

Smuggling in Eighteenth-Century Venezuela: The Role of the *Práctico*

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Human social organization intrinsically includes borders, divisions that mark inside and outside, civilized and barbaric, acceptable and unacceptable. Human groups establish physical and ideational boundaries that help order, explain, and direct their lives. Those groups and activities that blur or cross over these lines receive special attention, as their violations of or challenges to what are presented as logical, natural, and moral standards forces their reconciliation with generalized norms. Such people and actions are categorized as immoral, uncouth, detrimental, seditious, or non-human. They are also often considered endowed with special powers.¹

These parameters for the acceptable and unacceptable are, however, never fixed nor unchallenged. Hegemonies achieve their greatest coherence in their defenders' rhetorical presentations of them.² Divides between right and wrong, inside and outside are made, remade, and adjusted. Their existence as discernible and effective structures depend in large part on their breach, for it is in dual process of structural reproduction and transgressions made or identified during these processes that consensus becomes clear or key positions shift.³ Dominant groups and the behavior they deem proper exist in a mutually reinforcing bind with their corresponding challengers. Likewise, certain traders, professions, and the individuals who practice them or voluntary or involuntarily become identified with them are reviled and celebrated because of their simultaneous marginality and necessity.

In his essay "Infamous Occupations," Anton Blok reviews diverse occupations and activities from early modern and modern Western Europe and determines that the pollution and infamy attributed to members of these occupations and the inordinate symbolic attention given them result from their association, physical or ideational, with transitions.⁴ Because they

1 Silvio R. Duncan Barreta and John Markoff, "Civilization and Barbarism: Cattle Frontiers in Latin America," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20:4 (1978), pp. 587-620; Anton Blok, "Infamous Occupations," in his *Honour and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp. 44-68; and idem, "Why Chimney-Sweeps Bring Luck," in Blok, *Honour and Violence*, pp. 69-86.

2 Thomas W. Gallant, *Experiencing Dominion: Culture, Identity, and Power in the British Mediterranean* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), pp. ix-x, 213-214.

3 Marshal P. Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

4 Anton Blok, "Infamous Occupations," pp. 56, 66.

operated along the edges of socially accepted behavior or space, these people were subjected to ritualized social interactions and spatial segregation that reconciled their permanent marginality within the larger societies that simultaneously reviled and needed them.

Just as there are infamous occupations, there are also infamous industries, large economic or social systems that integrate many mundane and marginal activities in a singular, denigrated whole. In some settings an infamous industry becomes institutionalized. It becomes so embedded in the everyday workings of a society that the function of the whole cannot be understood without giving it careful consideration. Furthermore, as in the case of the marginal trades that Blok reviews, the reproach assigned to a certain industry is culturally contingent and historically situated. Shifts in moral consensus, at times gradual and at other times rapid, move activities from the margins to the center and out again. These shifts operate at multiple political and societal scales, from the smallest unit of human organization to the international regimes for commercial and political interaction. Piracy, the slave trade and slavery, and whaling are three examples of large-scale industries that have passed over time from international acceptance to prohibition.⁵ An example of an emerging global prohibition built on a global legal order would be the developing international consensus on domestic violence.⁶

Widespread or ubiquitous transgression is difficult for human groups to reconcile with established or dominant norms of interaction. A common yet simplifying strategy for achieving some degree of reconciliation imputes unmerited responsibility to parts of the whole. Such a metonymic maneuver assigns a certain group or sector within this vast system of production, transportation, exchange, and consumption greater blame or stigmatization than others. These are often those that risk most exposure. Examples from the contemporary United States might include prostitutes in the booming national sex industry or petty entrepreneurs in the hemispheric narcotics business.

This study examines another group that was singled out for attention: the brokers of the extra-legal trade between Dutch Curaçao and Spanish Venezuela in the early eighteenth century. They were considered more dangerous than others in an institutionalized, society-wide system of transgression. Smuggling in Europe's American colonies involved the transgression of mercantile trade restrictions, imperial territorial boundaries, and sometimes divides between the faithful and the heretic. The intermediaries who facilitated the exchange across imperial bounds in the eighteenth-century Caribbean played a critical role in the smuggling operations that connected American colonies with each other, transatlantic circuits of trade, and European and Asian systems of production and consumption. Their importance was not lost on the colonial officials assigned to repress smuggling. In fact, bureaucrats and military officers tended to exaggerate the threat they posed to royally sanctioned trade and social stability. These brokers, known in eighteenth-century Venezuela and New Granada as *prácticos*, *plácticos*, or *peritos*, enjoyed special attention within an extensive infamous system of exchange.⁷

5 Ethan A. Nadelmann, "Global Prohibition Regimes: The Evolution of Norms in International Society," *International Organization* 44:4 (1990), pp. 479-526; Josiah McC. Heyman and Alan Smart, "States and Illegal Practices: An Overview," in Josiah McC. Heyman, ed., *States and Illegal Practices* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 1-24.

6 Sally Engle Merry, "Rights, Religion, and Community: Approaches to Violence against Women in the Context of Globalization," *Law & Society Review* 35:1 (2001), pp. 39-88.

7 For the work that has been done to date on *prácticos* in the colonial Spanish Caribbean, see Lance Grahn, *The Political Economy of Smuggling: Regional Informal Economies in Early Bourbon New Granada* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Ramón Aizpurua, *Curacao y la Costa de Caracas: Introducción al estudio del contrabando de la Provincia de Venezuela en tiempos de la Compañía Guipuzcoana, 1730-1780* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la

New World smuggling during the second Atlantic system pitted imperial designs for mercantile integration against local practices.⁸ In the Caribbean, especially from the late seventeenth century through the eighteenth century, smuggling was widespread. In some places, especially the periphery islands and mainland regions that bordered the sea, extra-legal trade represented a greater portion of commercial activity than trade conducted in accord with imperial mercantile policies. Some imperial powers established colonies or oriented their island colonies' trade towards making the infraction of other powers' commercial restrictions regular and profitable. The English colony of Jamaica is one example. The Dutch had two: Curaçao and St. Eustatius. Curaçao was first taken by the Dutch from the Spanish in 1634 and made into a jumping off point for early seventeenth-century raiding. Later in the century the West Indian Company reshaped the island colony into the Caribbean's premier entrepôt, the West Indian island counterpart to the city of Amsterdam.

