marcos illustrates how the failure to reach compromises between slaveholders and slaves led to desertion. Arriving in Eastern Texas in 1808, Marcos emphasized that "[his] master was very cruel with [him]", and that he "could not stand being chastised anymore". Marcos initially attempted to negotiate with his master, hoping that his situation would improve. He requested to be sold to a new owner – a customary right for enslaved people in Spanish America – and threatened to abscond otherwise. This request exemplifies the lasting impact on master-slave relations of Spanish rule in Louisiana, well after the Louisiana Purchase, at a time when earlier customary rights were being gradually revoked from bondspeople under US rule. The new "Black Code", elaborated by the territorial legislature in 1806, had erased the more liberal policies on slave treatment practiced by the Spanish Crown in its former colony – for instance, the right of *coartación* or manumission – as well as the protective dispositions of the *Real Cédula sobre Educación, Trato y Ocupaciones de los Esclavos* (1789). Instead of finding an acceptable "middle ground" for both parties, the enslaver tied Marcos up and whipped him so furiously that even the intervention of neighbors could not halt the punishment. Marcos concluded from this traumatic event that his owner was not disposed to concede anything in his favor. Absconding across the Sabine River was undoubtedly preferable to futile negotiations. Like Marcos, many bondspeople in the US Southwest sought to negotiate (so far as possible) the terms of their enslavement, and escaped to the Mexican borderlands as a last recourse, when masters seemed unwilling to respect or to reach such compromises with them. In short, the inability to carve out spaces of autonomy within slavery prompted enslaved people to flee to Mexican territory as an alternative.[104]

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[102] *San Antonio Herald*, 16 Nov. 1861. On "borderlands paternalism" in Texas: Kelley, *Los Brazos de Dios*, 120-121. On the relation between breaking settled arrangements between master and slaves and running away: Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves,* 141.

[103] UT(A), Briscoe, Charles Ramsdell Collection, Box 2Q238, "Negro Slaves in Spanish America, 1563-1820", "Fugitive slaves from the United States, captured in Texas by the expedition against Long, trial at Monterrey, 1820", Box 2Q238. Original sentences in Spanish are as follow: "Preguntado: si no conoce la grave injuria que le ha hecho a su Amo con haversele fugado después de haver dado tanto precio por él responde: que si conoce le ha hecho mucho daño con haversele huido, y que nunca havría pensado en tal fuga, si su Amo le huviese dado el tratam.to que corrientem.te se les da a los Esclavos, y como se lo dava su anterior Amo" (spelling and syntaxes conserved as in the original).

[104] BA, reel 37, frame 495 (21 Jan. 1808). On enslaved people's treatment during the territorial period in Louisiana: Herschtal, "Slaves, Spaniards and Subversion in Early Louisiana", 292-301.

The increasingly hermetic nature of slavery in the southwestern borderlands did little to curb the numbers of self-emancipated slaves who streamed towards Mexico. In post-independence Texas, for instance, in light of the almost unattainable prospect of manumission (not least because parliamentary approval was required to emancipate bondspeople), slaves increasingly viewed flight as an immediate and more reliable solution. For slaves themselves, self-purchase was virtually impossible, since their value on the frontier often skyrocketed. For instance, in his personal correspondence, John Hamilton, a settler from Zavalla (Texas), stressed that in the early 1850s, "$500 would not buy a negro in this country" as "they sell from seven to eight hundred and sometimes more".[105] In antebellum Texas, legally resident free blacks were therefore scarce (a mere 397 in 1850 and 355 in 1860) – the outcome of social hostility combined with restrictive institutional provisions for their settlement – and the size of urban settlements remained limited when compared with elsewhere in the US South. Concealment among free blacks (a strategy commonly used by runaways in the US South) was therefore almost unthinkable for enslaved absconders in the US-Mexico borderlands. All these factors combined to increase the appeal of the Mexican beacon of freedom.[106]

