

## Mapping Caribbean Intellectual History: The Conspiracies of Juan Bautista Picornell

The call for a globalization of intellectual history and a pluralization of its sources is by now familiar. But while intellectual history as a discipline no longer confines itself to the study of Europe, the recent revisionism does not in itself amount to a decolonialization of the way intellectual history is practiced nor does it necessarily aim to do so. In his recent *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (2013) David Armitage, for instance, makes a compelling argument that inverts the flows of influence in the revolutionary age as they are conventionally conceived by shifting the focus from political theory, constitutions, and rights declarations – traditionally seen as of European provenance – to declarations of independence. Declarations of independence were the quintessential expression of revolutionary politics, he argues, and they were born in the Americas. He thus places the “conjuring of states out of colonies” (215) – a process that began 1776 with the Declaration of Independence of the British colonies and continued with the antislavery revolution in Saint Domingue and the independence movements in the Iberian colonies – at the center of the com-motions that came to define political modernity in the Atlantic.

This mapping of intellectual history does not work terribly well for the Caribbean, where the issue of governance was inseparable from that of black slavery.<sup>1</sup> In a region where European colonization had become practically synonymous with an economy based on slave labor, racial hierarchies were deeply entrenched and a significant percentage of the population were free people of color. It follows that insurgencies were often related to the struggle against the institution of slavery and the racial hierarchies that subtended it. In the late

1 Historians of the Iberian Atlantic have long argued against assigning exemplary status to the American Revolution for the Spanish American Independence movements and have, in more recent years, pointed to the French invasion of Spain and the abdication of Fernando VII in 1808 as the central events (e.g. Guerra 1992). I cannot here discuss this extensive historiography. However, it should be noted that this Ibero-Atlantic perspective also generates a blind spot as it tends to ignore the plurality of liberationist movements in the Caribbean prior to 1808 and the centrality of the issue of racial equality and slavery.

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we find a bewildering array of political projects circulating throughout the Caribbean. The best-known example of Caribbean heterodox politics, which cannot easily be subsumed under the label of independence movements, is probably Toussaint Louverture's anti-slavery project, which culminated in the 1801 colonial constitution for Saint Domingue. It declared Saint Domingue "free and French" and included as its first article of substance a ban on slavery, which in turn presented a profound revision of Article One of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in France (Fischer 2016). But there are other cases, too, in which it is questionable that the underlying visions are best understood in terms of aspirations to national sovereignty. We might think of the little-known conspiracies of Fermín Núñez, a Venezuela-born criollo who appears to have conspired against Spanish rule in Spanish Santo Domingo in 1816 and 1817, possibly in an effort to gain independence from Spain under Haitian republican protection; or, to cite a better-known example, the Coro rebellion in Venezuela in 1795, which called for the abolition of slavery and racial equality and was violently suppressed by the colonial government. In both cases, it seems that the issue of local autonomy was seen as only instrumentally related to the more central goal of racial equality. What I propose then is that we take seriously the plurality of political projects in the Caribbean and their deep connections to the issue of race. All too frequently, insurrectional movements prior to 1808 or 1810 have been dismissed as merely reformist, purely local, tied to Ancien Régime politics, or otherwise limited in their liberationist aspirations. This view entails an implicit ranking of political goals, which does not become less problematic on account of not being explicitly justified. Clearly, national independence was not always seen as the only alternative to Bourbon colonialism and the social hierarchies it entailed. To pretend otherwise means erasing from our intellectual landscape a variety of subaltern or otherwise contested projects, most particularly those relating to issues of race.<sup>2</sup>

The case of the twin conspiracies in Madrid 1795 and in La Guaira 1797 which are the topic of this essay are particularly interesting in this context. At their center stands the figure of Juan Bautista Picornell, a university-educated Spaniard from Mallorca, who in 1795 led a conspiracy (usually called the San Blas conspiracy, as it was discovered on Saint Blas day) against the Bourbon King Carlos IV and his Prime Minister Manuel Godoy. A mere two years later, Picornell was found to have been at the heart of a conspiracy in La Guaira, a harbor town near Caracas, where he had been imprisoned after the discovery of the Madrid plot. In the literature, the conspiracy in La Guaira is often referred

2 For a trenchant critique of the erasure of the contributions of people of color to the independence process in Spanish America, see Lasso 2007: 1–13.

