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Figure 1: Ben Kinchelow moved to the environs of the Río Grande/Río Bravo after his mother won her freedom. He said that Mexican laborers near the mouth of the river sometimes helped African Americans escape to the other side, 1937, no. 101, LOT 13262-7, Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

# THE LINE OF LIBERTY: RUNAWAY SLAVES AND FUGITIVE PEONS IN THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDERLANDS

JAMES DAVID NICHOLS

*In the aftermath of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, runaway slaves from Texas and debt peons from Northern Mexico put the new borderline to an unexpected use. Aware that it separated two very different countries, each sought refuge on the other side. Thus, a line intended to seal off one side from the other and keep laborers bounded in their place served a contrary function. The flood of refugees across the border produced a guerra sorda—cold war—between Mexico and the United States over their differing ideas of labor and race. On the ground, this war of words constantly threatened to degenerate into a hot shooting war. And when runaway slaves and Mexican peons became unexpected allies, the situation only deteriorated further. Ultimately, neither Mexican nor U.S. officials could disabuse their servile laborers of the notion that the new border represented a line of liberty and that greater opportunity lay in greater mobility.*

*Como consecuencia del Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo, esclavos prófugos de Texas y peones del Norte de México utilizaron la recién creada frontera en una manera imprevista. Estos esclavos prófugos y peones adquieren conciencia de que en la nueva frontera habían dos países con leyes muy distintas, y estos no titubearon en buscar amparo en el lado que mejor les convenía. Por consiguiente, una frontera que se suponía mantendría peones y trabajadores en su sitio sirvió una función contraria. El remolino humano de refugiados resultó en una guerra sorda—cold war—entre México y los Estados Unidos*

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sobre ideas de labor y raza. Desde el comienzo, en la frontera, siempre había la amenaza de que este conflicto se convertiría en una guerra de balazos. Cuando esclavos y peones refugiados se hacían amigos la situación empeoraba. Por que, ni los oficiales de México, ni los de los EEUU pudieron quitarle la ilusión a sus trabajadores de que la frontera representaba una frontera de oportunidad, y que en la movilidad se podía encontrar más libertad.

**B**EN KINCHELOW ARRIVED IN a small black community on the outskirts of Matamoros, Tamaulipas, in the late 1840s after he and his mother received their freedom. Growing up, he toiled along the Rio Grande/Río Bravo and learned ranch work from the Mexican day laborers who maintained a friendly disposition toward African Americans who lived nearby or ran away to the region. (See figure 1.) Aware that Mexico had abolished slavery, Mexican workers sometimes encouraged African Americans to stay behind in Matamoros, just across the border from the United States. Soon, Matamoros's reputation as a haven for runaways reached a good number of enslaved African Americans in Texas. As war with Mexico loomed, slaves described by Texas newspapers as "trustworthy, now insolent" began abandoning their masters near the mouth of the Rio Grande/Bravo. Years later, when the Work Projects Administration asked Kinchelow about his youth, he recalled watching enslaved drivers bringing their masters' cotton to the port of Brownsville, across from Matamoros. Then, "persuaded to go across the border by Meskins [sic]," many African Americans would cross over and "never return to their master." That was, he added, "how lots of Negroes got to be free."<sup>1</sup>

Kinchelow's recollections confirm a moment of extraordinary fluidity along the international border. In the wake of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, runaway slaves from Texas and fugitive indebted laborers (debt peons) from Mexico fled across the Rio Grande/Bravo in growing numbers, seeking out better working conditions and finding asylum on the other side of the border. (See figure 2.) In 1851 Mexicans estimated that "upwards of two thousand fugitive slaves" were to be found in Mexico east of the Sierra Madre. John "Rip" Ford, a former Texas Ranger and South Texas newspaperman, put the number of slaves who had absconded from Texas to live in Mexico north of the Sierra Madre Mountains at three thousand. Texans might have inflated these numbers, but they still betray the difficulty that Texas slaveholders faced in holding onto their laborers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John H. Fuller, "Ben Kinchelow: A Trail Driver on the Chisholm Trail," in *Black Cowboys of Texas*, ed. Sara R. Massey (College Station, TX, 2000), 100–3 and *Houston Tri-Weekly*, [1844?].

<sup>2</sup> "Convention of Slaveholders," *Clarksville (TX) Northern Standard*, 11 November 1854 and John Salmon Ford, *Rip Ford's Texas*, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Austin, 1963), 196. For more on the exposure of slavery in Texas, see Sean M. Kelley, *Los Brazos del Dios: A Plantation Society in the Texas Borderlands, 1821–1865* (Baton Rouge, 2010); Sean Kelley, "'Mexico in His Head': Slavery



Figure 2: Texas-Mexico borderlands, ca. 1848. Map by author.

Less known is the fact that Mexico had its own labor problems in the borderlands. The Mexico City newspaper *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* estimated that between 1840 and 1851 three thousand people abandoned the state of Coahuila. By 1852 another four thousand had left. The newspaper reasoned that the shrinking population could only be explained by the flight of indebted laborers to Texas. Again, these numbers are likely exaggerated, and some of the refugees probably sought to escape from the notoriously insecure frontier. But they still represented a tremendous loss of laborers from the Mexican North.<sup>3</sup>

and the Texas-Mexico Border, 1810–1860,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (Spring 2004): 709–23; and Robert S. Shelton, “On Empire’s Shore: Free and Unfree Workers in Galveston, Texas, 1840–1860,” *Journal of Social History* 40 (Spring 2007): 717–30. For groundbreaking works on runaway slaves in Mexico, see Rosalie Schwartz, *Across the Rio to Freedom: U.S. Negroes in Mexico* (El Paso, 1974) and Ronnie C. Tyler, “Fugitive Slaves in Mexico,” *Journal of Negro History* 57 (January 1972): 1–12.

<sup>3</sup> *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* (Mexico City), 10 January 1856; Charles H. Harris III, *A Mexican Family Empire: The Latifundio of the Sánchez Navarros, 1765–1867* (Austin, 1975), 228–9; and Juan Mora-Torres, *The Making of the Mexican Border: The State, Capitalism, and Society in Nuevo León*,

Like other “autonomous people” who were independent of larger state projects, mobile laborers frustrated their erstwhile masters and debt holders by running to the other side in search of greater liberty.<sup>4</sup> They did not see the border as a limit. Many laborers stuck in cycles of debt and the violent repression on either side of the boundary saw it as a gateway to freedom and opportunity. This article argues that after 1848, people with mobility crossed the border with surprising frequency.

The evidence confirms the findings of recent historical works that argue that the distinction between “borderlands” and “bordered lands” made by Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron in their seminal article is overblown. As Rachel St. John has recently shown, states continue to struggle as they implement their agendas of national security at the border. Their power is always limited by “practical difficulties” and they must come to terms with happenings on the other side. Karl Jacoby, meanwhile, suggested that the larger national narrative of “bordering” frontier zones does violence to smaller, but equally persistent, borderlands histories. In state-centered tellings, whatever alternative histories the borderlands may have previously contained, once bordered they succumb to a larger national story.<sup>5</sup> Narratives that centralize the inexorable march of the state leviathan fail to recognize that places where cultures meet continue to carry unique features.