Two commercial circuits met at Curaçao: the grote vaart, or the transatlantic trade between the United Province and the Dutch colonies of the Caribbean; and the kleine vaart, the transit trade within the Caribbean. The kleine vaart joined Curaçao with North America, the Greater Antilles, the Windward and Leeward Islands, but the most important route was the trip to and from Venezuela.⁹ The exchange was in the hands of the Dutch ship captains, merchants, and their representatives who cruised the Venezuelan coast, although less frequently Venezuela planters, merchants, colonial officials, or their agents went directly to Curaçao to trade or make arrangements for future transactions. Dutch sloops sailed out from Willemstad throughout the year, with more traffic to and from Venezuela during the cacao harvest.¹⁰ They followed two main itineraries: first, an extended sojourn to Venezuela that included calls at various ports and lasted anywhere from two weeks to two months; second, shorter, direct trips to specific destinations closer to the Dutch islands, to the Coro coast or the Dutch enclave of Tucacas.¹¹ These normally took a few days to complete, although expeditions to Tucacas sometimes turned into extended stays there, depending on the business the Dutch trader had or, depending on the presence of Spanish corsairs, the safety of returning to sea.

Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1993); Wim Klooster, *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648-1795* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998); and Hector R. Feliciano Ramos, *El contrabando inglés en el Caribe y el Golfo de México (1748-1778)* (Seville: Publicaciones de la Excm. Diputación Provincial de Sevilla, 1990).

⁸ Pieter Emmer, "The Dutch in the Making of the Second Atlantic System," in his *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy, 1580-1880: Trade, Slavery, and Emancipation* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 16-17.

⁹ The following discussion of the Curaçaoan kleine vaart with Venezuela draws heavily on Ramón Aizpurua, "El comercio holandés en el Caribe a través de Curazao, 1700-1756: Datos para su estudio," in his *Temas de historia colonial de Venezuela y del Caribe* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1996), pp. 126-143.

¹⁰ This occurred twice a year, in June and December, and the Dutch ships flocked to Venezuela's coastal valleys and inlet in the months that followed. Aizpurua, *Curazao y la Costa de Caracas*, pp. 64-75; Eugenio Piñero, *The Town of San Felipe and Colonial Cacao Economies* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1994), pp. 113-138; and Eduardo Arcila Farías et al., *La Obra Pta de Chuao, 1568-1825* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1968).

¹¹ Early in the eighteenth century Curaçaoan merchants established an outpost at Tucacas, on the western edge of the Province of Venezuela, where they constructed warehouses, residences, and a synagogue. Colonial authorities in Caracas sent various excursions against the settlement, only to see it rebuilt and reoccupied after Spanish forces had withdrawn. Celestino Andrés Arauz Monfante, *El contrabando holandés en el Caribe durante la primera mitad del siglo XVIII* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1984), pp. 65-66, 198-201; Aizpurua, *Curazao y la Costa de Caracas*, pp. 193-194; Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, pp. 135-138, 145-148.

The extended excursions to Venezuela took groups of Dutch ships to the colony's cacao-producing valleys and main points of coastal exchange. Sailing in groups of at least five, sometimes six ships, the Curaçaoan traders set out prepared to exchange textiles, liquors, foods, and other finished goods for Venezuelan agricultural products and raw materials; they also prepared for violent confrontation. They used the Dutch island of Bonaire, directly east of Curaçao, as both a storage facility for Dutch and Venezuelan products and as a stopover point between jaunts to Venezuelan inlets and ports. While most departed Willemstad with some plan, no matter how imprecise, of the places they were to visit and the people with whom they expected to trade, some set sail from Curaçao with no set itinerary and with no established contacts in Venezuela. They gathered information on potential deals once they reached the mainland, and they adjusted their itinerary accordingly. The ships generally let the prevailing currents dictate their route, visiting the eastern most sites first and working their way west.¹² The coastline from Cape Codera to the cays off Tucacas defines this extended route.

The shorter journeys tended to link Willemstad with Coro and Tucacas. The trip to Coro sometimes took just a day; sometimes it was combined with a visit to Tucacas. Dyewoods, hides, and mules were the dominant exports. Slaves were often imported. Trips to Tucacas were done for various reasons. In the early decades of the eighteenth century, Dutch merchants and their agents maintained a successful, permanent outpost in the Spanish colony. According to Klooster, the settlement was founded by a group of Jews from Curaçao who fled the island in 1693 to escape an epidemic.¹³ Spanish colonial authorities made repeated attempts to destroy the colony, only to see the Dutch return and refound it as soon as the Spanish presence had been removed and the threat of attack reduced. At its height, Tucacas had seventeen houses and a synagogue. The enclave often served as the final port of call for sloops and schooners that cruised the Venezuelan coastline. It was also an important rendezvous for Curaçaoans and Venezuelans involved in the informal trade. Here they met to arrange future encounters; sometimes Venezuelans transported goods, usually cacao, tobacco, hides, and mules, directly to the outpost. Curaçaoans also used Tucacas as base to make short journeys east and west, using it in the same manner as others used Bonaire. Once they had filled the holds of their ships, they returned to Curaçao.

The crews of the Curaçaoan ships consisted of a captain, sailors, and a merchant or his representative. Often the captain and the person in charge of commercial transactions were one and the same. Most of the captains lived on Curaçao and dedicated themselves to the *kleine vaart*, although it is not clear how many lived exclusively from the Venezuelan trade. A few captains who made the transatlantic route also stopped to trade in Venezuela. The dealers who sailed on the sloops and schooners also tended to be based in Curaçao. Often they represented the large import-export firms that had offices on the island and in the Netherlands. They were responsible for making prior commitments with Venezuelan sellers, negotiating deals, or recruiting Venezuelans to make the necessary arrangements to determine when and where to meet Venezuelan planters, merchants, officials, or their agents. The sailors were mostly free

12 By the 1740s and 1750s, the eastward expansion of the Caracas cacao frontier into Barlovento helped make Higueroite, at the Tuy River delta, the first stop for many Curaçaoan trading vessels. Before then, Curaçaoan ships had tended to concentrate on the coast west of La Guaira, avoiding confrontations with the Spanish naval forces stationed there. Also, ships that participated in the *grote vaart* between the United Provinces and Curaçao often made stops along the Venezuelan coast, first in New Andalusia and then in the province itself, on their way to their final destination.