to as the *Gual y España* conspiracy, after their criollo leaders, Manuel Gual and José María España; it is traditionally assimilated to the independence movements that began with Venezuela's first declaration of independence in 1811. The literature on the San Blas conspiracy is limited and usually considers the events as part of the social upheavals and court conspiracies in Bourbon Spain. Most historians have viewed the two events as separate, linked only by the figure of Juan Bautista Picornell. The possibility that the two conspiracies may have been related has been considered only by those who attribute an overarching Jacobine agenda to both. As I will show in the following, however, some of the more enigmatic aspects of the conspiracies and the political discourses that were put into circulation can be explained if we read the two events as part of an evolving story in which the two conspiracies are deeply connected – connected, however, through a variety of local emancipatory and strategic goals, which in no way can be reduced to Jacobinism.

The political and diplomatic map that becomes visible when we read the American files of Juan Bautista Picornell in conjunction with the Spanish files suggests flows of influences and political intentions that do not mirror the borders of empires at the time. But neither is the map simply a preview of the disintegration of the Spanish empire and the establishment of independent nation states in the Americas after 1810. One of the lasting puzzles regarding the 1797 conspiracy in fact concerns governance. Did the leaders embrace secessionist ideas? If not, what were their ideas and models of governance? As I will suggest in the following, the map that emerges from the 1795 and 1797 files imagines an inversion of the power relations between metropolis and colonies and claims political initiative for the colonies. Since neither one of the conspiracies under consideration came close to succeeding, we will never know all the details of the agenda the conspirators were pursuing, nor will we know how much agreement or disagreement there was among the various participants. We should note, however, that with the revolutionary reversal of the direction of influences the political models that were invoked change. In the La Guaira conspiracy, we find occasional references to earlier colonial insurgencies, but we also find a gaze increasingly trained on the French territories in the Caribbean rather than on metropolitan France. For the conspirators in 1797, the first postslavery territories in the Atlantic were not the specter of doom that they represented for the colonial elites in the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup> Yet, at the same time, some conspirators also seem to have thought of the planned uprising as a preventive strike against slave revolts and race war. In the end, the twin conspiracies of 1795 and 1797 show that an intellectual history which prioritizes aspirations for national sovereignty obscures not only the plurality of emancipatory

3 For recent studies that complicate this story, see Ferrer 2014 and Daut 2015.

projects in the revolutionary age but also the creative energy and theoretical depth of projects that prioritized racial equality.

Admittedly, it would be easy to miss these crosscurrents in Atlantic intellectual history. Unlike the sermons and treatises of metropolitan abolitionists, colonial declarations and plots that included a demand for racial equality never reached the international stage. Our knowledge about them comes from the archives of the colonial state, through the records of criminal investigations, the declarations of witnesses, confessions (often extracted under torture), and on rare occasions the clandestine writings of the conspirators. We also need to consider that the state sometimes had a stake in presenting conspiracies in a certain light – obfuscating larger political ramifications, for example, or casting them as Jacobine, thereby associating them with the beheading of the Bourbon King in France and the Terror. Remapping intellectual history thus requires us to work with compromised materials. This should not lead us to disregard them: Not only do these records allow us to develop a better grasp of the range of political options and aspirations at the time; they also promise to give us important examples of how race in fact worked as a political category at the time, thereby shedding new light on the occlusion of this issue in the Spanish American independence movements after 1816.

### **1 Madrid, February 3, 1795**

Juan Bautista Picornell (1759–1825) does not occupy a prominent place in the official chronicles of eighteenth-century Spain.<sup>4</sup> The archival files pertaining to his case are voluminous and involve a confusing array of activities from the 1780s in Madrid until well into the nineteenth century, but official history gives him short shrift. He makes a brief appearance in the works of the Spanish enlightenment philosopher and statesman Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos and the writings of some foreign diplomats established in Madrid during the reign of Carlos III and Carlos IV, but prime minister Godoy does not mention him in his memoirs. In his detailed chronicle of Bourbon rule in Spain, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century historian Andrés Muriel, who himself was eventually forced to leave Spain on account of his collaboration with Joseph Bonaparte's government, readily dismissed Picornell as insignificant. Contemporary observers and Spanish historians alike have thus tended to portray Picornell as an opportunistic conspirator whose talents were no match for his ambitions and whose political goals were as confused as they were unrealistic.