To be sure, escape attempts were spurred by motivations, timings and strategies specific to black freedom-seekers themselves. However, they were also conditioned by conjunctural factors, incentives and opportunities. In particular, disruptions of daily routines and transitions in mastery represented moments at which slaves were more likely to abscond.[107] A master's death, for instance, often created inconsistency and confusion in the management and supervision of slaves, a golden opportunity for would-be fugitives. Such was the case when the small planter James Alston died in Bastrop County in November 1851. Alston still owed a very substantial debt (close to $3.000) to his brother Elijah Alston, a settler from northwest Arkansas, which he had mortgaged through three "negroes and other property". One of the deceased's executors, Charles Miller, declined to honor the debt, and a legal conflict ensued between him and Elijah Alston over the question of who actually owned the deceased bondspeople. During the following winter, two slaves belonging to James Alston's estate named Dick and Bill escaped, feeling empowered by this ambiguous situation. Dick absconded "east of the Trinity River", while Bill fled "to the Rio Grande". Slave-hunters were mobilized to pursue the runaways, but they returned

[105] LOC, John Hamilton and William Hamilton Correspondence, Box 1, 7 Jan. 1852. For Western Texas, see for instance: LOC, George Denison Papers, Box 1 "Denison to his sister Eliza, San Antonio, 21 April 1855" ("There are not many slaves here, and nigger women cost about $1000 apiece. I have not invested much property in them yet").
[106] See ch.2. United States of America, Bureau of the Census *Seventh Census of the United States* (Washington DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1850); United States of America, Bureau of the Census *Eighth Census of the United States* (Washington DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1860).
[107] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 17; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 31; Pargas, "The Gathering Storm", 296.

empty-handed to Bastrop County.[108] Equally, uncertainties deriving from the prospect of an imminent sale and doubts about unknown new owners – apart from the inherently traumatic reminder of one's condition as a sub-human commodity – were met with deep anxiety among slaves.[109] The vast majority of bondspeople resented being sold, especially when the process was conducted in secret, as was often the case. For instance, Andrés, a refugee from slavery who arrived at San Antonio from Natchitoches in 1817, underscored that his master had "sold [him] without [his] knowledge" to an English planter, which had prompted him to flee to Spanish Texas.[110]

Alongside those anticipating sale and its implications, enslaved persons recently acquired by a new master were also particularly likely to abscond, especially when the transaction had significantly worsened their existences, in the form of separation from their relatives and conflicts with new masters, overseers or fellow slaves. Many enslaved African Americans, especially young enslaved people who had been forcibly transported to such new environments, escaped soon afterwards. Brought from Tennessee during the winter of 1851-1852, young Abraham twice attempted to abscond to Mexico over the following months from the town of Egypt on the Colorado River (he was arrested the first time in Seguin). Hammock, Henry and Oses, sold in March 1859 to a planter from Opelousas by some slave traders from New Orleans, escaped at night during their very first week in the service of their new enslaver, who had "some reason to believe that these negroes will try to cross Texas to reach Mexico". Cato – a deformed version of the Yoruba name Keta – a "carpenter by trade" who had previously resided in Houston and Mound Prairie, fled four months after being sold to a settler from Grimes County. Similarly, a twenty-five-year-old slave formerly from Goliad escaped from Columbus (Texas) in 1852, where he had recently been sold. His enslaver William Bridge suspected that the fugitive would head back to Goliad – suggesting that he would visit relatives or acquaintances in the town – on his way to the lower Rio Grande region.[111]

Moreover, in addition to escape attempts resulting from broken compromises with no hope of immediate or future improvement, some enslaved people followed a "nothing-to-lose" process of reasoning. Extreme circumstances compelled some bondspeople to flee to the border, especially confrontations with masters, overseers, third parties and even fellow slaves, all of which at times led to unpremeditated homicides. For instance, Frederick Law Olmsted recalled his encounter with an "old man" on the road to Indianola (Texas), looking for a "small black, screwed-up-faced

[108] RSPP, Petition n°21585201, "Elijah B. Alston to the Hon. William H. Garett Chief Justice of Bastrop County, 19 Jan. 1852"; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 287. The fact that two enslaved people from the same plantation escaped in two opposite directions suggests that geographical proximity cannot be exclusively held accountable for slave flight to the Mexican border, while particular background experiences and profiles significantly contributed to choices of destination.
[109] Johnson, *Soul by Soul,* 194; Din, *Spaniards, Planters and Slaves*, 27.
[110] BA, reel 58, frames 97-105 (10 March 1817) and 108 (13 March 1817).
[111] *The Texas Monument*, 14 July 1852; *The Opelousas Patriot*, 7 May 1859; *The Texian Advocate*, 12 June 1852 and 18 Sep. 1852.