13 Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, p. 135.

blacks and slaves from Willemstad, recruited by ship captains or merchants and hired out by their owners. According to Klooster, hirings were usually done by the single journey, so when the ships returned to Willemstad the crews broke up, with each individual going his own way, seeking the next opportunity to cruise the Caracas coast.¹⁴

Normally Dutch traders from Curaçao made the trip to Venezuela both to trade and set up future exchanges. Nevertheless, there were times when Venezuelans made the trip to Dutch centers. Sometimes merchants and planters carried their cacao and tobacco directly to Curaçao. Other times they met Curaçaoans on the Dutch islands of Kleine Curaçao or Bonaire or the Venezuelan islands of Las Aves, Los Roques, or Orchila to trade or negotiate. Barter prevailed: Venezuelans received textiles, foodstuffs, arms, alcohol, and slaves in exchange for cacao, tobacco, hides, or mules. Curaçaoan captains and merchants extended credit to their regular trading partners, and so at times Dutch traders received written promises of future payments from their Venezuelan counterparts.¹⁵

Most exchange took place in Venezuela's informal ports—the valleys, inlets, coves, and points that dotted the province's long coastline. This was done in a variety of ways. When the Curaçaoans enjoyed close relations with local officials, and when they saw little risk of capture, captains and merchants came ashore and dealt directly with their trading partners, the authority overseeing the exchange, or whomever was responsible for delivering the Venezuelan exports. More often an advanced party would confirm the terms of exchange. These were either groups of Venezuelans who took canoes out to the Dutch ships anchored offshore or sailors from the Dutch ships sent to the beach. Sometimes the Dutch convoys stayed in a particular port for just a night; other times, they stayed longer, especially at major sites of exchange, waiting for the various mule trains to arrive from the interior valleys or the human carriers to make all the prearranged deliveries. Some captains and merchants spoke Spanish and negotiated directly with their Venezuelan counterparts. Others had translators, often free men of color from Curaçao, or based in Curaçao, who facilitated communications.¹⁶

Sustained and large-scale exchange was exceptional in Venezuelan smuggling. Few subjects of the Spanish Crown sailed to Curaçao, although the small, uninhabited islands off the mainland frequently served as points of reconnoiter. Even fewer made the overland trip to Tucacas to visit Curaçaoans at their mainland stronghold. The risk of exposure was too great. Those based in the provincial interior moved along north-south routes from the interior highland valleys to the safest and most convenient coastal ports and beaches. Those who produced and sold cacao had to travel little, either down to the seashore or over to neighboring coastal valleys if their own lacked adequate anchorage. Likewise, their Dutch counterparts tended to carry out multiple modest transactions in a succession of clandestine ports as they cruised the Caracas coast. In the eighteenth century ocean-going vessels still sailed from Dutch ports directly to the

14 Ibid., pp. 68-69. See also his "Subordinate but Proud: Curaçao's Free Blacks and Mulattoes in the Eighteenth Century," *New West Indian Guide* 68:3 (1994), pp. 383-300.

15 Often the promises committed substantial amounts of future harvests. Some of these debts were substantial. In 1709, Juan Chourio, factor for the French asiento, owed the West Indies Company 15,000 pesos and various merchants on Curaçao, 10,000 pesos. In 1722, the total debt owed to Curaçaoan creditors by Spanish merchants in Venezuela and Santo Domingo was calculated by Dutch authorities at 400,000 pesos. See Aizpurua, "Comercio exterior," p. 29; Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, pp. 129-130. For Venezuelans' visits to Curaçao see Aizpurua, *Curacao y la Costa de Caracas*, pp. 258-280 and Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, pp. 126-129.. For the use of the small, uninhabited islands off the Venezuelan coast, see Aizpurua, "El comercio holandés en el Caribe," pp. 129-130, and Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, pp. 128-129.

16 Aizpurua, *Curacao y la Costa de Caracas*, pp. 264-270, 281-283; and Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, pp. 125-126.

Spanish Main, although they represented a small percentage of the Dutch-Venezuelan trade of the period. The merchants on these ships tended to do their business in a few large transactions, largely because the careful maneuvering of entering and exiting Venezuela's narrow coastal valleys was impossible for these large vessels. Tucacas served more as a point of collection and distribution and less as marketplace.

A succession of smaller exchanges was more common. Groups of small to middle sized vessels—sloops were the most common—set out from Curaçao individually or in groups and headed for the eastern edge of the province of Venezuela. Curaçao-based sea captains who dedicated themselves to the Venezuelan trade became quite familiar with the Tierra Firme coast, but they still sought help when they entered the various bays and coves that dot the coastline. They knew the coast but they did not know the particulars well enough to go it alone. As a consequence, they often hired local pilots who helped guide their sloops into anchorage. Another important consequence was that at each port of call Curaçaoan traders had to reach terms for exchange with their Venezuelan counterparts. Again they called upon intermediaries. Often these were the same individuals who served to negotiate the physical space between the sea and the shore.

Two systems of transportation met where Dutch and Venezuelans exchanged their goods: the Curaçaoan *kleine vaart* and the internal mechanisms for distributing goods within the Province of Venezuela. Critical in joining these two were the *prácticos*, the pilots who took charge of navigating the Dutch ships into and out of Venezuela's ports. In truth, *prácticos* did much more than this.¹⁷ They scouted for Dutch supercargoes and captains, found buyers and sellers in Venezuela's interior valleys, set up the times and locations for exchange, and secured official compliance or negligence. Some boarded Dutch ships in Willemstad and stayed aboard throughout the entire trip. Others came aboard at the Curaçaoan vessels' first port of call, or they met up with their Curaçaoan partners in Tucacas, Morón, or other sites along the coast. Still others remained on shore, traveling from coastal valley to coastal valley, just ahead of the Dutch ships, making arrangements for when the Dutch arrived. Most *prácticos* focused on a few coastal valleys and one or two routes between the sea and the interior. A select few enjoyed extensive patronage and worked the entire central coast, from the valleys east of La Guaira all the way to Tucacas.¹⁸

Correspondence among high and middle level colonial officials presented *prácticos* and the people they served, Dutch and Venezuelan, as a single, fearsome unit. Official discourse tended to overstate the unity of smuggling networks, their vertical integration, and the threat they posed to the safety, stability, and sovereignty of Spanish colonial economic, political, and social

17 The term is one of various applied by colonial officials—scribes, administrators, and law enforcement officers—to individuals who did much more than guide vessels in unfamiliar coastal waters. Other terms include *pláticos*, *peritos*, and sometimes *lenguas*, a Spanish word for translator. In their respective discussions, Klooster uses the English term pilots; Grahn uses the Spanish term *pláticos*, and Aizpurua uses *prácticos* and *pilotos de la costa*. Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, pp. 126-127; Grahn, *The Political Economy of Smuggling*, p. 85; and Aizpurua, *Curazao y la Costa de Caracas*, pp. 281-282.

