

## Comment on the Papers by Patrick Barker and Eugenia Zuroski

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It would take someone much cleverer than I to subsume these two papers under a common approach—so different are they in method, intent, subject-matter, and even tone. Indeed, doing so would be fool-hearty and downright disingenuous—so, as I’m neither clever nor, I hope, a fool, I won’t try. What we do have is two extremely compelling offerings, taking us, in very different ways, and, in a sense, from opposite ends of the historically relevant time-span, into the vexed subject of coloniality and racial dominance and its various afterlives.

Patrick Barker’s paper, “Maritime Marronage and Spanish Trinidad,” introduces us to a particular Caribbean context where slaves held in British territories found refuge and even a kind of freedom—or at least freedom from slavery—in the Spanish island of Trinidad. In the 1770s and 80s, we see several rather spectacular episodes where slaves, well-apprieved of the fact that the Spanish would provide them with “asylum,” organized themselves in well-coordinated brigades, commandeered weapons and boats, and then made their way across the waters to Trinidad, where a regime of slavery did not prevail.

Several factors seem to explain why Trinidad played this role *vis a vis* the British, slave-holding colonies. First, it was an outlier in the Caribbean basin in not being defined by a plantation economy; it neither generated enough wealth to play a role in the Atlantic slave market; nor did its rather small-scale production require slave labor. A mention is made of indigenous natives performing labor under the Capuchins. Indeed, it would be interesting to learn more about the relationship of these two features—the lack of wealth and the nature of the economy—which probably interacted in a circular fashion. Second, it seems that the Spanish crown, both under Carlos III and IV, insisted that the island should offer “freedom and royal protection” to fugitive slaves, an insistence codified in decrees all the way until 1790. Clearly, this was not a matter of beneficence or a policy of anti-slavery. Then why? Patrick doesn’t elaborate, but several factors come to mind. One is simply the geopolitical context between the Spanish and British empire. To ignore or thwart the overtures of your enemies—here the insistent demands that the Trinidadian Spanish government return the former slaves, especially as they had in their escape killed settlers—was simply part of the game. But mention is also made of these fugitives being converted and baptized—a significant “win” for this still very religiously infused Empire, and in the midst of inter-Imperial competition where the conflict was only sharpened with the confessional divide. Finally, while the fugitives were offered asylum of sorts, they were not “free”—clearly, labor was demanded on them. Indeed, they were considered not simply subjects of the crown, but vassals, laborers bound to sustain themselves through their labor, which presumably, served their Spanish overlords as well. (The paper also notes that fugitives were assessed a fee, a payment, or they would be returned—but the importance, or enforcement of this, would be of interest.) So, there were multiple factors in play to explain Trinidad’s anomalous role in the Caribbean—perhaps sorting these explanations out is something Patrick would like to consider.

He writes that he is motivated in his research to reconstruct the “everyday struggles of enslaved people.” And one feature of their lives which clearly stands out here is the way information circulated among them. The status of Trinidad as a refuge is something they knew about; moreover, they were aware of previous episodes of successful escape, providing an exemplary template for their present and future endeavors. Clearly, information circulated not

only within a single plantation—which is easy to imagine—but from plantation to plantation. And clearly it wasn't just a matter of receiving information but of disseminating plans and procedures for the complicated logistics of a successful uprising and escape. Walter Johnson and others have documented how slaves managed to establish lines of communication and exchange, sometimes over impressive distances. Sources are obviously a problem, but it would be terrific if Patrick could gain some insight into the nature of these lines among the enslaved in these British slave-holding territories.

But Trinidad's role as a place of refuge ends in 1790, and the paper ends with this statement, "Trinidad, if it ever had been, was no longer a safe retreat." A sad ending to a remarkable chapter in the history of slavery, but one, alas, that provokes this reader to ask: Why?

I hope I am not misunderstand if I say that I read Eugenia's contribution, "Relational Autonomy: Two Row Pedagogy and Anticolonial Grammars of Relation," not so much as a paper as a manifesto—a provocation, a challenge. Certainly it challenges me, as I think about how I teach, indeed, how I think of myself as a teacher in this public institution, in this time of late-modernity—and so much else.