<sup>4</sup> On Picornell and the San Blas conspiracy, see Warren 1942, 1943; López 1955; Zavala 1969, 1973; Aguirrezábal/Comellas 1982 and Michelena 2010.

Students of the *Gual y España* conspiracy in La Guaira have typically held more favorable views (e.g. [Aizpurua Aguirre 2007](#) and [Soriano 2017](#)), especially if they considered the 1797 events as early manifestation of a national liberation movement (e.g. Zavala and Michelena). That view, however, often comes at the cost of disregarding some of the unorthodox aspects of Picornell's writings and activities. His more outlandish claims, such as being an emissary of the Spanish King in Venezuela, as having connections in the upper levels of Spanish government or access to massive funds – all claims amply documented in court testimony – are usually dismissed as baseless fantasies or lies even by sympathetic readers of the files. Here again, Picornell is cast as an opportunistic conspirator with illusions of grandeur and limited understanding of the ways of the world. While these views cannot be dismissed out of hand, it seems to me that such post-hoc character analytics should be the last resort and that the principle of “charitable interpretation” posited by many philosophers of language should not be dropped quite so readily when studying figures in intellectual history whose actions come to us through the criminal archive. As I will show in the following, there are ways in which we can make sense of the political vision behind Picornell's intellectual production without having to take recourse to a Burkian psychology of revolution. This does not mean that Picornell's claims need to be understood as strictly speaking true.

Picornell was educated at the liberal University of Salamanca, where he studied philosophy and theology and developed a lasting interest in education. Still in Salamanca, he published a few short essays and translations from French on issues of general pedagogy as well as questions about how one might instill patriotic sentiments in children in a monarchy. Eventually, he moved to Madrid, where in 1784 he joined the *Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País* and the *Real Sociedad Bascongada*, both enlightened associations founded with the blessing of Carlos III in the mid-eighteenth century in order to promote knowledge about recent advances in industry and the arts. Picornell first came to the attention of the state in 1789 with a petition for a license to open a public school in Madrid, which was apparently declined.

We do not know what precipitated Picornell's transformation from a marginal member of the enlightened circles in Madrid into a conspirator who went into hiding in the popular neighborhood of Lavapiés and began to operate clandestinely under an assumed name. Did he really believe he could overthrow the government with the support of a few impoverished neighbors? And even if he did, what were his aims? When the plot was discovered on February 3, 1795, the prosecutors were in no doubt about its goals. In the words of the *consejero* Francisco Pérez de Lema, the plot hoped to “trastornar y mudar nuestro gobierno a imitacion de Francia.” ([AHN Estado 3161-1: 1](#).)

There are, however, significant mysteries attached to the events. In the months leading up to the discovery of the conspiracy, Picornell had been handing out alms to the indigents in his neighborhood. In the files, we find petitions that suggest that people were sending him somewhat formal applications and that he was able to deliver the cash. Since Picornell was an unemployed teacher without any known source of income, one wonders where this money came from. A couple of years later, in Venezuela, it was reported that he had boasted of having had access to vast amounts of money as well as important allies in the Spanish government. These, of course, may have been inflated or simply false claims aimed to boost his standing among locals and persuade them to join his plot. But the possibility that his activities were supported, however indirectly, by some members of the political elite cannot be excluded. I will return to this point.<sup>5</sup>

There are other questions that remain unresolved. Why would Picornell publish a book about how to bring up monarchist patriots and within a few years try his hand at a Jacobine plot, if it indeed was of such persuasion? Why did the prosecutors drop the investigation into elite support quite so readily? Why would a Spanish subject who barely escaped with his life in an ill-fated plot in Madrid join another conspiracy in Venezuela, a conspiracy, moreover, that embraced issues that seemed unrelated to those behind the Madrid plot? How was it possible that Picornell played a central role in a local conspiracy in La Guaira from his prison cell without some degree of official connivance? And