In an effort to write against such a totalizing national borderlands history, I argue that “bordering” does not end the mobility engaged in by certain groups. I suggest that borders sometimes have the opposite effect. The possibility of greater liberty drew servile laborers across the U.S.-Mexico border, and perhaps the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo made the contrast between the two countries even starker. Thanks to the efforts of mobile peoples in the borderlands, the international boundary marked the difference between servile labor systems in the United States and Mexico within the physical space along the newly instituted border. Slaves ran south into the relatively more racially fluid society in Mexico; peons, not yet considered racial outsiders by North Americans, went north into Texas.

Mobile laborers escaping servility did not see the international border as an unbridgeable chasm in the land; they saw a swinging gate. The experience of ex-slave Ben Kinchelow is instructive. His transnational upbringing endowed him with an alternative understanding of the borderlands. Rather than remembering a bordered

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1848–1910 (Austin, 2001), 154–9. For more on labor in the North during the *Porfiriato*, see Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago, 1981) and Friedrich Katz, “Labor Conditions on Haciendas in Porfirian Mexico: Some Trends and Tendencies,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 54 (February 1974): 1–47.

<sup>4</sup> Brian DeLay, “Independent Indians and the U.S.-Mexican War,” *American Historical Review* 112 (February 2007): 35–68.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104 (June 1999): 814–41; Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, 2011), 6–7; and Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: A Borderlands Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York, 2008), 2–5.

land where the oppressive hand of the state restricted mobility, Kinchelow recalled a history of the border driven by runaway slaves and their Mexican allies—where the border actually gave the oppressed a degree of control over their own destinies.

Already in the 1830s, African Americans were searching for freedom across the border. Many runaway slaves from Texas retreated south alongside the Mexican army after Antonio López de Santa Anna's decisive defeat at San Jacinto in 1836. José de Urrea, Santa Anna's subordinate in Texas, reported that fourteen slaves came to him with their families seeking asylum at the conclusion of the war with Texas. He sent them to live in Ciudad Victoria in Tamaulipas. In later years, runaway slaves did not stop coming to Mexico. In 1841 the authorities of Monclova intercepted a band of Caddoes under Chief Coyote wandering through the borderlands. A runaway slave who accompanied them said that he was in search of "a country where he could acquire liberty." The authorities sent him to the *alcalde* of Monclova.<sup>6</sup>

Runaway slaves streaming into Mexico procured something of a moral victory for Mexicans, humiliated by Santa Anna's defeats at San Jacinto and, a decade later, at Buena Vista. They found it very difficult to view the Texas secession from their country as anything but an attempt to establish the security of slavery in that territory. Pretensions toward federalism aside, Texas broke off from Mexico in part because of that country's deepening commitment to emancipation. The U.S.-Mexican War only confirmed Texas's status as a society with slaves. No one was more aware of this disagreement than enslaved African Americans in Texas, who transgressed the border in increasing numbers during the 1850s.

The conflict with Texas may have deepened Mexican nationalists' aversion to racial slavery and color prejudice but was not the root cause of it. Mestizos participated broadly in the war of independence and claimed citizenship in the emergent republic. Further, the Mexican War of Independence had room for a number of officers of color—even the *Afromestizos* José María Morelos and Vicente Guerrero. Hence, official color-blindness emerged as Mexican policy following independence.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, conservative Creoles, jealous of their position in society, often evinced a sort of anxious racism against the Indians and mixed bloods who surrounded them. Indeed, the Mexican indigent tended to possess more indigenous blood in that country due to historical patterns of dispossession. U.S. commentators who constantly referred to "Indian" peons in Mexico were not altogether off the mark. But, illiterate and impoverished as

<sup>6</sup> Schwartz, *Across the Rio*, 24–5; Joseph Milton Nance, *After San Jacinto: The Texas-Mexican Frontier, 1836–1841* (Austin, 1963), 232–3; and Rafael de la Fuente, *Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas* (Ciudad Victoria), 26 June 1841, caja 1, fondo Hemeroteca, Archivo Histórico de Matamoros, Tamaulipas (AHM).

<sup>7</sup> For more on race and Mexican independence, see John Tutino, "Social Origins of Insurrection: The Bajío, 1740–1810," in *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social Bases of Agrarian Violence, 1750–1940* (Princeton, 1986), 41–90 and Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810–1821* (Stanford, 2002), 128–38.

mixed bloods in Mexico may have been, slavery had ceased to exist by 1829 and the constitution of 1824 espoused color-blindness officially. As a result, Mexican officials refused to reproduce the racial tenets and sharply proscribed boundaries of citizenship and whiteness upon which American “herrenvolk democracy” rested. In the United States, all whites received the benefits of citizenship, but widespread enfranchisement was predicated upon the outright exclusion of racial others.<sup>8</sup>

Mexico’s distinct historical experience—and an avowed anti-Americanism within the population—deepened many Mexicans’ commitment against slavery. Mexicans who sought to downplay North Americans’ putative dedication to liberty needed only to point out the wretched situation of noncitizens in the United States—which newspaper editors did frequently. As *El Monitor Republicano* put it during the heat of the U.S.-Mexican War, “In the [American] patria, there is neither liberty nor political rights except for the dominant race.” Similar sentiments flowed from the pens of many more editors in the years to come. These editorials also provided opportunities to compare their own system of peonage favorably to chattel slavery. A writer for Mexico City’s *La Sociedad* even claimed that Mexican *sirvientes*’ (as Mexicans referred to laboring peons) recourse to tribunals made the “custom” of peonage much more “noble and human” than slavery, where African Americans were denied all judicial rights. He added that peonage was an ancient system of servitude held over from Iberian custom, and unlike American chattel slavery, was not based upon the arbitrary distinction of skin color.<sup>9</sup> The grudges produced by the North American conquest of half of Mexico’s claimed territory in 1846–1847 only deepened Mexicans’ dedication to official color-blindness.

U.S. officials pushed back, of course, and they found that Mexican officials could be both obstinate in their defense of runaway slaves and repulsed by North American racism. When the flight of slaves from Texas reached the attention of James Gadsden, American minister to Mexico, he wrote a tetchy letter to his counterpart in Mexico, Foreign Minister Plenipotentiary Luís de la Rosa. He implored, “Don’t permit the two neighboring Republics to get into a war of . . . abstraction, on the relations of the Mexican Government to her Indian Peons and those of the United States to the Affrican [sic] Race entailed in their protection.” He then wrote to all U.S. consuls in Mexico, instructing them not to recognize the citizenship of the “Africans . . . flocking in numbers from

<sup>8</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (New York, 1999), 59–60; and Pierre L. Van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon* (New York, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, 12 November 1850; *El Universal* (Mexico City), 25 and 19 March 1851; 21 October 1852; and 11 February 1849; *El Monitor Republicano* (Mexico City), 21 May 1847; *El Universal*, 28 April 1850; and *La Sociedad* (Mexico City), 17 June 1858. For more histories of peonage and runaway peons, see Juan Mora Torres, “Los de casa se van, los de fuera no vienen: The First Mexican Immigrants, 1848–1900,” in *Beyond La Frontera*, ed. Mark Overmeyer-Velázquez (New York, 2011), 10–3 and Miguel Ángel González-Quiroga, “Conflict and Cooperation in the Making of Texas-Mexico Border Society, 1840–1888,” in *Bridging National Borders in North America*, ed. Benjamin H. Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill (Durham, 2010), 46–8.

the United States to Mexico.” Turning his attention to the chief Mexican diplomat, Gadsden appealed to de la Rosa in an effort to educate him on the racism upon which American slavery rested. He beseeched him to exclude “the serpent from your Eden.” For good measure he added, “Don’t encourage, but rather exclude the Affrican from intruding on your land of promise unless you wish to [add] it to your own inferior caste.” But Mexican society at least held the potential for advancement of people of mixed heritage, even if class and race lines often overlapped. As a result, Gadsden’s recourse to racism and insult did not resound well with de la Rosa. Further, the foreign minister had already committed himself to following directives from Mexico City that described the practice of returning runaway slaves to the United States as “odious”—despite the fact that he hoped they could be exchanged for runaway Mexican debtors.<sup>10</sup> At least in official circles during the Santa Anna years, Mexican commitment to emancipation and color-blindness held steady.