There are several words and phrases—suggesting more than concepts but modes of being and relating—that jump out at us from the pages of her text: "alongsideness," "Being in good relation," "What do you know from?," "shoulder to shoulder," "belongingness/belongingnesses," "thinking in place," "made and unmade," "disruptive autonomy," "solidarity without a We," "unsettling of differences," "protocol" (as opposed to "policy"), and more.

Inspired, clearly, by her own experience with native American communities—both where she lives and the students in her classroom—Eugenia wants us to strive to create "anticolonial classrooms, as a space where learning is made possible by the unsettling of differences." The anticolonial space is not, she makes clear, defined by a process of inclusion for, as she cogently and eloquently argues, inclusion always entails modes of exclusion and closure, of giving something up in order to gain admission. It is "never as simple as opening the door, but generates conditions about what people are expected to leave behind, put on, or put away in the act of crossing the threshold," she writes. Rather, she asks for—using as a model the "Two Row Wampum Covenant Chain Treaty"—which evokes the image of parallel paths of ship and canoe—a classroom experience that fosters the felicitous relationships and interactions among students and teachers alike meeting on an equal footing, where their differences are both acknowledged and respected, allowing for those differences to flourish, never one giving way to the other. In referring to the mostly neglected and violated treaties between colonists and natives peoples, she notes that "inclusion was never part of the deal," for when it was enforced it was indeed through force, with forced assimilation the means and cultural annihilation the goal. What Eugenia holds up as the preferred path is, again the native model. As she writes,

The Two Row very clearly articulates that there is no crossing of cultural or governmental thresholds as a condition of this formal relationship—that the closeness of the bond that allows the ship and the canoe to move together, to move *with* one another, into a shared future depends instead on the maintenance of both material and conceptual space between these bodies. This space is not a void, and it is not, as the colonial imagination tends to understand space, a frontier of untapped potential. It is a structural component of a very particular kind of relation between cultural others, a buffer that makes peace, friendship, and respect possible across otherness.

This is a remarkable and indeed wonderful way to think of—let us be clear—rather ideal modes of relationship between very different—shall we say, autonomous—bodies. It is an ideal, but one, alas, hard to imagine given the awful and damaging course of history that has already transpired.

Interestingly—and least to me—what comes to mind when I think analogously about this kind of relationship is a historical and political reality that is far from ideal, and, I pretty sure in saying this, far from what Eugenia would prefer politically. That is, the configuration of what is sometimes called a “community” of nation-states. For what defines the relationship—the relatedness—of nation-states under some presumed rule of international law? Differences, acknowledged and affirmed by different languages, customs, history, etc. Distance, reified by boundaries and borders. And respect—or at least reciprocity—conveyed by formal, mutual recognition of national sovereignty. To be sure, this same configuration and concentration of sovereign power in nation-states has often led to war, but so have historically other political arrangements. Moreover, as we have been discussing rights, it is incontrovertible—although obviously unfair to many—that the nation-state has been the main guarantor of rights for those privileged to be its citizens.

Have I demeaned Eugenia’s “alongsideness” by suggesting this rather unsavory analogy? Perhaps, but let me then go farther down this path. Many of us—or let us say, those with a cosmopolitan orientation—likely have rejected the constraining limits of the nation-state (apart from other reasons for our abhorrence). Just as many of us—again, whatever particular emotional pushes and pulls might still prevail—have been happy to escape the centripetal force field of collectivities—say, patriarchal families, provincial communities, or religion, in order to strike out on our own—to find our own way in life. That is, to strive for personal autonomy—usually, of course, as we was noted yesterday—by finding other social contexts of belonging and recognition. How does Eugenia’s “alongsideness”—and the prescribed space between autonomous bodies—that is, I hasten to emphasize, collectivities—function as a model when those collectivities stifle, or at least inhibit, one’s quest for freedom, individuality, self-determination, control over one’s body—that is, those rights that people have struggled to attain across the centuries, and need to defend still. And, turning to the classroom itself, what does one do with students who, coming to a public institution such as this, clearly see their arrival as an act of liberation, a means of escaping, in some cases, the constraining identities and affiliations which have governed them heretofore. I would be loath to consider these students in terms of whatever collective identities appear to mark them. I strive to respect whatever mode of self-presentation and identification they prefer—but that is based on the individual’s decision, not a collectivity’s given.

So I guess my qualm with Eugenia’s heartfelt manifesto has to do with its implications beyond the context that informs it.