5 To this day, historians disagree regarding Picornell's political goals and the question of whether he had elite support. Those who see Picornell as embracing a Jacobine credo believe that he acted with covert French (possibly Masonic) support; those who believe that, to the contrary, Picornell wanted to promote modest reforms of the Bourbon monarchy believe that he was supported by the so-called *Partido Aragonés*, which strongly opposed the reforms carried out under Floridablanca and Cabarrús. Neither account is terribly satisfying as they both leave central aspects of Picornell's intellectual production unaccounted for. Ultimately, we may be running into the problem that political divisions in eighteenth century Spain do not map onto the the left-right scheme which we inherited from the French Revolution and which informs historians' disagreements about Picornell. Any reader of the historiography on Bourbon Spain will be struck by the fact that figures like Floridablanca, Aranda, Cabarrús, or Godoy have trickster-like capabilities of alternatively appearing as staunch conservatives, as cold-blooded modernizers, as supporters of absolute monarchy, as sympathizers of the Scottish Enlightenment, even as supporters of the French Revolution. We may need to consider the possibility that these shape-shifting qualities are not limited to elite figures. In fact, we may want to think about the notion of "tyranny" in Spanish political discourse from this perspective. In any event, the tendency to view a figure like Picornell through leftwing or rightwing conspiracies has severely hampered our ability to recognize the centrality of the colonial question in Spain and that of racial liberation in the colonies.

why would that same person eventually become a Spanish agent and provide intelligence on Bolívar's military activities?

The papers that were found in the hideouts of Picornell and his co-conspirators in Madrid do not necessarily support the state's conclusion that this was an anti-monarchical conspiracy of Jacobine inspiration. A hand-written manifesto by Picornell proclaims that the planned uprising would reduce the king's authority to its "justos y verdaderos limites" (AHN, Consejo 11937) but would not violate the dignity of the king as long as he did not try to recover absolute power by secret or violent means.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, there is an echo of the events in France, though it takes the classic form of disavowal: We will not follow the example of the French radicals as long as the king does not follow that of his cousin in Paris. But there are other echoes as well. Consider the complaints that are listed at the start of the manifesto:

El Pueblo plenamente convencido de que todas quantas miserias y calamidades afligen à la Nacion son efectos del mal gobierno; viendo al Estado Eclesiastico vejado, el noble abatido, y el plebeyo en la mayor opresion e infelicidad, las ciencias sin proteccion, las artes sin foment, la agricultura destruida, el comercio arruinado [...]. (AHN, Consejo 11937)

The problem here is "mal gobierno," not illegitimacy of monarchical rule. The grievances of the old nobility and the clergy are listed along with complaints that are reminiscent of the developmentalist discourse of eighteenth-century associations like the *Sociedad Bascongada* and the *Sociedad Económica*, whose much repeated aspiration was "mejorar la industria popular y los oficios, los secretos de las artes, las máquinas para facilitar las maniobras, y auxiliar la enseñanza."

As a member of both societies, Picornell clearly would have had knowledge of the conversations in Madrid's political circles. His contact with Francisco Cabarrús, the controversial financial advisor of Carlos III, is documented in the archive and shows Cabarrús taking a vastly more critical stance with regard to Spanish absolutist rule than Picornell was willing to take at the time (Zavala 1969). In the meantime, we should note that the *Sociedad Bascongada* was in fact a successor to the *Compañía Guipuzcoana*, which until 1785 had a monopoly in the trade with Venezuela and had its seat in La Guaira. We can safely assume that colonial policies were an important topic of conversation in these associations in Spain at a time when Spain had become increasingly dependent on colonial revenues. Some members of the state bureaucracy had embraced physiocratic economic theories, which led them to believe that only a

<sup>6</sup> The possibility that the San Blas conspiracy was aiming for a constitutional monarchy has been mentioned by López 1955; Elorza 1970 and Aguirrezabal/Comellas 1982.

liberalization of trade combined with substantial political autonomy for the colonies would lead to a long-term increase in colonial revenue (Stein/Stein 2003; Kuethe/Andrien 2014). The Bourbon reform efforts, faced with resistance from entrenched interest groups in the colonies as well as in Spain, were largely confined to making the tax collection system more effective. Political autonomy never became part of the official agenda.

