

Writing Royal Slaves  
into Colonial Studies

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Editora académica

REPENSANDO EL PASADO,  
RECUPERANDO EL FUTURO

Nuevos aportes interdisciplinarios  
para el estudio de la América colonial

Repensando el pasado, recuperando el futuro : nuevos aportes interdisciplinarios para el estudio de la América colonial = Remembering the past, retrieving the future : new interdisciplinary contributions to the study of colonial Latin America / [compiladora] Verónica Salles-Reese...[et al.]. — 1a ed. — Bogotá : Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005.  
ix, 422 p. : il.

Incluye referencias bibliográficas.

Textos en Español, Inglés y Portugués.

ISBN: 958-683-797-1

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Colonial Cultural Studies, particularly in the field of literature, has overwhelmingly focused on the story of Western (Spanish) conquest, colonization, and transformation of (indigenous) America. Since its foundation, the canonical and privileged texts of the field have been those produced by the "Western" encounter with the "New World" and its inhabitants. The story of the subsequent emergence of hybrid subject identities, such as those of Creoles or mestizos, and their textual representations and performances has also played a key role in the field. Although the story of African and Creole slaves and free people of African descent has been the object of significant attention in the discipline of colonial Latin American history since the 1970s, this story remains at the margins in the field of Colonial (literary) Studies. Yet even in Latin American history, the historiography of Afro-Americans has too often been regionally and territorially compartmentalized and for the most part confined to the plantation societies of the Caribbean (particularly Cuba) and Brazil. Only recently has there been a renewed attention to the history of slaves and free people of African descent in "mainland" Spanish America, particularly, but not exclusively, in the core vice-royal centers of Mexico and Peru.<sup>1</sup>

One facile explanation for the scant representation of slaves and their descendants in the scholarly production of the field of Colonial Cultural Studies may be the lack of recognized "canonical" colonial texts written by or about slaves and free

<sup>1</sup> See for example, Patrick Carroll, *Afro-Mexicans in Veracruz*, Herman Bennet, *Africans in Colonial Mexico*, Ben Venson III, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*, Christine Hunefeldt *Paying the Price of Freedom*. For a broad overview on post abolition societies see George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*.

people of African descent.<sup>2</sup> Another more intricate reason for the quasi invisibility of these enslaved colonial subjects in this fundamentally *letrado* oriented academic field is the deep-seated association of African slaves with oral culture. This entrenched connection leads to the common assumption that there are few or no written texts produced by or about enslaved subjects of African descent –or perhaps that such written texts as there may be are inherently “inauthentic.” Yet, as many historians well know, colonial archives are full of texts about –and even by– slaves and free people of African descent, particularly as these enslaved and free subjects engaged state and ecclesiastical courts and institutions. There are also thousands of texts about bondsmen and women produced by other kinds of subjects in Iberian colonial slave societies: by Inquisitors, lawyers, and witnesses, by royal officials, administrators and military men, by notaries, secretaries and scribes, by missionaries, parish priests and nuns, by abolitionists, by doctors and physicians, and by travelers among others.<sup>3</sup> These texts speak to the discursive constructions of self and Other among different sectors of slave societies in the New World.

The almost imperceptible presence of slaves and people of African descent in the field of Colonial Studies today may also be related to the longstanding cultural and juridical construction of slaves (and by extension of their free descendants) as “outsiders” in the body politic, any body politic, including the restricted Spanish (and Portuguese) colonial body politic. In fact, that “outsider” status was in many ways inherent to the condition of slavery understood as “social death.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, the multifarious discursive and practical contestations of that “outsider” –or even “non-subject”– status pertaining to enslaved people, constitute a significant theme in much of the textual production by and related to slaves that did take place in these societies. The discursive and textual production of the royal slaves of El Cobre –the subjects of my study below– exemplifies well some of these trends.

<sup>2</sup> One particularly well-known exception that has had to overcompensate for the alleged scarcity of enslaved subaltern subject authored or themed texts in the canon is Juan Manzano’s *Autobiography of a Slave*, perhaps the closest analogue in the Colonial Cultural Studies’ field to Guaman Poma’s now famous letter to the King Philip III of Spain. See Rolena Adorno’s important *Guaman Poma: Writing and Resistance in Colonial Peru*.