On the ground, things could be different, however, and slave hunters could sometimes count on the help of Mexican guides in the country’s semiautonomous north.<sup>11</sup> Further, North Americans were not about to buy into an argument that condemned slavery while a degraded labor system existed in Mexico at the same time. After all, Mexican peons recognized that they, too, could pursue new opportunities by leaving behind the hacienda in search of (literally) greener pastures in Texas. The institution of a boundary line between the two countries at the conclusion of the U.S.-Mexican War only drew a sharper contrast. As runaway slaves continued to stream into Mexico, this human wave intercepted another one flowing along the opposite axis from south to north.

Runaway peons enter the historical record immediately after hostilities between the United States and Mexico commenced. In 1846, shortly after Zachary Taylor’s forces arrived at the Rio Grande/Bravo, runaway peons began filing into the army’s encampments near Matamoros. It did not take long for *hacendados* (large landholders) and ranchers in Tamaulipas to notice increasing numbers of their workers fleeing to the border with stolen animals. Their departure had immediate consequences for borderlands agriculture. According to various reports, a cluster of cotton plantations along the lower Rio Grande/Bravo had relied on a large, pliant workforce in the prewar years. But whatever limited the cotton cultivation that existed along the river came

<sup>10</sup> James Gadsden to Luís de la Rosa, [1854–1855?], 42, cuaderno 6-18-42, Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City (SRE); circular to consuls of the United States acting under exequaturs of the Republic of Mexico, 25 June 1854 and Thomas Horgan to William D. Marcy, 25 November 1854, both microcopy 281, roll 2, Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826–1906, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives Microfilm Publications T18, National Archives and Records Administration—Washington, DC; Gadsden to de la Rosa, SRE; and de la Rosa to José María Lacunza, 19 May 1850, 112, legajo 32, expediente 2, Siglo XIX, Archivo de la Embajada Mexicana en Estados Unidos de America, SRE (hereafter AEMEUA).

<sup>11</sup> De la Rosa to John M. Clayton, March 1850, 43, legajo 32, expediente 2, AEMEUA.

to an abrupt end with the arrival of U.S. forces; according to one observer, Mexican laborers crossing to the United States during the war led to its demise. A few *amos* (a term meaning “master” that also implies a filial attachment) wrote to General Taylor personally in the hope that he would oversee their return, but he refused to turn them over. Instead, a good number of the fleeing laborers found work with the army quartermaster, who reportedly paid them a rate of \$30 per month—significantly greater than the 25 cents a day reputed to be an average peon’s wage in Mexico.<sup>12</sup>

Mexican laborers fulfilled a practical need in labor-starved Texas, but offering runaway peons shelter also served an ideological purpose. A trove of U.S. volunteers who had made the journey to Mexico during the war produced memoirs that contributed mightily to the image of the sadistic hacendado and the wretched peon. Volunteer soldiers compared peons to slaves just like Mexican writers did, but they most often came to a very different conclusion. By their lights, peons had it far worse than slaves, and they saw the liberation of put-upon and abused peons as one of the goals of the U.S. intervention in Mexico. A volunteer who passed through the vast Sánchez Navarro landholdings in Coahuila wrote of the “little huts made of corn stalks” where “200 lousy peons lived in misery while working off their debt.”<sup>13</sup> A volunteer from Illinois took heart in the fact that, if the U.S. forces camped in one spot for any length of time, runaway peons would eventually find their way into the army’s lines. Such volunteers saw themselves as the liberators of abused and indebted Mexicans. The obvious irony that some volunteers’ and officers’ slaves deserted to Mexico seems to have been lost on these memoirists, but an important contrast still could be drawn. African American slaves were not their own countrymen, and they were not blessed with the same sovereign protection of liberties guaranteed to all free (white) men in America.<sup>14</sup>

Given the context in which criticism of peonage in Mexico arose, the straightforward equation of Mexican *peonaje* with North American slavery is dubious. But contemporary observers did not hesitate to offer up exactly this type of comparison. Drawing on the reports and memoirs of war volunteers, proslavery writers pointed to the allegedly sharp contrast between the destitution of the hacienda system and the benignity of Southern slavery. Eventually this discourse on peonage had wide-ranging effects. Most remarkably, in 1851 an anonymous “ex-senator”—likely Daniel

<sup>12</sup> Jose María Girón to Zachary Taylor, 10 and 17 June 1846, vol. 55, box 2Q279, Matamoros Archives, 1811–1859, Spanish Materials from Various Sources, 1600–1921, Briscoe Center for American History, Austin (BCAH) and Ford, *Rip Ford’s Texas*, 214–5.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, *Sánchez-Navarros*, 207–30 and Richard Bruce Winders, *Mr. Polk’s Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* (College Station, TX, 2001), 180.

<sup>14</sup> Winders, *Polk’s Army*, 184 and Robert E. May, “Invisible Men: Blacks in the U.S. Army During the Mexican War,” *The Historian* 49 (August 1987): 463–77. For more on how Mexican Americans were considered white in some instances, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texan Cotton Culture* (Austin, 1999) and Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

Webster—learned that a radical group of Texans planned to establish a slaveholder's republic in the Mexican North alongside the Tejano filibusterer José María de Jesús Carvajal. The ex-senator wrote to de la Rosa, the foreign minister, with the meddlesome suggestion that the Mexicans should not only be on guard against the designs of slaveholders from Texas but that it “would do well to limit the continuance of peonage also.”<sup>15</sup>

Texans friendly to slavery leveled the sharpest criticisms against debt peonage. They had learned about the practice long before the 1850s. Slaveholders who immigrated to Texas in the 1820s and 1830s—during the years when Mexico gradually outlawed chattel slavery—sometimes skirted the law by redefining their slaves as extraordinarily indebted laborers. When the issue of peonage entered wider public discourse around 1848, however, Texan slaveholders became some of its fiercest enemies. The movement to establish the Sierra Madre Republic, which “Rip” Ford thought of as the greatest opportunity for Texans to safeguard slavery in their state, sought to spread slavery into Northern Mexico on the principal that it was more benign than peonage. The Anglos and Tejanos who made up the movement shared many of the same political and economic convictions, including hostility to debt peonage and friendliness to slavery. The group referred specifically to Mexican peonage in their founding doctrine (written conspicuously in English) declaring that the signers were “tired of the National Declaration that Slavery shall not exist in our Land when Peonage, a system hideous and cruel, exists, unrestricted and unnoticed.”<sup>16</sup>

Texans defended their own system, asking why peons would run north if liberty lay to the south, as their slaves believed. The *Texas State Gazette*, for example, expected its readers (and perhaps potential runaway slaves) to see slavery as a more benign option. Ford was particularly sanguine in commenting on the hypocrisy of Mexicans. In relation to Mexican officials' stark opposition to slavery, he wrote that Mexicans “seemed to forget that they made their own countrymen slaves—*peons*—for the inability to pay a debt.” In the United States, meanwhile, only African and Irish outsiders could be servants. Ford also referred to the criticism of Indian and black slavery in the northern U.S. press as a vast “humbug” and wondered why Mexican peonage was hardly scrutinized by these same authors.<sup>17</sup>

Self-serving Texans were not the only ones convinced of the wretchedness of the peons' lot. As one high-ranking U.S. diplomat put it, a peon “is not only a slave for life,

<sup>15</sup> An ex-senator of the United States to Percy Doyle, 15 August 1851, 430–2, legajo 33, expediente 1, AEMEUA.