Further research of the members and program of the enlightened societies at the time may generate more details about the conversations that were taking place in the 1790s and the possibility that the San Blas conspiracy occurred in an environment where colonial issues were of paramount importance. The only establishment figure with obvious colonial interests that appears in the Spanish and the American files of the 1795 and 1797 conspiracies is Francisco Leandro de Viana, Conde de Tepa.<sup>7</sup> José Lax, one of those convicted in the trial in Madrid, lived in the mansion of the Conde de Tepa, where he had found employment as a tutor. It was in his room that the San Blas conspirators began to meet. The criminal records in Spain mention the Conde de Tepa four times in connection with the San Blas plot, and even in the Venezuelan investigations his name comes up again as one of Picornell's supposed supporters in the Spanish government.

When Picornell and his co-conspirators began to meet in his house, Viana was a wealthy *indiano*, an important figure in the colonial administration, and an active member of the *Sociedad Bascongada*. After having served as a *fiscal* in Manila, he was appointed *oídor* at the Audiencia in New Spain in 1768.<sup>8</sup> There, Viana married a rich *criolla*, acquired a fortune through the pulque trade, and secured a nobility title. At the behest of Viceroy Bucareli, he wrote a report about the reforms proposed by José de Gálvez, one of Carlos III's most hard-hitting reformers, which came to withering conclusions regarding the proposed administrative reorganization of New Spain. Upon his return to Spain in 1776, Viana rose through the ranks of the Bourbon colonial administration, where he was known as a steady advocate for trade liberalization. Though he did not return to Mexico, he never liquidated his colonial properties. In honor of the Mexican origins of his wealth, he sent a painting of the Virgen de Guadalupe to his hometown of Lagrán in the Basque region and continued to promote the

7 On Viana, see Yuste 1992; Barbier 1990; Benavides 2015. Aguirrezábal/Comellas (1982) identify the Conde de Tepa as Viana.

8 On the figure of the Conde de Tepa in the archival files, see Aguirrezábal/Comellas (1982), who argue that Picornell's support in Madrid should be sought among the members of the *Partido Aragonés*. López (1955) by contrast believes that Picornell's clandestine support in Madrid rested with Freemasons. However, the existence of Masonic Lodges in Madrid at the time remains controversial.

cult of the virgin. His attachment to the colony seemed to have been a lasting one.

The prosecutor in Madrid vehemently rejected any suggestion of Viana's involvement in the San Blas plot and no concrete evidence has emerged that would link him to the conspiracy. In the end, the authorities concluded that while the plot had seditious intentions, it was hatched by a handful of malcontents who lacked popular support and connections to the political establishment. However, as several scholars have pointed out, it is hard not to feel that the authorities gingerly stepped around any evidence that might incriminate respected figures in the Bourbon administration. Such procedure would not be without precedent. In the large-scale uprising of 1766, commonly referred to as the *Motín de Esquilache*, too, authorities appear to have gone out of their way to discard any evidence that pointed toward machinations of a discontented elite behind the uprising in the streets.<sup>9</sup> The investigation in 1766 assigned responsibility to the Jesuits, though most historians agree that there was practically no evidence for this conclusion. Interestingly, the events which had forced Carlos III to make significant concessions to the rioters and forced him to dismiss the *Márquez de Esquilache*, the minister who had overseen colonial reform, were remembered in 1796. In his assessment of the San Blas trial, the *consejero* Pérez de Lema insists that the conspiracy was quite different from the earlier uprising (which he does not name or date), in that this time there was no involvement of powerful men. Picornell's crime was merely "un acto de carnaval, o de entremes." (*AHN, Estado 3161-1: 19*) This may have been the case; but it is also possible that the interests behind the San Blas conspiracy have been misrecognized by those who reviewed the files, both at the time and with the hindsight of the historian. The evidence that would link the Madrid events to the issue of the colonies is only circumstantial or contextual. But once we take into account the peculiarities of the events in La Guaira, it is not implausible to think that the two conspiracies were more closely connected than we have been led to believe and that they reflect a political landscape that vanished with the independence wars, when national sovereignty became the main goal.

After a lengthy trial, Picornell and his co-conspirators were sentenced to die at the gallows. Very quickly – so quickly that the authorities could not possibly have read the entire file of the trial – the sentence was commuted to deportation to Spain's prison camps in its colonies. Within a few months, the conspirators were reunited in La Guaira, Venezuela, and promptly began to plot again.