<sup>3</sup> The best published example of the spectrum of texts by and about slaves and people of African descent is Robert E. Conrad’s compilation of Brazilian documents entitled *Children of God’s Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*. For slaves’ use of the courts and the texts thereby produced see also Maria Eugenia Chaves’ *Maria Chiquinquirá Díaz, una esclava del siglo XVIII*. See also Sandra Lauderdale-Graham, *Cayetana Says No*. For other kinds of texts by slaves or former slaves see Nancy Van Heusen, ed., *The Souls of Purgatory: The Spiritual Diary of a Seventeenth Century Afro-Peruvian Mystic, Ursula de Jesus*.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this notion of slavery see Orland Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

Finally, another major reason why (African) slaves and their descendants have been written off the field of Colonial Studies and Literature for so long may be due to the age-old convention of troping “America” and the “New World” with the figure of its indigenous inhabitants, the “original” natives of the land. This entrenched discursive construction also has a long genealogy that goes back to the early colonial period, in effect to the textual production of chroniclers and missionaries. Thus, people of African descent also seem to have been often unwittingly marginalized –if not altogether excluded– in the field of Colonial Studies due to their “African” (or in colonial terminology a generic “Ethiopian”) origin or territorial/racial outsider status. Furthermore, the historical yoking of African/Ethiopian origin with New World slavery has tended to encompass all people of African descent, including Creole (or American-born) slaves and free subjects. These deep-seated constructions of identity and subject positions which I claim may still be afflicting the field of Colonial Studies today were implicitly alluded to *and* subverted in the texts –and subtexts– generated by the royal slaves of El Cobre in seventeenth and eighteenth century Cuba. These texts, as I will show below, often made rhetorical use of the Indian trope to make claims about the status of the royal slaves in American colonial society.

In short, free and enslaved Afro-Americans have yet to be written in more prominent and significant ways into the field of Colonial Cultural Studies much in the way they have been already incorporated into the discipline of colonial history. To do so, a series of avowed and disavowed preconceptions from the past still haunting the field in the present may have to be carefully scrutinized. Before plunging into the case study and texts of the royal slaves of El Cobre, let me begin by briefly mapping the main loci in which slavery has been examined in the historiography of colonial Latin America in the last three or four decades.

## 1. Writing Slavery into Latin American History: The Colonial Historiography of Slavery

The historiography of slavery, and to a lesser extent of free people of color, has for the most part concentrated on the forms that slavery (and conversely freedom) has taken in three major loci.<sup>5</sup> A fourth location is currently opening up in the historical

<sup>5</sup> I will not attempt here a detailed overview of the literature, but instead select a few paradigmatic studies for the different loci. For general overviews of the historiography of slavery and free people of

literature. The classic locus of New World slavery has been the plantation systems linked to the Atlantic world's export economies. The exemplary site of Latin American rural slavery has been the sugar plantation and the major works in the historiography of this type of slave regime have focused on Brazil and Cuba. One of the foundational studies in this academic subfield was Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1936) or *The Masters and the Slaves* (English trans. 1986), a work that had an enormous cultural and ideological resonance beyond scholarly circles in Brazilian society. Cuba's foremost works on plantation slavery are Manuel Moreno Fraginal's encompassing study of the plantation complex, *El ingenio*, (1978) and, in U.S. academia, Franklin Knight's more broadly framed *Slave Society in Nineteenth Century Cuba* (1970). Slavery as a dominant form of labor in other forms of plantation export settings such as in coffee production as well as in the mining industry have also received increasing attention since the 1970s.

Another paradigmatic locus of slavery in the historiography of colonial Latin America has been the urban setting. Studies in Latin American urban slavery were pioneered by Frederick Bowser's *The African Slave in Colonial Peru* (1976) for Lima. More recently, Mary Karash's *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808-1850* (1987) has become a point of reference in the genre due to the richness of its sources and the fine overview of the urban slave experience that it provides. Bonded labor in urban spaces covered a wide range of skilled and unskilled occupational niches and urban slaves had more spatial and social mobility than rural slaves. Urban locations held the strongest concentrations of free people of color and these spaces also provided enslaved people more opportunities for interaction with other sectors of colonial society. Urban slaves also had greater contact with the "lettered city" and with colonial institutions such as the Church and the state's tribunals. Perhaps the only text on slavery that has so far found a modicum place, if not altogether canonical status, in the field of Colonial Cultural Studies is Juan Manzano's *Autobiography of a Slave*, a work fully grounded on the theme of (domestic) urban slavery in Cuba and authored by an enslaved poet.

