

Introduction

Making the Boatloads Visible

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”
—Ralph Ellison¹

I felt intimidated by what had befallen them, their suffering, which was beyond my grasp. My discomfort annoyed them—‘Stop that! Stop!’—and they insisted I see that life in that place had kept all its diversity, with comedy as well as sorrow, tenderness as well as horror. Out of their love for life, they refused to be transformed into legend, into a monument to misfortune. —Milan Kundera²

*1547 años lai hab ca paxi u chem ex boxe ecabe ca bini españolesob
Baksahcicob u ahob katun yok box te ecabe uak ek boxil lae* [1547 was the year when a boatload of black people was shipwrecked at Ecab and the Spaniards went to capture them; they waged war upon the blacks at Ecab and brought out those black people tied together].

—The Titles of the Pech³



atload of black people”—thus did a Maya notary economically evoke transatlantic slave trade. The epigraph is an annals entry from a Maya-age account of the Spanish conquest of Yucatan. It is the sole mention in conquest narratives of the presence of Africans in the peninsula in the 16th century. Likewise, in the historical literature on colonial Yucatan, mentions of African descent are given but scant and passing attention; to borrow Frutkin’s famous use of the word, they are the invisible men and women of the recent past. The best single-volume history of the peninsula to date, Sergio G. O’Shea’s recent *Breve historia de Yucatán*, contains ninety-seven sections in twenty chapters, none of whose titles and headings make any reference to Africans.

Quezada can hardly be blamed. Despite the fact that both at the start and the end of colonial times there were almost as many people of African descent as there were Spaniards, Afro-Yucatecos wrote virtually nothing in

both to literacy and to the legal system, yet even European sources tend to be peculiarly blind to the black presence in the colony, or dismissive of it. Spaniards sometimes give us fleeting glimpses of the black men and women who lived among them, tantalizing moments of visibility for those mostly unmentioned and unseen on the page. Fray Cristóbal Asensio wrote that in 1570 he “hired a horse and a black man” in Valladolid for his journey to Cozumel to evangelize the island’s Mayas; but while the friar’s report is detailed in many ways, the black man never appears again.⁵ In his “description of the Indies” of 1620, fray Antonio Vásquez de Espinosa included over a dozen pages on Yucatan, permitting such details as descriptions of native dress, the precise locations of towns, the nature of local fruits, and a comprehensive list of all convents, curacies, and the number of Maya parishioners. But there is only one passing reference in Espinosa’s account to the existence of “blacks and mulattoes” in the colony, despite the fact that there were thousands of Afro-Yucatecans by this time.⁶ Similarly, don Joaquín Fernando Prieto penned a report on Yucatan in 1757 whose thirty pages informed the reader of the various types of wood found in the peninsula, the revenue from port taxes, and the number of Maya parishes—but nary a mention of enslaved African or free-colored contributions to Yucatan’s economy.⁷

One might argue that this is to be expected from Spaniards, who took the black presence in their colonies—in their own homes, even—for granted, but we encounter the same myopia in an outsider such as Lieutenant James Cook. Cook traveled through the colonial Yucatec town of Bacalar in 1769 and described it as “a small, poor, straggling village, of ill-built huts, of stakes of the Palmeta-tree drove in the ground, plastered with earth, and thatched with the leaves; in number not more than a hundred Spaniards and Indians, of the former they are most of the soldiers militia of the province.”⁸ Yet we know from a census of 10 years later that there were at least 263 people of African descent living in Bacalar and its environs. This was out of a population of some four thousand, almost all of whom seem to have been working outside the town walls when Cook visited. Similarly, more than one in eight of the sixteen thousand residents of the provincial capital of Merida were black or mulatto, but Cook failed to make any mention of them either.⁹

The very existence of Africans in colonial Yucatan is reason enough to study them; but the fact that they were demographically, economically, and socially significant while being almost entirely ignored by all those who have written about Yucatan over the past five centuries renders the telling of their story even more urgent and fascinating. At the heart of this study, therefore,

es several other key, intertwined questions that I explore during the
e of this book. For example, was colonial Yucatan a slave society or a
y with slaves? Why did Spaniards in Yucatan own slaves? How did the
the free-colored population impact the “black middle”?

ile the study of the indigenous and settler histories of colonial Yucatan
tly facilitated by extensive archival sources in Spanish and Yucatec
, the evidence relating to Africans is fragmented and relatively scat-
This study is therefore based on a wide variety of source genres and
dual documents, collected from a dozen archives and libraries in Eu-
Mexico, and the United States; only parish records and census records
close to offering quantifiable evidence, although even those can some-
be patchy and unreliable. In recognition of the anecdotal nature of
of the sources, I have tabulated sources not usually presented as tan-
nd tried to be as transparent as possible in analyzing archival sources
text and notes. I have selected a sample case or source to begin each
er; other sources are then analyzed partly with a view to determine the
icy of the impressions given by the opening sample stories.