nigger" who had been on the run for two weeks following a violent dispute with his master, a judge, whom he had cut "right bad". According to the "old man", his enslaver had given him a week of rest for Christmas, after which the slave had refused to return to work and "got unruly". Facing an imminent whipping after having inflicted the wound, the enslaved man ran away. Despite being arrested, he managed to escape once again to northeastern Mexico.[112] Conflicts within the slave community also occurred. Within the violent environment of the US-Mexican borderlands plantation, masters and overseers encouraged competitive and atomistic tendencies among their enslaved workers as a way to maximize profits and crush resistance. Slaveowners usually set material or immaterial incentives for efficient work by rewarding highly productive slaves. By doing so, they fostered insidious forms of individualism and rivalries among bondspeople, which undermined community spirit and generated conflicts. In San Antonio, two slaves belonging to army major Jeremiah Yellott Dashiell "got into a dispute" in 1854. One of them "seized a large cedar club with which he killed the other instantly". After wandering overnight outside of the town, conscious of the gravity of the act and probably fearing for his life in case of arrest, the man returned the next day to Dashiell's estate, stole a horse and "started for Mexico". During his escape to the Rio Grande, a Mexican attempted to capture him, but was stabbed with a knife by the fugitive. Despite his wounds, the Mexican eventually shot the runaway dead.[113] This last example illustrates the desperate nature of most escape attempts to the Mexican Northeast. To many fugitives, *grand marronage* to the southern border represented a last resort, and was not intended merely as a tactic to extract concessions or protect existing "rights" from masters, as was sometimes the case elsewhere in the Americas.[114]

In sum, a wide range of motives incited or compelled the enslaved African American population of the US Southwest to abscond across the Mexican border. During the decades leading up to the US Civil War, slaves from the Texas frontier, the lower Mississippi delta region and port cities scattered along the US South coast increasingly came to associate Mexico with the cause of antislavery. More and more often, self-emancipated bondspeople envisioned – and opted for – the Mexican borderlands as a suitable destination for their quest for freedom. They did so in order to avoid separation from relatives, in reaction to separation from relatives, in response to physical and psychological violence and as a result of broken compromises or the impossibility of negotiating with masters. All the above-mentioned fugitives provide spectacular and inspirational examples of resistance to slavery. However, as in the case of the "big fellow" described by Noah Smithwick, archival evidence suggests that bondspeople absconding to Mexico were not quite representative of the overall enslaved population of the US Southwest. Despite Mexico's attractiveness as a sanctuary for refugees from the Second Slavery, not all enslaved African Americans stood in an equal position when contemplating an escape to Mexico's free soil. A closer

[112] Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas*, 256-257.
[113] *The South-Western*, 4 Oct. 1854.
[114] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 32; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 41.

look at the demographic and occupational profiles of self-emancipated slaves who risked their lives to reach Mexico is therefore required.

### *The Intersection of Gender, Age and Qualifications*

> "RANAWAY from the undersigned, living in Caldwell, Burleson County, some time in June last, a negro boy named Simon, about twenty-five or thirty years of age, dark complexion, of an easy long tone of voice, has a foot very broad across the toes, and a narrow heel; his hair comes down rather low on his forehead – he weighs about 150 or 160 pounds and is a tolerable good blacksmith. He said, on leaving home, he would not own his master. *He is making his way to Mexico*. I will give a liberal reward for his capture and safe delivery to me – or any information that will enable me to discover his whereabouts will be thankfully received. Address W.C. Mosely, Caldwell, Burleson Co., Tex."[115]

Such was the advertisement published in the *State Gazette* in October 1859 by the owner of an enslaved man named Simon. In terms of gender, age, and occupation, the "boy" matched the average profile of enslaved people escaping to Mexico, which itself closely matched the profile of runaways in Texas (as recently analyzed by Kyle Ainsworth).[116] Simon's case suggests a larger tension at play between the structures of slavery and the agency of individual fugitives. Slave flight to the Mexican borderlands undeniably involved all categories of slaves, male or female, old or young, skilled or unskilled. However, a closer analysis of the main demographic characteristics of a sample of slave refugees who absconded from the US to Mexico between 1840 and 1859 sheds light on dynamics of under- and over-representation in terms of gender, age, and qualification, corroborating similar qualitative observations regarding earlier periods of time.[117]

First, the most striking imbalance that emerges from the collected data relates to gender. Historical studies of runaway slaves in the Americas have emphasized that enslaved men fled in significantly higher proportions than enslaved women.[118]

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[115] *The State Gazette*, 8 Oct. 1859 and 10 Dec. 1859; *The Daily State Gazette and General Advertiser*, 12 Oct. 1859.