A third major site that has emerged in the historiography of slavery is that of the runaway slave communities known in Spanish and Portuguese as *palenques* or *quilombos*. These communities have been construed in the scholarly literature as

major loci of resistance to slavery and currently have even attained an iconic character in the social imaginary at large. The main work that opened this subfield within slavery studies was Richard Price's popular 1973 anthology *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, followed by his own richer and more sophisticated *Alabi's World* (1990). The famous *quilombo* of Palmares in Brazil has commanded particular scholarly and popular interest due to its unprecedented size and its longevity. Another of the few texts also on Cuban slavery that has acquired some visibility in the field of Colonial Studies despite its post-colonial production, its relation to the modern genre of testimonial literature, and its ambiguous and controversial documentary status is Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (1966) or in its English translation *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (c.1968).

Finally, a fourth new locus has recently begun to emerge in the colonial historiography of slavery: the heretofore unknown Afro-American pueblos or corporate communities that existed within colonial society and not at its margins like the above mentioned maroon communities or *palenques*. The case of El Cobre (1670-1830) in eastern Cuba represents one such community constituted by royal slaves and freed people of color. The establishment of this pueblo with a corporate land grant, a limited *cabildo* (local government), and local militia companies with their own officers strikes the historian as particularly unusual, for legally, as "outsiders" in the body politic, slaves were not allowed to form such a polity. Corporate pueblos are mostly associated by scholars with the organization of Indian communities in the "repúblicas de indios." Even pueblos constituted largely or exclusively by freedmen and *castas* (racially mixed people) were uncommon in the Indies. Yet, more Afro-American villages formally recognized as pueblos than heretofore suspected may have existed in the Spanish colonial world, particularly in the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean region—in places such as Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela, or even early Mexico—where free people of color outnumbered slaves, or where military considerations may have modified the usual order of things. We know of other Afro-American communities, for example: Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose in Spanish Florida, San Lazaro de los Minas in Santo Domingo, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Morenos de Ampa in Mexico. These pueblos, however, were for the most part villages of freedmen who were the direct beneficiaries of the Spanish Crown's sanctuary policies for the enemy's escaped slaves.<sup>6</sup> The case of El Cobre in

color in Latin America see Leslie B. Rout, *The African Experience in Spanish America: 1502 to the Present Day*; Herbert Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*; A.J.R. Russell-Wood, *The Black Man in Slavery and Freedom in Colonial Brazil*; George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*, see particularly Chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Lander, "Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose: A Free Black Town in Spanish Colonial Florida." Carlos Esteban Deive, *La esclavitud del negro en Santo Domingo, 1492-1844*; Colin A. Palmer, *Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650*; William B. Taylor, "The Foundation of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Morenos de Ampa."

eastern Cuba, on the other hand, was particularly anomalous due to the fact that it was mostly constituted by royal slaves.

Although scarcely noticed in the literature, the Spanish state owned and employed *esclavos del Rey* (King's slaves) in Spain as well as in the New World. In the American territories, royal slaves were employed in the construction and operation of state projects, particularly when Indian labor was not readily available. The most sustained use of royal slaves involved the construction of massive fortification projects in the Caribbean.<sup>7</sup> In the case of El Cobre we are confronting not only a new locus of slavery, namely a slave village in a military defensive frontier setting, but a new form of slavery as well. The odd category of royal slavery immediately triggers several questions: Was slavery to the King imagined differently from slavery to a private master? What kind of arrangements or entitlements did it entail? How were these discursively conceived and legitimized?

In 1670 the Crown confiscated the copper mines and slaves of Santiago del Prado (El Cobre) in eastern Cuba from its private contractor. At that time, 271 private slaves, most of them Creole, became the King's slaves, thus placing them in a category whose practical and ideological meaning would be worked out in subsequent years through practices in everyday life, re-invented traditions, religious and vernacular stories of the past, litigation, and revolt. By 1730, El Cobre was one of only fourteen duly constituted settlements (cities, towns and villages) on the island at least two of which, but perhaps three, were Indian corporate pueblos. By 1773, El Cobre had grown into a sizeable village of 1,320 inhabitants of whom, 64 percent were royal slaves, 34 percent were free people of color, mostly manumitted descendants or relatives of royal slaves, and 2 percent were personal slaves (of royal slaves and free people of color in the village). Perhaps not altogether coincidentally, this remarkable village also came to house the most important colonial shrine in the island's Oriente region: the shrine to the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre who eventually also became the patroness of the Cuban nation.<sup>8</sup>