is Introduction’s sample source—the brief passage from the Titles of the
quoted earlier—has been chosen because, despite its brevity, it raises so
of the issues around which this study is structured. The first set of issues
from the implication of this quote that Africans came to Yucatan
gh the accident of shipwreck, an ironic image in view of the fact that the
uropeans to set foot on the peninsula were themselves the survivors of a
reck.¹⁰ Certainly, Africans were involuntary colonists,¹¹ but they did
me to Yucatan by accident. The questions prompted here (and tackled
apters One through Four) are thus demographic and socioeconomic:
did Africans come to Yucatan? How many came? Where in the penin-
id they go? What roles did they play in the formation of the Spanish
r? The answers center initially on slavery (the focus of Chapters One
wo), and on relations between Spaniards and Afro-Yucatecs (the
focus of the first three chapters). But when we look at the full array of
Yucatecan work experiences (Chapter Four), slavery does not feature as
fining institution of labor arrangements and patterns.

e second set of issues suggested by the epigraph in Maya is to do with
ties. In the earlier quote the Maya authors of the annals refer to the
n slaves as *ek box*, or “black people.”¹² Presumably these shipwreck
ors had only recently been removed from their African homeland and
were culturally and racially distinct from both Mayas and Spaniards.
at extent, however, did Africans and their descendents remain cultur-
istinct from the other inhabitants of Yucatan? How meaningful were

ucatecans”? Answers to these questions are proposed throughout this book, but most directly in Chapters Three through Seven.

The third set of issues raised by the Maya annals excerpt and closely related to the previous two is that of interracial relations. Through their focus on demographic issues, economic roles, and questions of identity, all the chapters address aspects of Spanish–African relations; African–Maya relations are also discussed to some extent in all the chapters, but I turn increasingly to the topic from Chapters Three to Six, devoting Chapter Seven entirely to the complexities of interaction between Mayas and Afro-Yucatecans. The Pech quote suggests that relations between Spaniards and Africans were delineated by the antagonisms inherent to slavery, whereas the Mayas remained dispassionate bystanders. To what extent was this the case; that is, were people of African descent really tied involuntarily to the Spanish community while being utterly distanced from the Maya world? How did Mayas perceive Africans? What were the means and loci of African–Maya interaction? To what extent were Afro-Yucatecans caught in the middle, between the prejudices of Spaniards on the one hand and of Mayas on the other?

The answer to the latter question is of course anticipated by the book’s title, which reflects the underlying thesis of this book—that those of African descent in Yucatan were positioned and caught in various ways in a middle ground between Spanish colonists and the peninsula’s native people, the Yucatec Mayas. The title is also of course intended as an echo of the phrase “the Middle Passage,” the transatlantic voyage that brought Africans to the Americas.¹³ In addition to the African slaves that Spaniards held as prestige property and personal servants, the substantial free-colored population was so tied to the colonists in a relationship of attached subordination. However, I try to demonstrate that despite being victimized by slavery, subordination, and the prejudices of both Spaniards and Mayas, Afro-Yucatecans still found ample space in this middle ground to build complex and varied lives—to pursue careers, seek opportunities, raise families, and often push against and even transcend the social and economic restrictions that they inherited.

Within this framework, then, the black middle became multidimensional. Afro-Yucatecans were heterogeneous; they lived in “the space in-between, among, and through” various socioracial arenas (to borrow Ben Vinson’s words).¹⁴ Many of these arenas comprised a dynamic social space created by free-colored families seeking to attain some mobility and access to the political and economic center. This they achieved in part by distancing themselves from the enslaved and engaging the Spanish and native communities that they bridged. If native Americans have historically been seen as the

located, but were both inside and outside the societies of Spaniards and Mayas.¹⁵ Consequently, Afro-Yucatecans forever altered the Maya communities in which they settled, in both town and countryside. Indeed, perhaps the most significant result of my research into Afro-Yucatan was the realization that by colonial times, the Mayas of Yucatan had in a sense become Afro-Mayas. This act not only alters our view of colonial Yucatan, but has profound implications for the study of modern Yucatan. Thus the history being presented here is far more than a tale of tragedy. It is a story of human endeavor; one of suffering, most certainly, but also one of survival, and in many cases, triumph. The reader may or may not be familiar with the historical and geographical setting of this book, but the patterns of human behavior that are illustrated should be all too familiar. My efforts to demonstrate that people of African descent were able in various ways to transcend the horrors of slavery and racial subordination should in no way be taken as an apologia for the slave trade; on the contrary, it is in riposte both to the dehumanizing nature of the slave trade, and to the concomitant scarcity of Africans in the human historical record, that I have sought to make visible in all its human richness the African experience in colonial Yucatan.