<sup>16</sup> Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821–1865* (Baton Rouge, 1989), 22–3; Olmsted, *Journey*, 333; “Mexican Affairs,” *Southwestern American* (San Antonio), 17 November 1852; Ford, *Rip Ford's Texas*, 215; and “Declaration of Independence, June 16, 1849, The Unanimous Declaration of the Seven Northern States of the Sierra Madre of Mexico,” *Defensor de Tamaulipas* (Matamoros), 26 June 1849, 13, expediente XI/481.3/3057, Archivo de la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, Mexico City.

<sup>17</sup> “Runaways to Mexico,” *Texas State Gazette* (Austin), 30 September 1854 and Ford, *Rip Ford's Texas*, 214 (italics in original).

but his children after him [are as well], unless the employer chooses to release [them] from his service.” Jane Cazneau (writing under the pseudonym Cora Montgomery), a contemporary of Ford’s, wrote extensively of her experiences in the borderlands from her home in Eagle Pass. She simply referred to peonage as Mexican slavery and noted that sometimes amos transgressed the border in pursuit of their runaway servants. To make the comparison explicit, Montgomery noted a conversation she had with a Mascogo (Black Seminole) woman who accompanied Wild Cat’s band to Nacimiento, Coahuila. “The only difference she ever found between being a slave and a peon,” Montgomery reported, “was in the hard way they had of grinding corn in Mexico, and that meat seemed scarcer.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite the anger many Mexicans felt toward their aggressive northern neighbors, some agreed with the critical observations of peonage. Colonel Emilio Langberg, who ascended from inspector of the military colonies of Chihuahua to the position of commander of Coahuila in the early 1850s, witnessed the abuse of hacienda peons firsthand and commented on the system’s physical violence. He tersely summed up his feelings in a letter to frontier *caudillo* (military chieftain) Santiago Vidaurri, when he stated that Texas slaves “were treated with more consideration [by their masters] than we treat our own peons.” *Sirvientes* in Coahuila “found themselves in a state of slavery worse than that of beasts; they suffer every type of terrible treatment and they never receive the money that is the fruit of their work.” They were stuck in a cycle of debt; they received articles of poor quality rather than wages—the result of the despised system of hacienda stores (*tiendas de rayas*)—and they could never hope to escape indebted bondage. Their only option was to flee “in bands” to Texas.<sup>19</sup>

The history of peonage in Mexico is complex, and the system varied widely across time and space. Probably the critics had a point. Modern scholars have confirmed the destitution of laborers on haciendas in the impoverished North. Hostile Indians surrounded the haciendas in a land with no free peasant villages and, consequently, very little chance of escape. But once Texas planters and ranchers began moving into the borderlands all this changed.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately for Mexican peons, Anglo-American enthusiasm for their plight fell off rapidly. Many of the same slaveholders in Texas who had pointed to peonage

<sup>18</sup> Waddy Thompson, *Recollections of Mexico* (New York, 1846), 7 and Cora Montgomery, *Eagle Pass, or Life on the Border* (New York, 1852), 36–8, 143.

<sup>19</sup> Emilio Langberg to Santiago Vidaurri, 1 September 1855, fondo Vidaurri, Correspondencia Emilio Langberg-Santiago Vidaurri, Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León (AGENL) (hereafter Langberg Correspondence).

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *Sánchez-Navarros*, 207–30; François Chavalier, “The North Mexican Hacienda: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century,” in *The New World Looks at Its History*, ed. Archibald R. Lewis and Thomas F. McGann (Austin, 1963), 101–6; and Harry E. Cross, “Debt Peonage Reconsidered: A Case Study in Nineteenth-Century Zacatecas, Mexico,” *Business History Review* 53 (Winter 1979): 473–95. For more on the Indian Wars and the Mexican North, see Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, 2008).

in Mexico as a reaffirmation of the benevolence of their “peculiar institution” saw things differently on the ground when they actually encountered one another. The 1850s witnessed an enormous migration of white Southerners and their slaves into Texas—some five hundred thousand in total—and they pushed the slave frontier even further west. With the new boundary in place, these new Anglo migrants mistakenly believed that their human property would be secure in Texas. They would realize quickly that this was not the case and that migrant Mexicans were at least partially to blame.

Unfortunately for Texan Anglos, their waning zeal intersected with a large migration of peons into the state. With the Comanches retreating toward the Texas Panhandle in the 1850s, runaway peons could at last pass with impunity from Coahuila to San Antonio and other West Texas towns. The citizens of Mexico were losing their servants as well as their beasts of burden—horses, mules—the theft of which was legion and likely financed the peons’ escape.<sup>21</sup> So great was the volume of migrants and rustlers to West Texas that the old military colony of Guerrero turned into something of a way station for Mexicano laborers en route to Texas. De la Rosa took special note of the large number of families and single men he saw in the early months of 1852, writing that the new arrivals came almost entirely from “the class of *sirvientes prófugos*—murderers and thieves—who were looking for refuge and to liberate themselves from the knife of the law” in Texas. Guerrero connected to San Antonio along a western road through the state, and the majority of migrants leaving Coahuila probably passed through the border town on their way to western Texas. Many of these runaway peons eventually ended up far in the interior, swelling the population of San Antonio and nearby towns, adding stolen horses to local herds.<sup>22</sup>

The Mexican North hemorrhaged labor and capital into Texas, causing *norteños* to look to their officials to do something about the problem of runaway peons. Again they called on the beleaguered de la Rosa to come to some sort of arrangement with the Texans. Despite the warnings of the anonymous ex-U.S. senator against peonage, de la Rosa drafted a treaty with the North Americans containing an article that called for the return of servants from Coahuila and other parts of Mexico who had fled to Texas and owed their masters large debts. But for this measure to be put into effect, the United States insisted that Mexico would have to agree to return escaped slaves living in Mexico—a trade-off the government refused. Accordingly, the treaty that emerged included neither a provision for the return of Texan slaves nor a provision for the return of runaway peons, and it pleased nobody. De la Rosa’s failure enraged *norteños*; it implied that the central government did not have their interests at heart. The

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<sup>21</sup> James David Nichols, “The Limits of Liberty: African Americans, Indians, and Peons in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1820–1860” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2012), 95–100.