The wider historical study in which this paper is based constitutes an attempt to write slavery into colonial history in freshly novel ways that combine social, economic and political approaches to slavery with cultural and discursive ones. The study, however, raises issues of interest for the field of Colonial Cul-

tural Studies too. In line with the textual and discursive approaches predominant in the emergent interdisciplinary field of Colonial Cultural Studies, I will focus in this paper on some dominant colonial discourses that the royal slaves of El Cobre engaged in their texts. These discourses show that these Creole royal slaves had become thoroughly familiar with the culture of literacy of Spanish colonial society. In the texts that they produced –and/or that were written on their behalf– they invoked the hegemonic discourses of the colonial Church and state (particularly the law), as well as more vernacular ones circulating orally and through the written word in seventeenth and eighteenth century Cuba. The royal slaves of El Cobre appropriated, stretched and re-worked some of these dominant discourses to authorize their new subject position in colonial society and to legitimate their claims to special status and even de facto freedom(s). In doing so they wrote themselves into colonial history and its texts in some noteworthy ways. I will examine here three different but related texts produced by these royal slaves, each in a different discursive field and genre: an excerpt of a petition filed in 1677 (a blend of legal and lay discourse); part of a notarized Virgin apparition miracle story cast in the dominant genre of Marian New World religious narratives; and perhaps most fascinating of all, a story or legend of origin cast in what I term here a hybrid of vernacular and chronicle-based Conquest lore.

## 2. The Petition of 1677: A Claim to Pueblo and Patria Chica

In 1677 Judge don Antonio de Matienzo received an unusual petition from the royal slaves of El Cobre. The judge had been appointed to officially oversee the confiscation of the mines of El Cobre and to dispose of the slaves in the Crown's recently acquired mining property. The orders were to sell the confiscated slaves to interested purchasers or to send able males to work in the royal fortification projects of Havana. In a classic act of *cimarronaje* or marronage, on learning of the King's orders the royal slaves escaped to the nearby mountains protesting their sale and relocation. From the mountains they sent a petition to the acting Judge trying to negotiate their stay in El Cobre. Although it is not clear who wrote the (semi-literate) petition, it was signed by one of the royal slaves, Captain Juan Moreno. I will focus here on the passage that pithily articulates what I consider to be the most radical claim of this unusual text and the discursive terms in which the claim was cast.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Pike, *Penal Servitude in Early Modern Spain*; Francisco Perez Guzman, "Modo de vida de esclavos y forzados en las fortificaciones de Cuba: siglo XVIII."

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller account of the formation and development of this unusual community see my booklength study entitled *The Virgin, the King and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670-1780*.

Captain Moreno's petition on behalf of "the Creole royal slaves natives of the mines of Santiago del Prado [El Cobre]" stated that "the love for our *patria* and our work move us to ask for...the mercy of being allowed to stay in our *pueblo*, paying tribute, in whatever manner it is arranged for us while we find [a way to pay] for our freedom...."<sup>9</sup> Underlying the perhaps less remarkable legal request for a concession of *coartado* status (without the required initial down payment) was the petition's most culturally and politically loaded formulation: that El Cobre was "our *patria*" and "our *pueblo*." Although it was not altogether uncommon for slaves in Cuba and elsewhere in Iberian slave societies to request their self-purchase or *coartación* in installments by offering owners a 25 percent down payment of their assessed price, this case called for a special concession since the royal slaves did not have the necessary capital to initiate the *coartación* process.<sup>10</sup> More unusual perhaps was the request for a collective concession rather than individual ones. Yet these requests, exceptional as they were, could still be accommodated within a discourse related to the custom and law of *coartación*.

More striking, however, was the allegation that the Creole royal slaves natives of the mines of El Cobre constituted a *pueblo* and that El Cobre was their *patria*. Such a discursive justification was unprecedented and represented a particularly bold political act in the case of slaves. Moreover it constituted a legal incongruence. In principle, the social death and natal alienation entailed by enslavement deprived the slave of all rights or claims by birth—either to family of origin, lineage, land and community—and this excluded him or her from any legitimate social order.<sup>11</sup> Here were slaves, the ultimate outsiders in colonial society, turning themselves into natives of the New World, making claims on their Creole status, and above all, binding that Creole identity concretely to a *pueblo* and a local territory. The petition's invocation of a patriotic tie may have been among the first such invocations among people of color—not to speak slaves—to reach us in writing from the colonial past.

<sup>9</sup> Petition of Captain Juan Moreno, Santiago del Prado, July 13, 1677, fols. 454-55v, Archivo General De Indias (hereafter AGI), Santo Domingo (hereafter SD) 1631. For a discussion of the whole text of this unusual petition see Díaz, *The Virgin, the King and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre*, Chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Coartación* constituted the common law right of a slave to purchase his or her own freedom. It represented a slave in the process of freeing him or herself. After the initial down payment, the rest of the price of his or her freedom could be paid in installments over an established period of time, sometimes a whole lifetime. The institution was supposedly founded in Cuba, and it is there that the practice became more extended. *Coartado* status often entitled a slave to some prerogatives like time off or greater autonomy from a master. See Herbert Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, 196-200.