18 See the royal decree issued in Madrid, November 27, 1657, Archivo General de la Nación (hereinafter AGN), Sección La Colonia, Reales Cédulas, Segunda Sección, Volume 1, Number 105, folio 159; “Autos del decomiso de contrabando introducido por Francisco Marín, efectuado por Diego de Matos, Comisionado del Gobernador,” September 10, 1717, Archivo de la Academia Nacional de Historia de Venezuela (hereinafter AANHV), Registro Principal (hereinafter RP), Signatura 1-10-4, folios 1-438; “Autos contra Joseph Luis Felipes y Ignacio de Goya,” 1746, AANHV, RP, Signatura 2-384-1. Also see Aizpurua's *Curazao y la Costa de Caracas*, pp. 281-282; and Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, pp. 125-126.

institutions. It was a discourse about the margins, one that established a rhetorical frontier within the province of Venezuela and drew a line around Caracas and the surrounding areas where provincial officials and their allies considered themselves in control.

The excited rhetoric about *prácticos* did show a degree of accuracy in locating the patterns of smuggling in eighteenth-century Venezuela. Reports from justices of the peace, assigned by governors' to administer Crown law in districts throughout the province, findings compiled by the governor or special investigators, and reports and complaints to the Crown consistently portrayed smuggling east and especially west of Caracas as out of control. Invariably they claimed that slaves on coastal cacao estate welcomed Curaçaoan traders ashore and exchanged cacao stolen from the estate owners for textiles, steel tools, and alcohol. The people who arranged these exchanges were, according to this rhetoric, free blacks or runaway slaves who had joined up with the gangs of *pardo prácticos*. The latter enjoyed free reign over the sparsely populated stretches of coast and interior valleys that extended between the more densely settled cacao-producing regions. This depiction changed some after the Royal Guipuzcoa Company began to exercise its trade monopoly in the province in 1730: officials tended to insist that Canary Island immigrants collaborated with the *pardos* of the coast in coordinating trading opportunities for foreigners, slaves, and other smugglers.¹⁹

The conflicts of the well-known *pardo práctico* Andresote helped strengthen this perception that unruly *pardos* dominated the work of brokering smuggling exchanges. Andresote, said to have been a slave who escaped his owner in the Valencia district, was during the late 1720s the most successful and prominent *práctico* in the busy smuggling zone between the Punta de Morón and the Yaracuy River. He was known for his close ties with ship captains and supercargoes from Curaçao and for the control he and his cohorts exercised over the transport of goods along the lower reaches of the Yaracuy River. In 1730 Andresote and the group of smugglers with him refused to acknowledge the authority of a Royal Guipuzcoa Company patrol. The patrol attacked and was repulsed. Andresote's successful resistance, the official reaction to it, and the violent conflict in the Yaracuy River valley that ensued over the next three years solidified, at least in the eyes of colonial officials, the identification of smuggling brokers as rebellious *pardos*. The evidence available, fragmentary as it is, would seem to indicate this assessment was accurate for Curaçaoan pilots but fell short of accounting for all the *prácticos* based on the mainland.²⁰

White worries over slave and free colored watermen were common throughout the Americas during this period. Also widespread were complaints that they were simultaneously unruly and lazy. Lasso, in her study of black republicanism in Cartagena during and immediately after the wars of independence, presents the example of the *bogas* of Mompox, the free colored river boatmen who lived and work in the region's most important interior trade

19 Autos del descamino de contrabando introducido por Francisco Marín, efectuado por Diego de Matos, comisionado del gobernador," AANHV, RP, Civiles, Signatura 1-10-4, folios 145, 247v-248, 407, 410-410v; Jorge Olavarriga, *Instrucción general y particular del estado presente de la Provincia de Venezuela en los años de 1720 y 1721* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1965); and Arcila Farías et al., *La Obra Pía de Chuao*.

20 *La rebelión de Andresote (Valles de Yaracuy, 1730-1733)* (Bogotá: Editorial ABC, 1957); idem, "Rebelión de Andresote," in Manuel Pérez Vila, ed., *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela* (Caracas: Fundación Polar, 1988), Volume 3, pp. 305-306; idem, *Rebeliones, motines y movimientos de masas en el siglo XVIII venezolano (1730-1781)* (Madrid: Ediciones Guadarrama, 1961); Luis Alberto Sucre, *Gobernadores y Capitanes Generales de Venezuela* (Caracas: Tipografía Tecnocolor, 1964 [1928]), pp. 246-247; and Klooster, *Illicit Riches*, pp. 153-154.

center.²¹ The bogas exercised considerable control over the terms of river transport: They set the prices, they received payment up front, and they were not afraid to abandon their passengers or their cargo if they determined they had good motive to do so.²² Helg also catalogs concerns over what were perceived as unmanageable pardos and Indians in Cartagena's late eighteenth-century peripheral areas.²³ In the Chesapeake and Lowcountry, the mobility and relative autonomy of slave and free-colored watermen concerned plantation owners and colonial officials, and their increasing numbers in coastal and river transportation provoked complaints from whites who felt threatened. It was commonly assumed by rural whites in Charleston's hinterland that slave crews used their trips as cover for smuggling and stealing from plantations, and that slave boatmen and plantation slaves had secret accords which they fulfilled at night.²⁴ Whites in colonial North Carolina expressed similar concerns.²⁵

Colonial officials and plantation owners and managers aptly correlated slave flight and maritime activities. And blacks and free colored did increasingly move into maritime trades in the Atlantic and Caribbean over the course of the eighteenth century.²⁶ Slaves who were sailors, either for their own masters or hired out, and others who worked in and around ports escaped with greater frequency and greater success than their rural counterparts.²⁷ However, not only did they unfailingly overstate the numbers of runaways in Venezuela, but they also incorrectly maintained that successful runaways swelled the ranks of smugglers and pushed Spanish rule

21 Marixa Lasso, "Haiti as an Image of Popular Republicanism in Caribbean Colombia: Cartagena Province (1811-1828)," in David P. Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 181-182.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 182, fn 32.

23 Helg argues that the geographic, social, and racial fragmentation that characterized Caribbean Colombia thwarted the development of the kind of unified political project or rejection of colonial authority so feared by civil and Church officials. Aline Helg, "A Fragmented Majority: Free 'Of All Colors,' Indians, and Slaves in Caribbean Colombia During the Haitian Revolution," in Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution*, pp. 157-175.