[116] Kyle Ainsworth, "Advertising Maranda: Runaway Slaves in Texas, 1835-1865", in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, 197-230.

[117] On profiles: Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 209-233.

[118] Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas*, (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2006), 72; Diouf, *Slavery's Exiles*, 89; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 31. Johnson argued in particular that two-thirds of fugitive slaves were men. Studying another borderland of the US South, S. Charles Bolton underlined that in Arkansas, women represented 18,2% of "runaways" between 1820 and 1836, and merely 7,5% between 1861-1861. S. Charles Bolton, *Fugitives from Injustice: Freedom-Seeking Slaves in Arkansas, 1800-1860* (National Park Service, 2006), 21. A comparison with frontier slavery geographies in Brazil is also consistent with the results of table 3. For instance, during the first half of the nineteenth century, men represented more than 80% of fugitive slaves in Minas Gerais (83,62% according to Marcia Amantino, and even up to 87% according to Ana Caroline de Rezende). Marcia Amantino, "Os escravos fugitivos em Minas Gerais e os anúncios do Jornal "O Universal", 1825 a

According to Franklin and Schweninger, during the first half of the nineteenth century, four out of five fugitives in the US South were men. In the US-Mexico borderlands, this discrepancy between men and women was even sharper, being consistent with Randolph Campbell's assessment.[119] As table 3 shows, during the two decades leading up to the US Civil War, slightly less than nine out of ten individual and collective escape attempts to Mexico *exclusively* involved men. By contrast, the proportion of enslaved women absconding to the Mexican border appears dramatically less significant as, including mixed-gender escape attempts, they took part in slightly more than one out of ten escape attempts (11,4%). The over-representation of male fugitives reflects diverging socioeconomic experiences among enslaved African Americans depending on gender, as opposed to alleged stronger tendencies to resistance among men than women, as contemporaries sometimes assumed.

| **Gender** | Men only | Men and women fleeing together | Women only |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Percentage** | 88.6% | 7.9% | 3.5% |

**Table 3**: Gender imbalance in escape attempts to Mexico (1840-1859)[120]

A generational imbalance complemented this gender imbalance, with young slaves absconding in significantly greater numbers than their older fellows (table 4). The following table demonstrates the *likelihood* that individuals belonging to selected age groups would be found in individual and collective escape attempts to the Mexican border. In the US-Mexico borderlands, enslaved asylum-seekers were usually in their twenties: in terms of probability, at least one fugitive aged between 20 and 30 was to be found in roughly two-thirds of all escape attempts. This observation matches Franklin and Schweninger's medium age estimate of 27 for escaped slaves from the US South between 1838 and 1860.[121]

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1832", *Lócus, Revista de Historia*, v.12, n°2 (2006), 59-74; Ana Caroline de Rezende Costa, "Fugas de Escravos na Comarca do Rio das Mortes, Primeira Metade do Século XIX" (São João del-Rei: Universidade Federal de São João del-Rei, Departamento de Ciências Sociais, Dissertação a Pós-graduação, 2013).

[119] Franklin and Schweninger concluded that about 19% of all US South fugitive slaves between 1790-1816 and 1838-1860 were women. Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 211-212. On the predominance of men among runaways in Texas: Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 181-182.

[120] The figures in table 3 are consistent with observations formulated for earlier periods of time, in comparable geographical settings across the US South. For instance, David J. Libby issued similar estimates for nineteenth-century frontier Mississippi. Between 1805-1808, the *Natchez Mississippi Messenger* advertised 101 runaway slaves, among whom 85 were men. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi,* 54.