<sup>11</sup> On "natal alienation" and "social death" as the fundamental conditions defining enslaved status see Orland Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

To be sure, the petition's language was not unusual with regard to the identification of slaves as Creoles, or even as *naturales* (natives) of a particular locality (in this case what was known as the mines of Santiago del Prado). What was extraordinary about the discourse employed was the affective attachment to local territory and community that the use of the term "*patria*" invoked and what that tie presumably entailed. *Patria* was a term that turned mere place of origin into a homeland: a different cultural, social, and political entity altogether. The ideology of *patria* referred to an inclusive bond of community that implied an enduring solidarity constructed through a common history or tradition, and perhaps some common rights and institutions that were linked to territoriality as well. The term *patria* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries still referred for the most part to a local community, in effect to a *patria chica*. Local homelands were part of politically bounded units, such as *pueblos*, towns, and cities representing different constituent units in the body politic. Moreover, the claim to *patria chica* and to *pueblo* made in the petition implicitly constituted a sort of birthright that entitled a subject to live in his or her locality of origin or official residence, a right recognized in the case of freemen but not in the case of slaves. It also entailed implicit claims to land as a community. The text in fact invoked and claimed on behalf of slaves one of the most significant identities of free subjects in the early modern Iberian world—that of belonging to a *patria chica*.

In short, the most fascinating aspect of the discourse found in the petition was the extent to which it ignored or refused to acknowledge the "natal alienation" or "social death" entailed by the condition of slavery and the ways in which it subtly inserted these royal slaves into the civil polity despite their slavery. The text's main rhetorical move consisted in foregrounding the royal slaves' status as Creoles and as *naturales* or natives of El Cobre and conflating that generic status with a more specific and politically charged identity based on *pueblo* and *patria*. That act of semantic alchemy was performed by the anticipation of the royal slaves' freedom to be attained through a legally viable but yet to be initiated process of *coartación*.

The *cobrer*os' discursive attempt to insert themselves into the colonial body politic eventually received some institutional recognition. In fact, although most of the royal slaves of this or subsequent generations never purchased their juridical freedom, they were nonetheless able to become a *pueblo* and to negotiate a series of *de facto* freedoms, a story that I study in great detail elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> In the next two or

<sup>12</sup> Díaz, *The Virgin, the King and the Royal Slaves*. See also Díaz, "Of Life and Freedom in the (Tropical) Hearth: El Cobre, 1709-1773," in Barry and Clark, eds. *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas*.

three decades, they even obtained a concession of a surrounding league of land that enabled them to live as a semi-peasant community. Given the innovative discursive interventions it made, the petition of 1677 constituted an important foundational text for this community and for the eventual identity of these subjects as “cobreros” much along the lines of other local territorially based identities in the island such as that of “habaneros,” “bayameses,” or “cubanos” (from Santiago de Cuba). Similarly the marronage events that surrounded the production of this foundational text constituted a significant political intervention that allowed the petition’s discursive claims to take on practical historical shape. One could go further and claim that this petition also constituted a foundational text in Cuban history (and its historiography) as it marked the discursive and practical appearance of the only black *pueblo* in the island’s history, and for more than a century an exceptional *pueblo* whose members—the *cobreros*—were for the most part royal slaves.

By 1687, the same Captain Juan Moreno who ten years before, in 1677, had petitioned colonial royal officials to allow his fellow royal slaves to remain in El Cobre living as a *pueblo*, produced yet another kind of “foundational” text. This time, however, it was a notarized deposition of a miraculous story of the past that he related to ecclesiastical authorities. The notarization event and the foundational text it produced can be seen as a joint attempt between the *cobreros* and some sectors of the Church to construct and consolidate the royal slaves’ right to community in yet another type of discursive mode.