24 Philip D. Morgan writes, "Nobody had a kind word for 'Boat Negroes.'" See his "Black Life in Eighteenth-Century Charleston," *Perspectives in American History*, New Series 1 (1984), pp. 199-201; and *idem*, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 239, 337-339.

25 David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

26 Julius S. Scott, "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of the Newport Bowers," in Colin Howell and Richard J. Twomey, eds., *Jack Tar in History* (Frederickton, N.B.: Acadiensis Press, 1991), pp. 37-52; *idem*, "Crisscrossing Empires: Ships, Sailors, and Resistance in the Lesser Antilles in the Eighteenth Century," in Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), pp. 128-143; and W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-Americans in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). For general concerns over subaltern groups in the English colonies in the eighteenth century, see also Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, "The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, and the Atlantic Working Class in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3:3 (1990), pp. 225-252; and *idem*, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

27 N.A.T. Hall, "Maritime Maroons: Grand Marronage from the Danish West Indies," in Verene A. Sheperd and Hilary McD. Beckles, eds., *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2000), pp. 905-918; and Ramón Aizpurua, "En busca de la libertad: Los esclavos fugados de Curazao a Coro en el siglo XVIII," ms. in the author's possession.

closer to collapse in the province's peripheral areas.²⁸ Official rhetoric would have the Venezuelan shoreline and coastal waters teeming with runaway slaves, free pardos, Dutch smugglers, and an assortment of deserters, adulterers, thieves, and other lowlifes. In fact, this danger zone was scantily populated, as participants in the extra-legal trade with Curaçao left it open or crossed through it quickly. Most rural people who freed themselves from bondage or repressive plantation obligations normally ended up sustaining themselves in labors that were not inherently tied to the clandestine trade with the Dutch. Only a few had the skills, resources, connections, and gall to earn their living chiefly from smuggling. This applied especially to prácticos, who though they did not direct the trade, did exercise fundamental roles that assured its smooth function.

Prácticos brought a degree of stability and predictability, no matter how slight, to a business that was by nature dangerously unpredictable. Limited in number yet widely recognized along the coast, they played a crucial role in holding together disparate strands in an extensive, regular, yet unstable commercial system. They simplified and reduced the work of their Curaçaoan backers, and they also contributed to the consolidation of Venezuela's crucial routes for the extra-legal circulation and exchange of goods. Prácticos saved Curaçaoan captains and supercargoes from spending the time and running the risks of recruiting laborers for the various tasks required to move Venezuelan exports to market. They also allowed vessel commanders and merchants to restrict their sailing and anchoring along the Venezuelan coast to the choicest and safest locales.

Communication was an issue, though not as important as others. Possible language barriers were a more pressing issue for the ships that made the transatlantic voyages from the United Provinces directly to the Venezuelan coast, as their captains, merchants, and crews were less likely to speak Spanish than the crews of vessels that sailed out of Curaçao. From as early as the 1650s Dutch traders in the United Provinces recognized the advantages of employing an agent who could smooth what could be tense, sometimes confrontational negotiations. Ships that sailed from the United Provinces to various destinations in Spain's American colonies hired Spaniards to serve as intermediaries. Dutch captains and merchants had learned from experience that Spanish American governors responded better in trade negotiations when their Dutch counterparts worked through a Spanish interpreter.²⁹ Translating services were also more in demand in the English trade out of Jamaica, as less of the English captains and merchants spoke Spanish than their Curaçaoan counterparts.³⁰

Curaçaoans hired prácticos to help with communications, although many on board the trading vessels had some level of proficiency in Spanish. This was for a number of reasons. First, Sephardic Jews often served as supercargoes. They represented Dutch trading houses operating out of Curaçao and with their home base in the principal ports of the United Provinces. Sephardic Jews maintained their language from the time of their expulsion from the Iberian

28 For exaggerated estimates of runaways in eighteenth-century Venezuela, see, for example, Olavarriaga, *Instrucción general y particular*; and Federico Brito Figueroa, "Venezuela colonial: las rebeliones de esclavos y la Revolución Francesa," *Caravelle* (Toulouse) 54 (1990), pp. 263-289.

29 For example, in 1657, the Spanish ambassador to the United Provinces informed the Crown that in the previous two years, 28 ships had left Rotterdam for the Indies, most with a Spanish práctico. He was able to name two: Juan de Cosa, originally from Old Castile, sailed for Havana, and Marcos de la Rama, from Seville, sailed for Buenos Aires. Another ship headed for Buenos Aires included 12 Basque sailors. See AGN, Reales Cédulas, Segunda Sección, Volume 1, Number 105, November 27, 1657, Madrid, folio 159.

30 Feliciano Ramos, *El contrabando inglés*, pp. 88-89.

Peninsula, and what they spoke was close to the Spanish spoken in eighteenth-century Venezuela. Second, after the United Provinces wrested control over Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao from the Spanish in the 1630s, one important institution established on the island of Curaçao during Spanish rule remained. The Bishopric of Caracas retained spiritual jurisdiction over the island and the United Provinces, even during years of war with Spain, respected the Catholic priests' evangelization efforts. The missionary effort of Catholic Church and the Bishop of Caracas in particular faced no rivals. Priests sent by the Bishop of Caracas to the island concentrated their attention on Africans and Afro-Curaçaoans. The colonial administrators of Willemstad did not challenge this, nor did the island's Sephardic Jewish community, which dominated commercial life. As a result, those Africans and creole slaves and free coloreds who converted to Christianity became Catholics, and the language of their spiritual instruction was more often than not Spanish. And as Klooster shows, the crews on coastal cruisers were mostly composed of Curaçaoan slaves and free coloreds. Third and most generally, Spanish had become by the early eighteenth century the island's leading trade language, where it was understood that business with Venezuelans—on the mainland, on uninhabited islands, or in Willemstad—would be done in Spanish.³¹

While verbal communication was not a crucial issue, the ability to communicate in writing was. Most brokers showed some degree of literacy. Juan Hipólito de Acuña, an Indian from Choróní known in the valleys of Ocumare, Cata, and Cuyagua as Cross-Eyes, was caught in Cuyagua in 1735 with fake travel papers. Acuña had written the permit himself and attributed it to Manuel Marcano, the illiterate cabo responsible for patrolling Ocumare and Cata. He had also used the back of the permission slip to tabulate transaction totals and keep track of debts outstanding and settled. Simón del Rosario, a free black tailor from Valencia, and Félix Alberto, a free black tailor from Choróní, served the valley of Cuyagua in the 1730s. Both could sign their names. Pedro Cadenas, a free black *práctico* in Morón, could also sign his name. Juan Clavería, known as Juan the Aragonese along Valencia's coast during the 1730s, wrote messages to his Dutch and Venezuelan contacts, as did his sometime partner Pedro Zurita, an immigrant from the Canary Islands. Antonio Padilla, another Canary Islander who in the 1740s worked as a *práctico* for the *práctico*-become-sloop captain Juan Félix de Ovalle, communicated with his contacts in the Puerto Cabello area by hand-written note.³²