[121] Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves.* For Arkansas, S. Charles Bolton established a medium age of 25,8 years old for the period 1820-1836, and 27,1 years old for the period 1836-1861. S. Charles Bolton, *Fugitives from Injustice,* 21.

| **Age group** | 10 to 20 | 20 to 30 | 30 to 40 | 40 to 50 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Likelihood** | 10.75% | 67.7% | 27.7% | 6.15% |

**Table 4:** Generational under- and over-representation in escape attempts to Mexico (1840-1859)[122]

The nature of the Second Slavery in the US Southwest favored the escape of young and qualified enslaved men.[123] Within the hierarchies of slavery, only a limited part of the enslaved population had access to some degree of mobility and autonomy due to their status as skilled and/or hired laborer. Men (most of them young) predominantly composed this particular category of enslaved workers. By contrast, enslaved women were proportionately more likely to labor as domestic slaves within the strict boundaries of the master's estate. They also often bore responsibility for the care and education of children, which frequently deterred flight.[124]

Slave labor, being the essential economic structure of the US South, permeated a wide range of activities, and was by no means restricted to unskilled plantation work. On the contrary, it extended to more qualified and mobile occupations linked to the Second Slavery's qualitative diversification and development – both geographical and numerical. In the lower Brazos region, for instance, the expansion of sugarcane production from the mid-1840s onwards created a need for a (semi)-skilled enslaved workforce. Around Brazoria, sugarcane and its more sophisticated production process fostered certain occupational hierarchies within slavery. Occupational skills represented valuable resources for slave refugees, before escape, on the run, and while resident in Mexico. Skilled slaves had greater scope for negotiation with their masters. The repeated publication of a runaway slave ad or gradually increasing rewards reveal how financially valuable and essential to the process of production a skilled slave could be. For instance, in 1806, James Bludworth, a planter from nearby Natchitoches, offered a reward of $1.100 for Jerry, a shoe and boot maker he had hired for a month from another settler, who had subsequently fled to Nacogdoches. Like Jerry, a significant number of absconders came from the most valuable workforce of their estates. (For small slaveowners especially, escape attempts entailed dramatic economic losses). Qualified fugitives were not always easily replaceable, since they were usually

[122] Percentages reflect the *likelihood* of finding an individual of a given age group in an escape attempt – be this individual or collective. As a result, the total of separate percentages presented in this table surpasses 100%, since fugitive slaves from different age group sometimes escaped together in a single escape attempt. Children under ten years old were deliberately excluded from the table (on the assumption that flight was not a conscious choice for children), as well as individuals aged over fifty (due to the insignificant numbers involved).

[123] Kyle Ainsworth has concluded that "the average runaway slave from Texas was a twenty-eight-year-old man who had escaped by himself, departed from either Brazoria or Harris County, and was most likely headed making his way to an urban area or Mexico" (Ainsworth "Advertising Maranda", in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, 207).

[124] Nichols, "The Limits of Liberty", 24; Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola,* 93; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves,* 4-5.

less available and more expensive than common "plantation hands", which accounts for the desire of some masters to get their slaves back at almost any price.[125]

As Jerry's case suggests, being qualified also increased the potential for personal mobility and autonomy through slave hiring. This practice partly stemmed from the need for skilled bondspeople and became increasingly popular throughout the US Southwest after Texan independence. The ledgers of the Peach Point plantation belonging to the Perry brothers near Brazoria, for instance, are replete with names of hired bondspeople during the last two decades preceding the Secession War. Hired slaves constituted a segment of enslaved African Americans that benefited from greater inter-estate mobility (a state of "*quasi-freedom*", as Jonathan D. Martin has argued) than bondspeople ascribed to a single workplace. They were mostly men, such as Tom and Esau, two of the slaves of Sam Houston, who absconded to Matamoros during the fall of 1840 while being hired out from Cedar Point plantation.[126] Some mobile enslaved women also fled to the Mexican border, although in fewer instances. Matilda, a "mulatto girl", had been "peddling goods for the last two years" around Natchez, the economic hotspot of Mississippi's cotton production during the first third of the nineteenth century, before she absconded to "the Spanish country" in 1825.[127] Relatively less confined than their "sedentary" counterparts, enslaved people such as Matilda had gained knowledge of local geographies and had created economic as well as social networks outside of the plantation. In the case of slave-hiring, the division of mastery generated by the separation between proprietor and hirer – a breach in the fundamental authority of the master – loosened supervision while, being conscious of their bargaining power, hired slaves were more reactive to mistreatment. Drawing upon their contacts with white people, free blacks and Mexican workers (among others), mobile and hired slaves developed elaborate social abilities and came to understand behaviors, speech manners and dress customs that would later help them to pass more easily as "likely" and "plausible" to the eyes of the wider (white) society when clandestinely running for freedom. Developing spatial, social and even economic autonomy within slavery proved essential in sustaining creative and successful escape strategies (ch.2).[128]

Blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers and other craftsmen, in particular, stood at the fruitful intersection between skills and mobility. When Henry, an enslaved

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[125] Dunbar Rowland, *Official letter books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, v.4 (Jackson, Miss.: State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 163-164.

[126] Abigail Curlee, "The History of a Texas Slave Plantation 1831-63", *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, v.26, n°2 (Oct. 1922), 106; Joseph D. McCutchan, (ed.) Joseph Milton Nance, *Mier Expedition Diary: a Texan Prisoner's Account* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 67; Allen Andrew Platter, "Educational, Social and Economic Characteristics of the Plantation Culture of Brazoria County, Texas", PhD Diss. (Houston: University of Houston, 1961), 26-65; Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery*, 82; Martin, *Divided Mastery*, 161-187.

[127] *The Ariel*, 19 Dec. 1825. On Natchez as a slave trade hub: Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi*, 244.

[128] Martin, *Divided Mastery*; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 22 and 140; Audain, "'Design his Course to Mexico': the Fugitive Slave Experience in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1850-1853", in Pargas (ed.), *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, 233.

blacksmith, absconded in November 1853 from Port Lavaca, he was described by his master as "very smart" and likely to "tell a very plausible story", given that he was well acquainted with the geography of the coastal region and its people. Likewise, a thirty-five-year-old "very likely mulatto" mechanic and Baptist preacher was arrested near Austin in December 1855. Lewis, a skilled slave carpenter who escaped from Washington (Texas) in September 1854, was similarly described as "smart, active and likely" as well as able to elude pursuit and suspicion thanks to his former occupation.[129] Masters seemed well aware of the close connection between skilled occupational experiences, familiarization with diverse social environments and escape to Mexico. In 1852, when James S. Hanna introduced the fugitive slave Jim, brought from Mississippi to Texas, as "quite an intelligent and polite negro, having been a waiter in a hotel", he knew that Jim had acquired some social and cultural resources through this experience that would help him disguise his identity as a runaway.[130] Qualifications and social skills were convertible in strategies of deception and were also mobilized to earn a living on the run. When Brad, a slave painter and "preacher by profession", fled in 1858 from a cabinet-maker from Clarksville, James B. Shanahan, the enslaver warned readers that the fugitive would likely "be apt to demonstrate his professional proclivities". Shahanan's concern proved grounded, as Brad indeed hired his skills out on the streets of Independence (Texas) for about a year before heading to Mexico, using two forged passes to pretend that he had the consent of a master residing far away.[131]

Besides technical skills, literacy represented a significant asset for self-emancipated blacks. Many slaveholders bitterly emphasized this ability – which most of them attempted to undermine – among fugitives. Among Bill, Taylor and Henry, who absconded from the plantation of the notoriously violent Jared Kirby near Hempstead in 1857, at least "one of them [was] a good scribe", a man who would likely counterfeit freedom or travel passes. Forty-year-old Fortune, who escaped during the summer of 1858, could "read and write, [speak] very politely and [preach] very well for a negro" according to his master in Freestone County (Texas). The next year, Dick Tyler, a slave skilled in carpentry who could "read, write and play on the violin", fled from notary and attorney Peter MacGreal in Brazoria.[132] Connected to literacy and education, the capacity to speak Spanish (as a native language or otherwise) represented another incentive to abscond to Mexico. In the early nineteenth century,