<sup>22</sup> Ayuntamiento of Matamoros to ayuntamiento of Nuevo Laredo, 21 June 1850, 236, fondo Legajo Encuadernado 1595, SRE (hereafter FLE) and de la Rosa to Lacunza, AEMEUA.

loss of servants and “the impunity of thieves”—according to one provincial newspaper editor—was costing the frontier its “scarce fortune.” Mexico City could rail against returning runaway slaves but Mexican merchants, ranchers, and hacendados endured great financial loss as they watched their former debtors stream into Texas.<sup>23</sup>

Texans were wary of the peons coming into the state as well. As soon as Mexican laborers began to arrive in large numbers, the West Texas towns of Gonzales, Bastrop, Austin, San Antonio, Refugio, and Goliad went on alert. Slaveholders’ anxiety about the new peons in their neighborhoods deepened when they discovered that, for a small fee, a few migrant laborers were willing to help African Americans reach the Rio Grande/Bravo. Running slaves to Mexico was an odd job that migrant Mexicans in West Texas took on at tremendous personal risk, but a few did—putting themselves “at the command of the slave for a small bribe.” In San Antonio, a townsman overheard a Mexican offer to supply a slave with a horse and even show him the way to the border for a fixed price. After a judge found only the Mexican guilty of a misdemeanor, a commission of citizens from San Antonio petitioned the governor to do something about the “insecurity of slave property” in Bexar County.<sup>24</sup>

Afraid that they would lose their human property, the growing Anglo population of West Texas reacted by proposing expulsion decrees. As a result, the towns of Seguin, Bastrop, and Austin, as well as the counties of Uvalde, Matagorda, and Colorado, all passed measures during the 1850s that expelled Mexican laborers as a class from city or county limits. In Matagorda, reprisals were particularly harsh. In 1852 authorities there caught a group of Mexicans stealing horses and running three slaves to Mexico. Residents reacted swiftly and severely, expelling the entire population of Mexicans from the town. The justifiable action, according to one newspaper editor, was much milder than the other option—resorting to lynch law.<sup>25</sup>

A couple of years later, in nearby La Grange, every Mexican in the county faced the accusation that they had tried to help slaves escape to Mexico. The La Grange vigilance committee arrested the principal leaders of the alleged conspiracy and expelled the rest of the Hispanic population, telling them that their return would be punishable by death. The *Texas State Times*, reflecting on the banishment, explained that it was “satisfied that the lower class of Mexican population are incendiaries in any country where slaves are held and should be dealt with accordingly.” In nearby Gonzales, meanwhile, a white mob also resorted to violence to deal with the perceived treachery of migrant peons. In 1854 they caught a peon who had helped a slave escape and held

<sup>23</sup> De la Rosa to Lacunza, AEMEUA and *El Constitutional* (Matamoros) 16 and 30 September 1850, caja 2, fondo Hemeroteca, AHM.

<sup>24</sup> “Runaways to Mexico,” *Texas State Gazette*, 30 September 1854 and petition to S. A. Maverick and members of Bexar delegation, 20 December 1851, box 100-357, Texas State Archives, Austin (TSA).

<sup>25</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin, 1988), 28–9; Olmsted, *Journey*, 163–4; “Important to Slave Owners,” *Bastrop (TX) Advertiser*, 14 March 1857; and *Gonzales (TX) Inquirer*, 13 August and 17 September 1853.

him while an accomplice with a branding iron burned a letter *T*, for *traitor*, into his forehead. They then administered 150 lashes to his bare back.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the older Texans were astute enough to realize that their problem lay with the new migrant laborers and not with the old-guard Tejanos—or as one editor referred to them, the “white Mexicans”—who had lived in Texas for generations. The new migrants belonged to a class that included “peons, pelados, picaros, sin verguenzas, [and] putas [sic], . . . in short, the whole tribe of low flung Mexicans.” Another observer minced no words in pointing out those Hispanos guilty of robbery and meddling. It was the migrant laborers, he said, the “lower class of ‘Peon’ Mexicans . . . [who] have no fixed domicile . . . [and] hang around the plantation, taking the likeliest negro girls for wives . . . and endeavor to run them to Mexico.”<sup>27</sup> As a result of peon migration into the state, a racial argument against migrant Mexican laborers stood in for what was in reality a difference of class and national origin amongst Hispanos.<sup>28</sup>

But even old-guard Tejanos suffered collateral damage from the vulgar racialization of Mexican peons. It is doubtful that the new Anglo migrants could make the distinction between Tejanos and peons, and as Raúl A. Ramos shows, Tejanos were losing influence by the 1850s in the face of a massive Anglo influx into Texas. As a result, expulsions affected peon and elite alike. In 1851 a particularly ragged lot of Hispanos arrived in Laredo at the terminus of one of the routes toward Mexico from San Antonio. The refugees declared that vigilantes had recently assassinated many Hispanos from Bexar County, and they had robbed even more. The commander at Laredo noted that the refugees had left in such a hurry that they took neither their property nor the fruits of their harvest.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the key development in the racialization of Hispanos during this time hinged on the failure of itinerant laborers to adopt the racial norms of their Anglo neighbors and discriminate against African Americans. The declining relationship between peons and Anglo Texans affected all Hispanos. Frederick Law Olmsted, who traveled through Texas as a correspondent for the *New York Herald* in the early 1850s, noticed the tremendous strife between Anglos and Hispanos caused by peons who associated with African Americans. Mexicans “consort freely with the negroes,” he wrote, “making no distinction from pride of race. A few of old Spanish blood, have purchased negro servants, but most of them regard slavery with abhorrence.” Laboring Mexicans

<sup>26</sup> “Negro Insurrection,” *Texas State Times* (Austin), 27 September 1856 and “More Negro Stealing,” *La Grange Texas Monument*, 6 February 1854.

<sup>27</sup> M. M. Kinney, letter to the editor, 6 January 1858 and “Labor,” 18 May 1858, both *Southern Intelligencer* (Austin); “Runaways to Mexico,” *Texas State Gazette*, 30 September 1854; and *Gonzales Inquirer*, 17 September 1853.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the similar racialization of national differences, see Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans*, 6–9.

<sup>29</sup> Raúl A. Ramos, *Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Ethnicity in San Antonio, 1821–1861* (Chapel Hill, 2008), 92, 202–4 and Comandante Subalterno de Nuevo Laredo to gefe [sic] político del distrito del norte de Tamaulipas, 25 September 1851, 28, FLE.

upset tremendously the bedrock of slavery and the foundation of slaveholder power in West Texas: the repression of African Americans. In exchange for this perceived racial treachery, Hispanos became “greasers” in the minds of Texans—especially the many new Anglo migrants who knew nothing of Mexico or Mexicans.<sup>30</sup>

Reports of Mexican “treachery” were not simply white hysteria. In fall 1854, a large number of peons began to arrive in Austin—and almost immediately the racial situation deteriorated as they befriended the black population.<sup>31</sup> According to one report, many Mexican laborers employed in Austin camped in the suburbs of the city, where they met with the local slaves in the evening and formed personal and recreational connections. A traveler between Bastrop and Austin in 1854 remarked that he had “discovered at a late hour of night, at a Mexican camp . . . a large number of Peons, Mexican women and slaves. The Peons and slaves were playing at *monte*, smoking cigars and drinking liquor. He noticed one slave with his arms around a señora and another señora lay her shawl over a slave while he was reclining on the ground.” He added that “[i]t is not surprising that our citizens should feel disposed to rid themselves of this low and dangerous class of Mexican Peones [*sic*], when scenes like these are transpiring around us.” Soon afterward, Texans ejected peons from the county.<sup>32</sup>

But they returned a year later, supposedly meeting with African Americans in the outskirts of Austin, striking deals, playing cards together, and gambling. As a result, citizens again voted to expel all “transient Mexicans” from the city in order to “relieve the community from the pernicious and growing influence of the Mexican peon population now in our midst.” At this point the federal government stepped in, sensing the dissatisfaction of Texans and the insecurity of the new border.<sup>33</sup> Nothing came of these efforts, however, as the central Mexican government refused to kowtow to the demands of slaveholders and their representatives in Washington, DC.