Prácticos often handled the delicate task of assuring official compliance or at least negligence. For example, in November of 1736, a group of six smugglers based out of El Tocuyo and Coro hired two *prácticos* to guarantee their 52 loads of tobacco had a safe and uneventful journey from Carora to the mouth of the El Tocuyo River. Gabriel de León Suárez and Francisco Gallardo chose to take them through the Valley of Siminipuche, dominion of the local cacique don Ambrosio Camacano. Gallardo made sure Camacano gave the tobacco

31 Klooster, "Subordinate but Proud."

32 "Sumaria hecha por don Diego Iníquez de Soriano, teniente cabo a guerra y juez de comisos del Valle de Cuyagua, contra diferentes reos de comercio ilícito," AGN, Comisos, Volume 15, Expediente 7, folios 167-200; "Autos criminales seguidos de oficio contra Tomás Moncada y Juan Clavería por introducción de ropa de ilícito comercio," AGN, Comisos, Volume 12, Expediente 3, folios 39-78; "Autos criminales fechas por el Real Oficio de Justicia contra Pedro Lopez Cadenas, vecino de la ciudad de Cartagena de las Indias, sobre ser practico de los holandeses en los tratos de comercio ilicito, y por una herida que dió con una lanza a Santiago de Acosta, vecino del Valle de Morón," AGN, Comisos, Volume 24, Expediente 1, folios 1-12v; and "Autos contra Joseph Luis de Felipes y Ignacio de Goya," AANH, RP, Civiles, Volumes 378-390. Feliciano Ramos documents the circulation of notes between English merchants and their far-flung contacts and representatives in Spanish American. See Feliciano Ramos, *El contrabando inglés*, pp. 89-91.

smugglers no trouble by paying him some pesos.³³ Local colonial officials, especially members of coastal patrols and cabos assigned to specific coastal valleys, were removed or relocated with great frequency. It would have been difficult for prácticos to establish and maintain contact and friendly relationships with the succession of low-level officials, and what they tended to do was seek out members of the colonial government who showed some permanence and influence. For example, Juan Blanco, an Irishman on Curaçao, got his start in the Venezuela coastal trade in the 1720s as a práctico on a Dutch sloop. It was then that he struck up a friendship with Captain don Ambrosio Fernández Bello, at the time assigned to the valley Ocumare. Five years later, Bello had been reassigned to Morón, a favorite place for Curaçaoan traders and their práctico contacts. Blanco shifted his activities west from the Valencia coast to the Morón area, and Blanco, now employing a Greek práctico named Juan Bautista, followed suit. Blanco supplied his friend with guns, munitions, and clothing for his men; in return, Bello assured his friend of official neglect of his trading activities. Juan Félix de Ovalle, Valencia's best known práctico during the 1730s and 1740s, enjoyed a strong friendship with Valencia's justice of the peace, don Joseph Luis Felipes who, because of the great trust Governor Gabriel Zuloaga had in him, held his post for 8 years. Felipes' support for Ovalle was public knowledge in Valencia and allowed the latter to move with relative ease within the district.³⁴

As a result of their ties with colonial officials, successful prácticos enjoyed some protection from law enforcement. In one instance in 1736, Commander General Martín de Lardizábal ordered the release of three prácticos who been caught getting off a Dutch sloop in Turiamo. Lardizábal absolved without giving any explanation Domingo Mantano, a Galician who lived in Yagua; Juan Joseph Sánchez, a white creole from Cartagena de las Indias, who lived in San Carlos; and Francisco Gisardo, a pardo from Maracaibo.³⁵ This was an extreme case, as most relied upon lower-ranked collaborators and assumed governors and supreme military commanders would not show much pity, generosity, or support for their cause. The turnover in local administration was high, although local cabildo officers enjoyed more stability. Once the Royal Guipuzcoa Company began its operations in the colony, local administration and counter-contraband efforts showed greater uniformity and integration, as the justices of the peace tended to be confidant of the governors, who in turn worked closely with the company.

Prácticos had other support besides colonial officials. Ovalle's travels through Valencia were also made easier by a string of safe houses and storage facilities he relied upon when he came inland from the Caribbean Sea. He had friends who received and sheltered him in Turiamo, Yagua, and Valencia. Ovalle's connections seem to have been typical for prácticos who did inland brokering. Prácticos who dedicated their energies to recruiting Venezuelan business partners for Curaçaoan merchants tended to concentrate their operations on a main transportation route or in a few contiguous coastal valleys. Ovalle worked the Turiamo-Valencia

33 "Consejo hecho por don Ignacio Bazasábal, teniente de la ciudad de Carora, de 51 cargas de tabaco, 53 mulas y 2 bestias cavallares y roes comprendidos en su introducción y apprehension," November 11, 1736, AANH, RP, Civiles, Signatura 1-167-4, folios 1-12.

34 "Causa criminal sobre comercios ilícitos en las costas de esta provincia, remitida al tribunal del señor Comandante General por don Domingo Aróstegui con las personas de Juan Blanco, de nación irlandesa, Francisco Lorenzo Carambeo, Juan Pascual Miquilarena, y don Ambrosio Bello, cabo a guerra y juez de comisos del valle de Morón," AGN, Comisos, Volume 13, Expediente 3, folios 143-157v; and "Autos contra Joseph Luis de Felipes y Ignacio de Goya," AANH, RP, Civiles, Volumes 378-390.