### 3. The Virgin of Charity’s religious narrative

The narrative of the miraculous apparition of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre became a major discursive site for the construction of social memory and local identity and for the legitimation of unusual claims to land, community and residence in this village of royal slaves in eastern Cuba. I have examined elsewhere the significance of this Cuban Marian cult and the various miraculous stories that accompanied the consolidation of this and other Marian shrines in the New World.<sup>13</sup> Suffice it to point out here the major motifs in the Marian genre (and in

its New World versions) and the particular rhetorical moves made in this narrative to produce the desired inside status for these royal slaves. Stories of the past, including religious and miraculous stories, ground social identities and claims in the present. They occasionally point to an imagined future as well. While manifestly speaking to the alleged origins of the shrine in the early seventeenth century, the subtext of this Marian story also spoke to the social identity and the ensuing claims to land and community that the *cobrero* royal slaves had struggled to secure and consolidate after the Crown’s confiscation of the mines in 1670 and more specifically after their petition of 1677. The story that the Creole royal slave Juan Moreno recounted to ecclesiastical authorities in 1687<sup>14</sup> went something like this: around 1604, when still a very small boy, Juan and two Indian brothers who lived and worked in the mining settlement of El Cobre found floating in the waters of Nipe Bay an allegedly miraculous effigy of “the Virgin of Charity.” They brought the small image into their canoe and carried it to land. The Virgin performed some miracles that communicated to royal and ecclesiastical authorities and to the people in the mining settlement of Santiago del Prado (El Cobre) where a hermitage should be built for the image. One of the most important miracles was, according to Moreno’s story, a sign of some unusual lights that appeared for three consecutive nights on top of the Hill of the Mines where the mining slaves of El Cobre used to work at the time. Thus, it came to be that through a series of supernatural signs the Virgin guided residents in the settlement to the exact place where she wanted to establish her home—a common motif in the genre of Marian stories. In Moreno’s spin on the story, the Virgin’s effigy had come full circle from the Indian brothers and the creole slave boy’s hands in the sea, to the center of the mining settlement, and from there to the mining slaves’ work domain in the Hill of the Mine. It was precisely through this metonymical association with the mines that the Virgin of Charity became in Moreno’s implicit narrative, the protector of the mines and its slaves.

Moreno’s story about the finding of a miraculous Marian effigy was based on a Catholic master code whereby the mother of God appeared to the wretched, lowest and most disempowered all over the world: to children and women, to shepherds and peasants, to Indians (and more rarely in the New World) to blacks and slaves. This genre of religious Marian stories codifies an important ideological

<sup>13</sup> See Maria Elena Díaz, “Rethinking Tradition and Identity: The Virgin of Charity of El Cobre,” *Cuba, the Elusive Nation: Interpretations of National Identity*, Damian J. Fernandez and Madeline Camara Betancourt, eds., See as well Díaz, *The Virgin, the King*, Chaps. 4 and 5.

<sup>14</sup> Testimony of Captain Juan Moreno, Investigation of the Virgin’s Apparition, Santiago del Prado, Apr. 1, 1687, fols. 12-18v, AGI-SD 363. A full transcription of this document can be found in the Levi Marrero Collection at Florida International University in Miami.

tenet of Christianity—namely, the value of all men and women in the eyes of God, where in fact, the underprivileged can become over privileged through divine favor.<sup>15</sup> Making use of this dominant Catholic narrative, Moreno and his fellow royal slaves articulated an account of their past that expressed their present concerns in a manner acceptable (or more acceptable) to the Church, to the Crown, and to other sectors of colonial society, high as well as low. That is, Moreno's Christian story of Marian miracles had a political subtext whereby the slaves of El Cobre's extraordinary claims to land, community and *patria chica* found powerful validation through supernatural protection. Moreno and the *cobrer*os' claims were not cast here in the quasi legal and political discourse of the petition of 1677, but rather in a religious discourse that at times had an even stronger moral force in Spain's early modern world. That is, in Juan Moreno's implicit account of the Virgin of Charity, the *cobrer*os' own political claims constituted an expression of divine (or Marian) will.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the most simple way to accommodate into the discursive horizon of the time these royal slaves' extraordinary claims was indeed through the language of miracles.

Moreover, the figure of Indians was effectively utilized as a trope in this story to construe these slaves as natives of the New World, and more specifically of the territory of El Cobre. In Juan Moreno's story, the Virgin's chosen people were the Indians and the slaves of the mines of El Cobre, and her selected and hallowed place was the land where they lived and worked. Colonial discourse construed Indians as the natives of the land. By juxtaposing Creole slaves and Indians, the story rhetorically turned the former into natives of the place as well and made their position in colonial society analogous. In fact, the pueblo of royal slaves of El Cobre would eventually be organized and constituted in many ways as a corporate Indian pueblo.