In sum, after the resolution of the U.S.-Mexican War, Texans concluded that they no longer needed to defend the rights of runaway peons. With the influx of migrants from all over the South, slavery had simply become too essential to the state’s economy and culture. By continuing to rely primarily on slave labor, Texans entertained many options to deport Mexicans and stave off further migrations. Mexican laborers would be subject to the same racial othering that Africans had endured—stripped of citizenship and whiteness and shipped back to the dire situation from which they had come. By the mid-1850s, Mexican amos who demanded the return of their peons had found an ally in the planters of South Central Texas, who believed that the free-floating

<sup>30</sup> “Runaway Slaves,” *Texas State Gazette*, 30 September 1854 and Olmsted, *Journey*, 163.

<sup>31</sup> Paul D. Lack, “Slavery and Vigilantism in Austin, Texas, 1840–1860,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 85 (July 1981): 1–20.

<sup>32</sup> “The Peons,” *Texas State Gazette*, 14 October 1854. For more on the growing Texas animosity toward the peons in their midst, see *Texas State Gazette*, 21 and 28 October 1854.

<sup>33</sup> “Mexicans Aiding Negroes,” 7 October 1855; “The Meeting of Last Saturday,” 14 October 1855; and “The Meeting of Last Saturday,” 21 October 1855, all *Texas State Times*; Olmsted, *Journey*, 163; and Gadsden de la Rosa, SRE.

population of Mexican laborers added to the “insecurity of slave property” in and beyond Bexar County.<sup>34</sup>

On the opposite side of the border, Mexicans began to weary of the African Americans in their midst, whose numbers seem to have increased dramatically after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. First off, their presence on the northern Mexican frontier clearly affected area security. Texans who violated Mexican territory in search of runaway slaves frequently threatened to turn a cold war over ideas about labor and race into a hot shooting war.<sup>35</sup> To the growing impatience of Texas slaveholders, Mexican officials usually followed the letter of law—protecting free African Americans on Mexican soil—but Texans increasingly took matters into their own hands.

The security that African Americans found in Mexico and the pride they evinced in their new freedom probably most aggrieved Texas slaveholders. In Monterrey, an Anglo traveler ran across a runaway known simply as Dan, who chose to use his Mexican father-in-law’s name once he married. He became Don Dioniso de Echavarría and claimed that his old name was only fit for a “plantation nigger.” Indeed, he even went so far as to complain about “lazy Mexicans,” which was certainly a sign that he had adopted some of the more elitist customs of his host country. Frederick Law Olmsted, meanwhile, visited Piedras Negras, across the river from Eagle Pass, and claimed that runaway slaves were “constantly arriving” there. Olmsted was particularly taken aback when one man he met looked at him and “grinned impudently—expressing plainly enough—‘I am not afraid of you.’”<sup>36</sup>

The situation was positively explosive, and confrontations involving runaway slaves, Texas bounty hunters, and Mexican officials increased along the newly instituted border after 1848. In 1850, for instance, three runaway slaves crossed the Rio Grande/Bravo to Mexico. They sought refuge (*amparo*) from the alcalde of Nuevo Laredo. The alcalde granted them the protection they requested but soon after, several “North Americans” appeared before him to claim that the slaves were their property. The alcalde cited Mexican law and refused to turn over the men. He could not stop the Texans from crossing over, “scorning Mexican laws,” and kidnapping one of the runaway slaves.<sup>37</sup>

Runaway slaves continued to test the resolve of Mexican officials to support the international boundary as a line of liberty. Accordingly, most towns along the border suffered at least one attack from a slave hunter in pursuit of a runaway. In August 1850, the former master of an African American woman named Matilda Haynes (or Hanna) attempted to kidnap her and a child—likely her own—in Matamoros. The

<sup>34</sup> Petition to Maverick and members of the Bexar delegation, TSA.

<sup>35</sup> Langberg to committee from San Antonio, 30 August 1855, caja 115, fondo Militares, AGENL (hereafter Militares).

<sup>36</sup> Montgomery, *Eagle Pass*, 139–40 and Olmsted, *Journey*, 323–4.

<sup>37</sup> Alcalde of Laredo to governor of Tamaulipas, 17 January 1850 and governor of Tamaulipas to alcalde of Laredo, 2 March 1850, both FLE.

police responded to her call and arrested a man named Richard Cheney, who languished in a Matamoros calaboose for at least a month after the attack. A similar episode occurred about a year later in Mier, where a free African American named Melchor Valenzuela lost his freedom to a Texan named Captain Jack and his accomplice. The attackers overwhelmed the man as he performed on the fiddle at a fandango thrown by his employer, Bernardo Baker, turning him into chattel and tearing him away from his friends and his Mexican wife for a debt his employer owed in Texas.<sup>38</sup>

The *jefe político* (political leader) of Mier had the final word on the Valenzuela kidnapping. These Texan “pirates” had not only abducted an African American but “violate[d] Mexican territory” and cast indignity upon her “national honor.” Mexicans viewed slave hunts into their territory as a grave insult to their incipient national pride. As a result, Texans’ raids across the border sometimes degenerated into shootouts. Such was the case near Guerrero in 1851. A bounty hunter captured an African American who howled mightily, protesting that he would “rather be dead than captured in this way.” Shortly thereafter, a small force made up of three *vecinos* (neighbors, or citizens of a town) and an officer caught up to them. They freed the black man and shot the slave hunter when he refused to surrender his weapon, felling him from his horse and killing him.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of such “victories,” bounty hunters searching for runaway slaves in Mexico greatly undermined the security that *norteños* sought.

The threat represented by slave hunters soured some *norteños* to the presence of fugitives in their territory, but troubles emerged in other ways too. Short of resources, African Americans in the North sometimes worked on ranches and occasionally even entered into sharecropping agreements with Mexican *rancheros* and *hacendados*. But their involvement in cattle theft was most well known. Some worked with the notorious black rustler known as Francisco, others alongside Mestizo rustlers. Mexican authorities captured one man in 1852 associated with the Mexican rustler Santiago Perales, out of Morelos, and sent him to stand before a *juzgado* (tribunal).<sup>40</sup>

After liberals captured power in the Mexican North during the mid-1850s, they sought to ease the tensions with Texas resulting from the wars waged by their conservative predecessors. Santiago Vidaurri represented a key figure in the transition

<sup>38</sup> Investigation of the *alcalde* of Matamoros, August 1850, 1–3, caja 3, expediente 13, fondo Comisión Pesquisidora del Norte, SRE (hereafter CPN); Leonardo Espinosa to [Pedro de la Garza?], 14 September 1850, caja 35-A, expediente 911, Justicia, Archivo Historico de Matamoros, Tamaulipas; and investigation of the *alcalde* of Mier, 7 July 1851, 8–10, caja 3, expediente 13, CPN.