35 "Autos sobre tres hombres prácticos apprehendidos en el Valle de Patanemo," September 26, 1736, AGN, Volume 17, Expediente 7, folios 177-179, 188-188v.

tobacco trail, and by the end of the 1740s, he had ascended from *práctico* to the biggest buyer in Valencia's clandestine tobacco trade.³⁶

Overseers and slaves provided shelter and meeting places for individuals involved in clandestine trade. Eugenio Riveros worked as an overseer in coastal cacao plantations. He used his position to collaborate with and protect *prácticos* who worked the Valencia coastline. In the early 1730s, he managed don Juan Gabriel de Rada's estate in Ocumare, which he used to meet fellow Canary Island immigrant Pedro Zurita, who traveled the coast arranging exchanges with the Dutch. In 1734, Riveros was in San Esteban, now managing the cacao plantation of sisters doña María and doña Mauricia Sáenz Valera. He continued to collaborate with Zurita. In September his friend used his home to make arrangements to purchase textiles and other goods from the Dutch at Agua Caliente. Riveros also loaned Zurita the mules to carry the load.³⁷

Dominga Gemba, a free *morena* who lived in San Esteban, also let out her home for smugglers to meet. Here Zurita and his partner, Juan the Aragonese, met up with Juan Andrés Sequera, a free mulatto whom they had contracted in Maracay to carry the silver specie with which they would pay their Dutch counterparts. Juan the Aragonese, the major *práctico* on the Valencia coast during these years, enjoyed a variety of safe houses and friendly haciendas where he could spend the night, hide, or carry out secret meetings. One was Dominga Gemba's house; another was doña Mariana Quixán's cacao estate in Guaiguaza, where he periodically visited and met with his partners at the residence of a slave named Fabián.³⁸

Pedro López, better known as Pedro Cabezas, used only his partner's home in Morón as a base of operations. The range of his activities was likewise limited to the Punta de Morón. Juan Joseph and Cross-Eyed Acuña centered their work on Ocumare and Cuyagua. They seem to have enjoyed less extensive connections, relying more on members of their immediate families than on unrelated individuals whom they could repay with some of their earning made as brokers.³⁹

Brokers in the clandestine trade had ties with individuals who could help hide or obscure the extra-legal origins of the goods they stored, transported, or received as payment. The connection between *prácticos* and tailors was recurring. Simón del Rosario and Félix Alberto, two free black *prácticos* who worked out of Cuyagua in the mid-1730s, were both tailors. Another example is Pedro Joseph Díaz Velasco, better known as Joseph the Cuban, a tailor who lived in Puerto Cabello. Originally from Santiago de Cuba, he had wife and 7 children in Caracas but preferred to practice his trade in Puerto Cabello. Smugglers from San Esteban, Guaiguaza, and Puerto Cabello used his Borburata home as a base for trading with the Dutch. *Prácticos* traveling along the coast made arrangements with muleteers and couriers to meet at Pedro the Cuban's house, where they completed transactions or planned new ones. As a tailor, Pedro the Cuban had legitimate reasons to have bolts of cloth stored in his house, just as it was expected that he would have many visitors.⁴⁰

Dutch traders not only entrusted *prácticos* with the heavy responsibilities of securing them active trading partners and quiet colonial officials when they pulled into an informal port,

36 "Autos contra Joseph Luis de Felipes y Ignacio de Goya," AANHV, RP, Civiles, Volume 384.

37 "Causa criminal sobre comercio ilícito contra Pedro Zurita, Juan Aragonés, Francisco, y Pedro Ledo, reos ausentes, y contra Juan Andrés de Sequera y Eugenio Riveros, presentes," Patanemo, June 20, 1734, AGN, Comisos, Volume 14, Expediente 1, folios 1-109v.

38 Ibid.

39 "Autos criminales fechas por el Real Oficio de Justicia contra Pedro Lopez Cadenas."

40 "Causa criminal seguida contra Diego Ventura Rodríguez y otros reos por comercio ilícito," Puerto Cabello, December 4, 1735, AGN, Comisos, Volume 20, Expediente 1, folios 1-89v.

but they also relied upon them to make advanced payments for both purchases and bribes. *Prácticos* carried large amounts of cash, a rare commodity in early eighteenth-century Venezuela, especially in the provincial periphery, where *prácticos* were most active. In 1734 Juan the Aragonese and Pedro Zurita's contacts in Tucacas advanced them 350 pesos in silver coin to set up deals in San Esteban, Guaguaza, and Agua Caliente. Juan Joseph, a free black pilot who worked for Captain Muxinche from Curaçao, came ashore in Turiamo with a knife and 16 pesos 4 reales in his belt and a travel permit from the local *cabo*. Francisco Gallardo carried on his person the pesos used to secure the complicity of the local *cacique* in El Tocuyo.⁴¹

Just as brokers aimed to develop regular relationships with a few dependable Venezuelan colonial subjects and members of the colonial administration, they also aimed to develop a few close relationships with Curaçaoan traders. *Prácticos* often worked for one captain consistently, and along the coast they developed a reputation as emissaries for certain individuals.

Venezuelans knew that if they ran into or heard word from particular *prácticos*, they were hearing from their Curaçaoan employers as well. Juan Joseph, a free black from Curaçao, worked for Curaçaoan Captain Muxinche. He was caught in Turiamo because members of a patrol recognized him as Muxinche's *práctico*. He said he was on his way to Ocumare to see his brother in Cata, though it seems he had good relationship with the *cabo* in charge of Turiamo. Juan Joseph worked as a blacksmith, up and down the coast, worked out of don Antonio Blanco's forge on his estate in Cata. Antonio Padilla, when he visited the Venezuelan coast, did so as Juan Félix de Ovalle's representative. Established and potential clients who knew which *práctico* worked for whom understood that Juan Joseph and Padilla's presence, or word that they had come ashore, meant that their employer was soon to follow. Reputation was an important resource for brokers. The most successful were known if not by face at least by name along the coast. Venezuelan smugglers perhaps never knew the identity of their Curaçaoan employers, but they did know their *prácticos*. These, in their ability to broker transactions, built their employers' reputations as dependable, safe, and fair trading partners.⁴²

Prácticos exposed themselves to greater risks than other participants in smuggling enterprises. They crossed more boundaries than others. By assuming the various risks involved in recruiting labor, securing official quiescence, traveling across multiple jurisdictions, and negotiating with exporters and importers, *prácticos* served to protect the principles involved in extra-legal transactions. Their constant shuttling and communication of trade information restricted the various participants' knowledge of each other, which made the identification and investigation of smuggling networks difficult for colonial officials. Most involved knew by name, and usually either by first name or nickname, the *práctico* who had made the transaction arrangements. *Prácticos* concurrently protected the buyers and sellers from the risk of exposure and official persecution while at the same time fortified their privileged positions within the smuggling network. As brokers, they benefited from the various parties' ignorance or distrust of each other. The efforts of Curaçaoan sea captains and merchants to rescue or protect favored *prácticos* reflect how valuable these men were to Curaçaoan traders. Andresote's contacts on Curaçao picked him up from the Golfo Triste coast and took him to safety on the island when the Venezuelan governor's military excursions to the Yaracuy River valley escalated into an effort to eliminate him and his company of watermen, *prácticos*, and spies. In August of 1778, Manuel

41 "Causa criminal sobre comercio ilícito contra Pedro Zurita, Juan Aragonés, Francisco, y Pedro Ledo;" and "Consejo hecho por don Ignacio Bazasábal."