Furthermore, although Indians were common figures in the genre of New World Marian stories, people of African descent and in particular slaves, hardly ever appeared as protagonists and seers in these popular religious narratives.<sup>17</sup> It is

as if Indians functioned as tropes for the evangelization and protection of America through Marian intervention, but slaves could not play that rhetorical and symbolic role in these New World stories. Thus, Moreno's narrative of the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre is also remarkable in that slaves wrote themselves, and were allowed to write themselves, into a popular religious mainstream story, one in which they were protagonists in the creation of a major Christian Marian cult in the region. The inclusion of slaves in this Christian narrative, the role of a royal slave (the child Juan Moreno) as main witness and living repository of this memory, and subsequently the development of what would become the island's major Marian shrine in a pueblo of royal slaves and people of African descent all constitute unique historical aspects in the making of this unusual community and of this Marian tradition. The foundational text of this important Cuban Marian tradition—a colonial text in which a slave even takes on an "authorial" role (or a co-authorial one with the ecclesiastical scribe)—throws light on some of the discursive strategies that were mobilized to inscribe slaves as subjects in colonial texts and history.

#### 4. The Three Indian Caciques Origin Story

The last text I want to consider is also a narrative of the past produced by a *cobrero*, but one based on a somewhat different discursive tradition. The local legend in question constitutes an eloquent manifestation of this community's, local imaginary and succinctly encodes the *cobrer*os' understanding of their rights to land, territory and corporate identity. Although the story constitutes a popular rendition of royalist political discourse and rights of conquest, that dominant discourse is appropriated to legitimize what I have argued was an unconventional form of community and of claims for land rights. The story also writes the royal slaves of El Cobre into the wider history of the region.

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Veronica Salles-Rease's *From Viracocha to the Virgin of Copacabana*. These works elucidate the emergence and history of their respective New World Marian cults from angles other than what I have taken in my study of the Virgin of El Cobre's cult. What all of these studies seem to show, however, is that Marian narratives were strongly charged plurivocal and plurisemic texts in New World Spanish colonial societies and that they constituted important discursive sites where the agendas of different sectors of society—be they subaltern Indians or slaves, Spanish Creoles, or religious orders and ecclesiastics—could overlap and seek validation.

<sup>15</sup> For similar "master narratives" in what may well be regarded as a widespread Marian story genre see Marina Warner, *Alone in All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. For the identification of many themes of Marian apparition narratives in early modern Spain see William Christian, *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain*. For an overview of New World Marian narratives and cults see: Ruben Vargas Ugarte, *Historia del culto de Maria en Ibero-America y de sus imagines y santuarios mas celebrados*.

<sup>16</sup> For another version of the story with a similar thrust which was produced almost a century later in 1783 see Díaz, *The Virgin, the King and the Royal Slaves*, 107-09.

<sup>17</sup> For excellent studies of two major New World Marian cults and their narratives see Jacques La Faye's *Quetzacoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813*, and

Dismissed as “nonsense” by the royal official who nonetheless wrote the extant fragment down, the narrative was related in oral form by the elder *cobrero* Francisco Sanchez in 1792. The context for the production of the text was a report ordered by the Crown regarding “the origins and foundation of El Cobre”. By the 1790s, more than a century after El Cobre had become a *pueblo* of royal slaves, the ambiguous and anomalous status of this unusual community was challenged again. The narrative of the past recounted by the *cobrero* Sanchez was a vernacular story that seems to have traveled back and forth between oral and written sources for many years. It was a narrative of what I shall call “Conquest lore” that the *cobrer*os appropriated at some point in time from oral or written sources in eastern Cuba and into which they wrote themselves as heirs to an ancient Indian *cacicazgo*. When asked about the origins and foundation of El Cobre, Sanchez did not give the story about the founding of the copper mines that the royal official expected and that he also knew. Instead he swerved into another discursive mode and a different temporality. Wrote the scribe:

[El Cobre's] first beginning and foundation had been three Indian cacique brothers: one had his home in Baracoa and his name was Coa, the other was named Cuba and lived there [Santiago de Cuba], and the third lived in the village of El Cobre and his name was Cobe. He had sold himself with the greatest humility during the Conquest without it being even necessary to fire a shot. He [the speaker] mentioned lands that the Cacique Cobe had owned at the time and [said] that His Majesty had given them as a mercy to the Pueblo of El Cobre and its natives [the *cobrer*os].<sup>18</sup>