<sup>39</sup> Investigation of the *alcalde* of Mier, CPN and testimonies of Benjamin Thomas, Jesús Rodríguez, Vicente Garza, and Pedro Guerrero, all 18 March 1851, caja 3, F8 E8, fondo Siglo XIX, Archivo General del Estado de Coahuila, Saltillo (AGEC) (hereafter Siglo XIX).

<sup>40</sup> Pablo Espinosa to the *alcalde* of Guerrero, 18 April 1859, caja 2, F10 E2 and Espinosa, to the *alcalde* of Guerrero, 27 May 1859, caja 3, F4 E7, both Siglo XIX and José Antonio Arredondo to Antonio Juárezgui, 13 June 1852, ficha 1808, caja 17, F6 E52, fondo Colonias Militares Orientes, AGECE.

from conservatism to liberalism in the North. His *ejército de la restauración de libertad* (army of the restoration of liberty) assumed control of Nuevo León in 1855 and annexed the neighboring state of Coahuila the following year.<sup>41</sup>

Sensing this change in the Mexican political scene, a committee of citizens from San Antonio once again sought a resolution. Feeling a certain bonhomie with the new regime, they wrote to Colonel Langberg, who had recently visited the city and immensely charmed its upper class with some tunes on a violin, requesting an extradition treaty. The citizens complained to Langberg about the problem of runaways from West Texas and Bexar County. They agreed to cover any debts that slaves may have incurred in Mexico if Langberg would simply collect all the African Americans he could gather from the frontier and hand them over to a specially appointed posse who would wait for him on the Texas side of the Rio Grande/Bravo. They even offered to round up all of the peons who had taken up residency in San Antonio in exchange. This offer must have come as quite a temptation to Vidaurri, cash-strapped as ever in his military effort to expand his power into the state of San Luís de Potosí. But the committee threatened to use force if their terms were not met, and this did not sit well with the new caudillo.<sup>42</sup>

The citizens of San Antonio had every reason to believe that they at last had an ally in the new liberal government of Nuevo León. After all, Langberg told the committee:

[E]ver since I took command of this frontier, it has been one of my primary objects to end . . . this guerra sorda that both frontiers are engaged in against each other . . . never a day goes by that a vecino doesn't complain that he has lost a peon who fled after stealing his animals or an American doesn't contact me in pursuit of their negroes . . . In all of the populations of this frontier, I have found that, for the most part, no one will permit a negro to stay . . . far from being useful they are troublesome, and if the state of Texas consents to turning over Mexico's peons, the Mexicans will present themselves voluntarily on the other side with their negroes and other criminals, since I repeat, this frontier is already tired of the abuses that they daily commit on both side of the border.<sup>43</sup>

Langberg reiterated his low opinion of the African Americans in Mexico to Vidaurri, saying that the vast majority of them caused terrible damages on the frontier and that they had fled from Texas only after committing crimes against their masters. Further, he opined that an illegal entry by the Texans would gravely offend the vecinos and

<sup>41</sup> In 1856 Vidaurri combined the states of Coahuila and Nuevo León into the new state of Nuevo León y Coahuila. María Elena Santoscoy et al., *Breve Historia de Coahuila* (Mexico City, 2000), 216–7 and Israel Cavazos Garza, *Breve Historia de Nuevo León* (Mexico City, 1994), 148–9.

<sup>42</sup> *El Siglo XIX* (Mexico City), 12 November 1855; Langberg to Vidaurri, 1 September 1855, Langberg Correspondence; and *Texas State Times*, 1 September 1855.

<sup>43</sup> Langberg to committee from San Antonio, 30 August 1855, caja 115, Militares.

that “[i]t would be very sad to expose the entire frontier to an invasion to defend these men [runaway slaves], especially when we consider that our interests are the same in this arrangement.” Concluding his letter, Langberg alerted his boss that the invading force had already begun to gather.<sup>44</sup>

Vidaurri would not concede to an arrangement, however, and on 1 October 1855, a group of disbanded Rangers, likely swollen by additional volunteers, crossed over with the stated objective of chasing down a band of Lipan Apaches. Their implicit purpose was to pursue African Americans, fulfilling a promise of bounties for captured runaways.<sup>45</sup> Vidaurri estimated that the large force, led by James H. Callahan and William Henry, comprised around three hundred men, although he later revised that number to something closer to two hundred. (Texas sources, meanwhile, put the number at around one hundred.) The invaders successfully forded the swollen river, but an even larger number of Mexican volunteers and military colonists, complemented by a handful of Seminoles, Kickapoos, Mascogos, and Lipans, roundly rebuffed them.<sup>46</sup> Forced to retreat, Callahan’s forces evacuated across the river—but not before burning the town of Piedras Negras to the ground.<sup>47</sup> Included among those who lost all their property in the fire was Pedro Tauns, an African American who scraped by playing the violin at fandangos held by officers on either side of the river. He would have to wait almost twenty years before the U.S. government redressed grievances resulting from the fire. Meanwhile, the vecinos of Piedras Negras returned to their charred town from the nearby cliffs. Taking stock of their lives, they elected to rebuild the town a little ways downriver.<sup>48</sup>

Given the aggressive—even imperialistic—actions undertaken by Texan filibusterers in search of runaway slaves, it is not altogether surprising that Vidaurri continued the policy of his conservative predecessors. A slippery figure, Vidaurri’s loyalties

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Evidence for the implicit promise of slave bounties comes from a letter written by Callahan to Ed Burleson, 31 August 1855, box 2B158, Burleson Papers, 1854–1861, BCAH.

<sup>46</sup> For the estimation of Texas raiders closer to 200, see Vidaurri to William Marcy, 18 October 1855, *Siglo Diez y Nueve*, 12 November 1855. The number mustered into service under Callahan in July amounted to only 98. E. M. Pease to James H. Callahan, 5 July 1855, Correspondence Concerning the Texas Rangers, 1851–1856, vol. 2, Walter Prescott Webb Collection, BCAH (hereafter Rangers). The number of Mexicans and their allies involved in the fight was likely larger, ranging from 200 to 350, by some estimates. “Col. Langberg and his Letters,” *Texas States Times*, 1 December 1855.

<sup>47</sup> Ernest C. Shearer, “The Callahan Expedition, 1855,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 54 (April 1951): 430–51; Ronnie C. Tyler, “The Callahan Expedition of 1855: Indians or Negroes?,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 70 (April 1967): 574–85; and Pease to Callahan, 5 July 1855, Rangers.