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[129] *The San Antonio Ledger*, 19 Jan. 1854; *The State Gazette*, 22 Dec. 1855; *Texas Ranger*, 23 Nov. 1854; *The Washington American*, 8 Feb. and 22 Feb. 1856, 12 March 1856.
[130] *Texas State Gazette*, 25 Dec. 1852; *Nacogdoches Chronicle*, 4 April 1853.
[131] *The Standard*, 22 Jan. 1859 and 3 March 1860; *The State Gazette*, 2 April 1859. Shanahan had opened his shop in 1844, and it burned down in February 1857. The mention of scars in ads narrating Brad's escape suggests conflicts with Shanahan, although the record does not provide any further hint as to why Brad fled, and whether or not his flight was connected to the fire some months earlier. On runaways pretending to be hired slaves: Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 134-135.
[132] *The Washington American,* 21 April 1857; *The Southern Intelligencer*, 28 July 1858; *The San Antonio Ledger*, 24 Aug. 1858; *Daily Ledger*, 30 Sep. 1858; *The Weekly Telegraph*, 16 Nov. 1859; *The Daily Ledger and Texas*, 22 Nov. 1859.

apart from French and English, Spanish was commonly spoken in the plantations of the lower Mississippi valley – both by slaveholders and bondspeople – as a legacy of Spain's rule over Louisiana. The Second Slavery and the introduction of enslaved African Americans from foreign lands across the "Hidden Atlantic" through the Caribbean into the US South (although made illegal from 1808 onwards) brought further bondspeople acquainted with the Spanish language to the US-Mexico borderlands.[133] During the early 1830s, especially, traders from Mexican Texas smuggled slaves from Cuba and beyond to the province. Some of these bondspeople were Creole slaves born in Cuba. Others were *bozales* slaves (most of them of Yoruba and Kikongo origin) forcibly transported from Africa – especially from Ouidah, Lagos and Gadamey at the time of the Oyo Empire's decline – who had transited in Cuba before being smuggled to the coasts of Texas, for instance through the lower San Bernard River, where they were unloaded at the so-called "African landing".[134] Equally, in post-independence Texas, the frequent contact between bondspeople and low-skilled Mexican laborers in plantations familiarized local slaves with the Spanish language. Some slaveholders underscored that mastering this language played a role in fostering escape attempts to Mexico. In 1845, two slaves from Fayette County were advertised as having absconded to the south through San Antonio, as one of them was "well known to many of the Mexicans in San Antonio" and spoke "their language well". Eight years later, the master of a twenty-five-year-old slave named Charles also reported that the man "[spoke] Spanish and intend[ed] going to Mexico".[135]

### *Conclusion*

As underlined in this chapter, not all bondspeople with Mexico in their heads had equal chances of successfully fleeing to the southern border. Running away to Mexico was often an endeavor for the male, the skilled and the young. Qualified slaves, in particular, were usually more likely to be hired out by their masters. Those slaves

[133] Michael Zeuske, "Out of the Americas: Slave Traders and the Hidden Atlantic in the Nineteenth Century", *Atlantic Studies*, v.15, n°1 (2018), 103-135.
[134] Juan Nepomuceno Almonte, *Noticia Estadística sobre Tejas* (México: Ignacio Cumplido, 1835), 61; Louis E. Brister, Eduard Harkort, "The Journal of Col. Eduard Harkort, Captain of Engineers, Texas army, February 8-July 17, 1836", *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, v.102, n°3 (Jan. 1999), 354; Monroe Edwards (ed. Paul D. Lack), *The Diary of William Fairfax Gray: from Virginia to Texas, 1835-1837* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1997), 141; SRE, AEMEUA, 20/9, f.18-20, "Pizarro Martínez to Mier y Terán, 2 Feb. 1832"; SRE, LE 1077, "Martínez to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de Relaciones, 16 Feb. 1833"; SRE, AEMEUA, 22/3, f.101, "Martínez to Encargado de Negocios, 20 May 1833"; SRE, AEMEUA, 25/1, f.70, "Martínez to Encargado, 22 May 1835"; SRE, AEMEUA, 25/1, f.107, "Martínez to Encargado, 11 July 1835"; Eugene C. Barker, "The African Slave Trade in Texas", *Texas Historical Association Quarterly*, VI (1902), 145-158; Platter, "Educational, Social and Economic Characteristics", 150; Lack, "Slavery and the Texas Revolution", 186; Robin Law, *Ouidah, The Social History of a West African Slaving "Port", 1727-1892* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 155-188; Kelley, *Los Brazos de Dios*, 53; Kelley, "Blackbirders and Bozales", 406-23; Sean M. Kelley, Henry B. Lovejoy, "The Origins of the African-Born Population of Antebellum Texas: a Research Note", *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, v.120, n°2 (2016), 216-232.
[135] *La Grange Intelligencer*, 23 Jan. 1845; *The Texian Advocate*, 24 Sep. 1853.