42 "Causa criminal sobre comercio ilícito contra Pedro Zurita, Juan Aragonés, Francisco, y Pedro Ledo;" and "Autos contra Joseph Luis Felipes y Ignacio de Goya," 1746, AANHV, RP, Signatura 2-384-1.

Urbaneja was captured off the coast of Barcelona and accused of being a *práctico* for the Dutch. He was sent to La Guaira, and on the way, a Dutch schooner captained by Joseph Matheo attacked the launch that carried him and whisked him away from Spanish colonial officials.⁴³

These intermediaries performed one of various smuggling tasks that would fall under the category of infamous occupations within an officially condemned system of exchange. Others would include muleteers, spies, lookouts, couriers, fences, safe house operators, and the various military entrepreneurs who provided protection, solicited and unsolicited, along the networks that connected producers and buyers.⁴⁴ While individuals and institutions that sought to eliminate or monopolize extra-legal trade expressed concern over each and attempted to control them in various ways, muleteers and pilots presented special difficulties. Their work required them to cross boundaries. *Prácticos* had to shift between Curaçaoan traders who moved east-west along the coast and Venezuelan traders who tended to move north-south, and they had to make sure each party were in the right place at the right time with the right information. Nonetheless, both groups were more rooted than those charged with repressing smuggling and who complained of *prácticos*' autonomy were willing to recognize. Both limited their activities spatially and socially. In the case of muleteers, they tended to operate along the same routes, which allowed them to develop relations not only with contractors but also with official and unofficial tax collectors. In the case of *prácticos*, they, too, tended to concentrate on a circumscribed area, often a few adjacent coastal valleys. As with muleteers, stable relations with colonial office holders and other military entrepreneurs were critical. Nonetheless, *prácticos* were more inclined to range widely than teamsters. Since their business was by nature less fixed. While the routes muleteers took crossed over diverse terrains—plains, mountain passes, swamps, and coastlines—their work was restricted to the transportation of goods. *Prácticos*, on the other hand, performed a variety of tasks, often simultaneously. They cruised the coast in trading vessels when they accompanied Curaçaoan captains and supercargoes; they journeyed from coastal valley to coastal valley either on foot or on mule when they made advanced arrangements for extra-legal exchanges. They came ashore and crossed mountain passes to rendezvous with clients or couriers in the highland valleys. Sometimes they had business in coastal exchange points separated by hundreds of kilometers and also had business to take care of in one or more settlements on the interior. *Prácticos*, in short, joined the pieces of a commercial system, which as a whole mocked imperial divides but whose parts were relatively circumscribed.

Governors, justices of the peace, and other colonial officials presented the coastal brokers as a chronic threat to Crown sovereignty and social stability in Venezuela, but in truth, the smuggling system in which they played a vital role pushed them away from Venezuela. *Prácticos* found their best opportunities to advance within the coastal trade not along the Venezuelan coast but on Curaçao.

Although scant, the documentary evidence from early eighteenth-century Venezuela would seem to indicate that few of those who reached the position of intermediary in smuggling activities managed to move much higher within these informal commercial networks. Curaçaoan pilots or Venezuelans who began their careers on Curaçao showed greater mobility than their counterparts on the mainland. For example, the Irishman Juan Blanco got his start in the

43 This example is from Aizpurua, *Curacao y la Costa de Caracas*, p. 282, fn 55. For Andresote, see Felice Cardot, *La rebelión de Andresote*.

44 Military entrepreneurs are individuals whose stock in trade is the credible threat of violence. From Thomas W. Gallant, "Brigandage, Piracy, Capitalism, and State-Formation: Transnational Crime from a World-Systems Perspective," in Josiah McC. Heyman, ed., *States and Illegal Practices* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 25-61.

Venezuelan coastal trade as a *práctico* for a Dutch captain. In 1728 he began his business relationship with Bello. Five years later, in 1733, Blanco had his own sloop, the Hummingbird, and was now sending his own *práctico* ashore to contact his old business partner, this time to sell his own goods and not as someone else's representative. Juan Félix de Ovalle, a free colored originally from the Valley of Choroní, made his name and probably some fortune as a *práctico* on the Venezuelan coast and then relocated to Curaçao. There he purchased his own ship and by the late 1740s, he was hiring his own *prácticos* to do the work he used to do.

Prácticos had greater chances of moving up in smuggling operations by leaving the Venezuelan coastline and heading for Curaçao. Within Venezuela, their marginality, which helped push them this line of work in the first place, hindered their passage to higher echelons in the business of extra-legal trade and its selective protection and persecution. I have found no evidence of *prácticos* buying land or purchasing a cacao estate, nor is there any indication that the *prácticos*, at least the ones caught or reported on in the criminal record, held any office in either local or provincial government. *Prácticos* had few personal possessions; they tended to be single men without a fixed residence. Their success depended on their mobility and the connections with people across various borders. Furthermore, it was easier to take their earnings from intermediary work and invest it in property on Curaçao than to do the same in Venezuela. Also, the big producers, buyers, and protectors of contraband trade lived and consolidated their patronage systems inland, away from the coast—area of expertise of the *práctico*—making *prácticos* and their services peripheral to the colony's major systems of commodity production and social patronage.

Concerted efforts by the colonial administration to identify and eliminate *prácticos* took tangible form in the years immediately following the Royal Guipuzcoa Company's founding in Venezuela. Official claims that all *prácticos* in smuggling networks were *pardos* was mistaken. Likewise, the concern over the threat they posed to the colonial social order was misplaced. *Prácticos* did tend to be outsiders of some sort, if color and place of origin are the dual standard for measuring social belonging. *Pardos*—from Venezuela, New Granada, Curaçao, and Cuba—were prominent among Venezuela's *prácticos*, but there were also Canary Islanders, Irishmen, and Greeks.⁴⁵ The most successful did not put together trading organizations that challenged colonial authority, nor did they parley their talents and resources into land or political office. Instead, they left the colony, for the structure of the trade between Curaçao and Venezuela pushed the upwardly mobile out of brokering and towards the port of Willemstad, Curaçao.

⁴⁵ I have yet to come across a Basque or white creole *práctico* originally from Venezuela, at least for the time and place under consideration—the Province of Venezuela in the first half of the eighteenth century.

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