<sup>48</sup> Alcalde of Mier to Vidaurri, 30 October 1855 and Felipe Sepulveda to Vidaurri, 19 October 1855, both caja 117, Militares; *Texas State Times*, 1 December 1855; J. Hubley Ashton, *Piedras Negras Claims in the American and Mexican Joint Commission. Pedro Tauns* (No. 679). . . ., 5–10; and Francisco Javier Rodríguez Gutiérrez, “Algunos documentales para la historia de la fundación de Piedras Negras, 1848–1855,” (conference paper, Saltillo, 2009), 14–15.

were most often situational. He was often ambivalent in his dealings with the Texans and sometimes led them to believe that he would cooperate with their aims. But he knew better than to suck up to them. Unlike Langberg—a later investigation found him guilty of “anti-national” behavior (he had helpfully drawn a map for the raiders) and removed him from his post—Vidaurri knew that nothing united vecinos like an invasion from Texas.<sup>49</sup>

Vidaurri took advantage of Callahan’s raid to denounce the aggressiveness of the Texans. He congratulated the vecinos and colonists for securing the border and defeating the filibusterers. Despite their lack of resources, and despite the tragedy that had befallen the hapless inhabitants of Piedras Negras, the Mexican forces had fulfilled their duties. Their “patriotism and valor” had prevailed and the frontier caudillo broadly praised the comportment of his subordinates, who had acted bravely “[u]nder the honorable name of México.” The Texans only partially intended the raid as a slave hunt, but Vidaurri said that it was because Mexico “professed the principal of liberty of the slaves and the abolition of slavery ever since it became independent” that filibusterers had scorned its laws.<sup>50</sup> In an ironic twist of fate, the causes of anti-imperialism and liberty for African Americans became joined. Blacks may have been troublesome, but protecting them offered an opportunity for Vidaurri, his minions, and the vecinos of the frontier to prove their patriotism by rebuffing raiders. They would have other occasions to protect their “national honor” from the “arrogance” of Texans in the years to come. African Americans continued streaming into Mexico into the late 1850s and 1860s, sometimes bringing raiders in their wake.<sup>51</sup>

The intransigence of mobile peoples ensured that the deluge of servile laborers to each side of the border continued unabated. Autonomous mobile laborers played both sides against one another to ensure the existence of a route to freedom across the borderlands. But by the end of the 1850s, things had begun to change. Santiago Vidaurri turned the efforts of Texans to expand the rights of slaveholders in Mexico into a contest that tied norteños ever more closely to his own growing power base. He inherited the causes of anti-imperialism, volunteerism in defense of the homeland, and—ironically enough—liberty for African Americans from his centralist and conservative predecessors. But as the Civil War loomed on the U.S. horizon, Vidaurri began to acquiesce to the complaints of officials who claimed that African Americans wanted a country where their “liberty was absolute.”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> William R. Henry to Vidaurri, 12 August 1856 and Vidaurri to Henry, 8 September 1856, both Vidaurri Correspondence, BCAH; *Texas State Times*, 1 December 1855; and Emilio Langberg, letter to the editor, *El Bejareño* (San Antonio), 19 October 1855, caja 117; testimony of Manuel Menchaca, 17 May 1856, 2, caja 122; and testimony of Florencio Rodriguez, 4 June 1856, 11–2, caja 122, all Militares.

<sup>50</sup> Vidaurri to Ignacio Galindo, 6 October 1855 and Vidaurri to secretary of the governor, 8 October 1855, both 11–2, expediente 5, cuaderno 10, caja 3, sobre la invasion de Piedras Negras, CPN and *El Siglo XIX*, 12 November 1855.

<sup>51</sup> For more on an 1859 slave hunt near Resurrección, see *San Antonio Herald*, 25 February 1859.

<sup>52</sup> Miguel Blanco to Gregorio Galinda, 7 February 1859, 147, FLE.

With Santa Anna and the conservatives out of power, Vidaurri sought peace with his northern neighbors. Despite his “very simple observation . . . [that] it is not prudent or rational that eight million people should be enslaved,” Vidaurri had simply run out of money to pay for his continuing campaign to annex Tamaulipas to his fiefdom of Nuevo León y Coahuila, and in 1858 he acceded to the overtures of Texan slaveholders to return their runaway slaves.<sup>53</sup> Texas newspapers ran this offer, encouraging individuals to approach the caudillo.<sup>54</sup>

During the Civil War, officials in Matamoros who were anxious to receive Confederate cotton likewise signed a treaty to return runaways. Hence, by the late 1850s, the border no longer separated a virulently antislavery country from a country with slaves—and African Americans paid the price. In Texas they found diminished opportunities for freedom; those who lived around the maroon colony at Nacimiento de los Negros, Coahuila, were moved further inland to stave off attacks by bounty hunters. African Americans continued crossing the border into Mexico in search of freedom up until 1865, but the moment of their greatest mobility had passed with emancipation. (In ensuing decades, Mexico would again attract African Americans hoping to escape from Jim Crow.)<sup>55</sup> But it was not the institution of the border that discouraged their movement. Rather, it was increasing cooperation by authorities on both sides.

Migrant Hispano laborers also continued moving into Texas in the years following the tumultuous war decade, rarely hampered by repressive measures on the Texas side. In 1873 the Mexican-U.S. Boundary Commission found that 2,812 servants had fled from Nuevo León and Coahuila since 1848, often with their families (the women and children comprised an additional loss of 2,582 persons). The commissioners calculated that runaway peons caused the loss of 250,000 pesos and 125,000 pesos to Nuevo León and Coahuila, respectively, in debts and stolen animals. Further, this great drain of capital was entirely to Texas’s gain. Mexico would never recover these resources or workers, and the new Anglo ranches of the Nueces River Valley swelled with growing armies of Mexican laborers. Even though migrant Mexicans were increasingly racialized and subject to terror in Texas, they still found opportunities there that they did not have in Mexico. As the nineteenth century wore on, they emerged as the preferred servile nonwhite laborers in the state.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Vidaurri to Galindo, 7 November 1858, 5080–2, fondo Vidaurri, Correspondencia, Ignacio Galindo-Santiago Vidaurri, AGENL. I would like to thank Luís Garcia for bringing this document to my attention.

<sup>54</sup> *Matagorda (TX) Gazette*, 25 December 1858.

<sup>55</sup> Kevin Mulroy, *Freedom on the Border: The Seminole Maroons in Florida, the Indian Territory, Coahuila, and Texas* (Lubbock, 1993), 8 and Tyler, “Fugitive Slaves,” 11. For more on African Americans in Mexico after emancipation, see Karl Jacoby, “Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony of 1895,” in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, ed. Samuel Truett and Elliott Young (Durham, 2004) and J. Fred Rippy, “A Negro Colonization Project in Mexico, 1895,” *Journal of Negro History* 6 (January 1921): 66–73.

<sup>56</sup> *Reports of the Committee of Investigation Sent in 1873 by the Mexican Government to the Frontier of Texas*. . . . (New York, 1875), 402–3 and testimony of Agustín Dias, 3 July 1873, 183,

Over time both Mexicans and Texans adapted as well as they could to what was now an inalterable reality: the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the new border set up resilient new migratory patterns. The United States benefited the most from this phenomenon, and the Texas economy boomed in the late nineteenth century thanks in no small part to the tremendous influx of labor from Mexico and the refusal of authorities in Texas to return runaway debtors.<sup>57</sup> The opportunities in Texas both liberalized working conditions in the Mexican North—leading to the most favorable conditions in the country—and ushered in one of the largest sustained migrations of laborers between bordered countries that the world has ever seen.

Mexicans and Texans in the 1850s tried to blame each other for inciting laborers to abandon them, but slaves and peons simply recognized that greater liberty lay on the other side. They caused this war of abstraction over labor—not Mexican officials who protected runaways, not free (white) labor ideologues in the United States, and not outside observers who wrote scathing diatribes about slavery and peonage. When boundaries ossify spatial divides, they sometimes reveal essential ideological distinctions between one place and another. As a result, borders can provide clear alternatives to mobile peoples. Sometimes they give opportunities to the oppressed. Accordingly, bordered lands do not always represent the closing of frontiers; sometimes they represent the opposite.



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legajo 63, expediente 35, FLE.

<sup>57</sup> M. Morales to the Ignacio Mariscal, 28 November 1869 and E. Morse to the Mariscal, 9 January 1870, both legajo 20, expediente 1, AEMEUA.