(most of them male) – who possessed some technical, cultural and intellectual skills, had developed social networks and knowledge of geographies through inter-estate mobility – stood on the front line of escape attempts across the borderlands. As an outcome of their (occasional) itinerancy, they had gained a sense of personal autonomy and were able to accumulate local intelligence that would prove advantageous during their escape to Mexico. By contrast, enslaved women were more likely to carry out indoor tasks related to domestic service and were often less specialized than men, undermining chances of inter-estate mobility, while they usually took care of family responsibilities in line with prevalent gender norms. Moreover, slaves aged between twenty and thirty were overrepresented among runaways to Mexico. Apart from their comparative physical strength and stamina, making them more likely to overcome exhausting distances, environmental hardships and a series of life-threatening perils, such young slaves usually had had less time than older individuals to form family bonds. To a significant extent, the very prospect of freedom through marronage in the US-Mexico borderlands was conditional upon diverse factors such as gender, age, skills as well as other personal characteristics that provided bondspeople with relatively unequal opportunities from the start. In particular, access to partial freedom(s) within slavery, as well as the possession of resources and social contacts, all eased self-emancipation. The *typical* escaped bondsperson to Mexico was remarkably *atypical* when compared to the general enslaved population of the US South. [136] This also implied that fugitives to Mexico were not necessarily the most oppressed bondspeople of the US South, but individuals with particular characteristics who successfully developed networks and strategies enabling them to flee (ch.2)[137]. While slave flight to Mexico represented a remarkable proof of individual agency and collective resistance to slavery, its magnitude remained nonetheless deeply constrained by existing demographic and socioeconomic structures. As Sean M. Kelley has argued, more and more slaves from Texas and further east viewed Mexico as a land of freedom for African Americans. Yet acting accordingly by escaping to Mexico's Northeast remained a fairly different issue in practice. Nevertheless, the individual actions of hundreds of self-emancipated slaves absconding to Mexico, responding to structural factors and contextual incentives for flight, had a significant cumulative and systemic impact on the regime of slavery north of the Rio Grande.[138]

During more than half a century, Mexico's appeal as an idealized racial haven among enslaved people and abolitionists throughout the US consistently intensified.

[136] For similar observations for nineteenth-century Brazil and Cuba, the other hearts of the "Second Slavery": Ian Read, Karl Zimmerman, "Freedom for too few: slave runaways in the Brazilian Empire", *Journal of Social History*, v.48, n°2 (2014), 404-426 (see conclusion); Manuel Barcia, *Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations, 1808-1848* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 51.

[137] Interestingly, this very point is more largely made by the historiography on modern refugees. See, *inter alia*, Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[138] Kelley, "Mexico in his Head", 709-723.

Its reputation as a beacon of freedom spread from western territorial Louisiana's slave quarters to most of the Lower South's plantations by the eve of the US Civil War. During the first decade of the century, the emancipatory appeal of the border separating the US from New Spain had remained rather vague and for the most part limited to plantations along the Red and Cane Rivers, while self-emancipated slaves deserting westward to Texas were relatively few and did not represent a major threat to southern society. However, as Secession loomed, many more fugitives began to follow in the footsteps of the Cane River pioneers. Slaves from the Texas frontier, the lower Mississippi delta region and port cities scattered along the US South coast had become well aware of an increasingly clear and appealing connection between Mexico and the cause of anti-slavery. Self-liberated bondspeople increasingly ran away in order to avoid separation from their relatives, or as a reaction to separation; they fled from physical and psychological violence; and they absconded in response to broken compromises and the impossibility of negotiating with masters. From Brownsville to Pensacola, *bozales* newcomers and Creole slaves, urban and rural bondspeople, plantation hands and domestic servants, entertained visions of freedom across the southern border. Seeking refuge, some undertook a life-threatening journey to Mexico's Northeast, as we will discuss in the next chapter.