Underlying this legend was a royalist story about king-granted rights to land and the recognition of the *cobrer*os as a corporate *pueblo*, particularly in the politicized backdrop in which the tale was recounted and recorded. While in the above examined Marian story the *cobrer*os' special link to the land and territory of El Cobre was sanctioned by divine—or Marian—will, in the more secular story of the three *caciques* the imagined source of legitimacy was instead—or also—the king. After subjugating the *cacique* Cobe and taking his lands by right of conquest, the king granted that bounded territory to the black *cobrer*os, thereby turning them into the new holders of the land and the first settlers of what became the colonial village of El Cobre. More generally, the figure of the king in the story implicitly had the absolute power to take and give land, to alter the social order, to favor his own slaves, to allow and legitimize an “anomalous” situation such as that of slaves

constituting a corporate community, and to turn them, like their Native Americans predecessors, into full natives of their new local territory (presumably with landholding and residential rights). And by tracing the name of “El Cobre” to the *cacique* Cobe, the story obliterated the *pueblo*'s foundation as a Spanish copper-mining settlement where the *cobrer*os had once been regular mining slaves. Instead, the narrative grounded the origins and boundaries of the *cobrer*os' imagined community in the ancient past of pre-colonial and Conquest history. One can hear in the story, however, an officially sanctioned colonial narrative about the imposition of the Spanish order over and above a defeated Native American one and the latter's almost voluntary submission to the Spanish Crown.<sup>19</sup>

The story of the three *caciques* also seemed to invoke an ancient and noble aura that could confer symbolic legitimacy and pedigree to colonial communities—in fact, that could equip them with what may have been valued as a “New World” tradition so to speak. The story of the three *caciques*, for instance, related how the *cobrer*os became the natives and preservers of ancient land, even if by conquest and royal intervention. Furthermore, the stature of the modest *pueblo* of El Cobre was enhanced in a show of local pride by its kinship to what had allegedly been two important regional *cacicazgos* and its juxtaposition to two major centers in colonial times: Baracoa (the first colonial settlement and capital of the island) and the city of Santiago de Cuba (the island's second capital). From yet another perspective, the diachronic continuity of El Cobre from its days as an Indian *cacicazgo* to as colonial community of king's slaves also suggested a synchronic analogy between these two groups in the eighteenth century's colonial present. Not only were there two Indian communities in the environs of this village of royal slaves (Jiguani and El Caney), but El Cobre had in common many organizational features with them.

As already mentioned, this foundation story seems to have been borrowed and adapted from the oral (and written) archive of pre-colonial and Conquest lore in Oriente at the time. Rather than inventing the “three *cacique* brothers” origin story, the *cobrer*os were more probably appropriating and rewriting regional lore. Foundational stories of other towns and settlements in the region were also based on a similar structure of Indian *caciques* recalled in their names. Some of these once oral stories and traditions were passed down orally as well as through their inscription in chronicles. From these chronicles of the early Conquest years days

<sup>18</sup> Testimony of Francisco Sanchez, El Cobre, [ca. Apr. 8, 1790], AGI-SD 1629, Cuaderno 6.

<sup>19</sup> There seems to be some confusion in the story regarding the Crown's right to enslave and dispossess Native Americans of their land if there was no resistance and “just war.” Perhaps this “confusion” reflected the social memory of the Conquest that circulated orally in the region and which the *cobrer*os may have appropriated for their purposes.



the stories may have made it back to oral tradition and back to the written word as in the case of Sanchez's deposition.<sup>20</sup>

The story of the Three Caciques shows how pervasive was the Indian trope in colonial discourses even in a Caribbean region where Native Americans were no longer highly visible given their demographic collapse in the years following the Conquest. It also shows how slaves and people of African descent made use of these vernacular and official discourses to write –and at times re-write– themselves into the imaginary of colonial history and its texts.

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Colonial texts and the hegemonic (and counter-hegemonic) discourses in which slaves and subaltern subjects of African descent were inscribed may very soon begin to receive increasing attention by scholars in the field of Colonial Cultural Studies. The texts are in the archives and some have already been published in document anthologies. Latin American historians have been using these texts and documents particularly since the 1960s and 70s in their efforts to write slavery into the field of colonial history. More intense interdisciplinary exchanges and forms of collaboration may open the way for writing slavery into the field of Colonial Cultural Studies in new and more sophisticated ways. Scholars may also turn to alternative kinds of texts less dependent on the written word –or altogether removed from it– to access more comprehensively the wider range of cultural and political production of subaltern subjects (and of elite ones too). CASO constitutes an extremely promising forum for these exchanges.

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<sup>20</sup> Bishop Morell de Santa Cruz recounted some of these oral histories of Bayamo alongside others taken from different chroniclers in his pastoral visit of the city of Bayamo published in Cesar Garcia del Pino, ed., *La visita eclesiastica*.

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