<sup>9</sup> For a reconstruction of the *Motín de Esquilache*, see Stein/Stein (2003), who conclude that popular discontent was manipulated by establishment figures for their own purposes. Kuethe/Adrien (2014) dismiss this view as conspiracy theory.

## 2 La Guaira, Summer of 1797

What ensued in La Guaira is what turns the minor incident in Bourbon Spain into an event on the Atlantic stage. On June 4, 1797, less than a year after their arrival in the colony, the *reos de estado*, as they were typically referred to, escaped from their prison cells. No insurrectional activities had materialized, but the investigation after the prison break revealed a vast web of political and educational activities, which involved local *criollos*, *peninsulares*, and a significant number of free people of color. While the colonial regime conducted one of the most exhaustive and long-lasting investigations in the history of the Spanish empire, Picornell was moving from island to island in the Antilles, from Saint Domingue to Guadeloupe, and on, trying to avoid capture by the agents of the Spanish government. While the authorities in Venezuela were interrogating local people who had been drawn into various subversive *tertulias*, the leaders of the conspiracy were searching for new venues of political organization on the Caribbean islands.

Tucked into the considerable documentation about Picornell in the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid is a curious personal letter from Le Cap, in the French Caribbean colony of Saint Domingue. Signed simply Lafont, the letter is addressed to a group of unnamed friends in France. The only thing we know about M. Lafont is what the letter tells us: that he had been spending about four months in Saint Domingue, that his *habitation* in Jeremy had been destroyed by the English during their invasion of Saint Domingue, and that he was, at the time when he wrote the letter in June or July of 1798, in Le Cap, ready to depart for safer shores. Lafont only briefly touches on the situation in the French colony, and what he has to say is not good: Crime has triumphed and the colony will not be of any use to France “unless different measures are adopted.” (AHN Estado 3161–1, no. 113)

The letter conforms to the pattern of countless missives from white *colons* who found their fortunes ruined by the turmoil in the colony. What follows is different, however, and it explains why the letter ended up in Picornell’s file. He had had, Lafont tells his French correspondents, the great pleasure of meeting “votre camarade d’infortune P.” Lafont does not spell out the name but identifies him sufficiently to bring the letter into Picornell’s file: “C’était lui que était à la tête de l’insurrection de Caraque.” Lafont goes on to report that before departing for Guadeloupe, where the French commissioner Victor Hugues held P. in great estimation, P. had given Lafont a copy of a pamphlet he had written titled *Discourse to the Americans*, which he was including in the letter “as proof of P.’s passion for his cause.” (AHN Estado 3161–1, no. 113)<sup>10</sup> Lafont ends his report on P. on a more critical note, however: “Ses intentions sont pures, mais

je l'ai en detorné [sic] de son projet en lui présentant le triste tableau de St. Domingue.”

The letter does not provide any further details about the nature of the plans that Lafont tried to dissuade Picornell from. Did he think he could garner support for an attempt to overthrow the colonial government in Venezuela with support from Saint Domingue? Was he thinking of instigating a slave insurrection? Was he perhaps gathering information about how the Saint Domingue insurrection succeeded where he had failed in La Guaira? The phrasing suggests that Picornell was thinking of Saint Domingue as a model – but a model for what? We may never be able to give a definitive answer to these questions. However, the extensive files on the 1797 conspiracy contain significant amounts of writing by Picornell himself and some of his co-conspirators, which provide material that allows us to develop some plausible conjectures.

Upon his arrival in La Guaira in 1796, Picornell had quickly entered into contact with local people who were gathering in various informal groups (*tertulias*).<sup>11</sup> While Picornell was not allowed to leave his prison cell, locals had permission to visit him regularly. He was given access to writing materials and produced a significant number of texts from his cell, which were then copied and circulated for purposes of political education.<sup>12</sup> We also know that when Picornell arrived, there were over 1,000 deportees from Santo Domingo in La Guaira, from both the French and the Spanish side, among them probably Picornell's “friends in misfortune” mentioned in Lafont's letter from Saint Domingue. Court testimony speaks eloquently of the conversations between the deportees confined to La Guaira and local populations about the events in Saint Domingue.

The materials that were discovered in the course of the investigation of the conspiracy are heterogeneous and reflect a variety of points of views. They aimed to persuade different audiences, deployed different textual genres, foregrounded different issues, and were written at different moments. All of this affects the propositional content and should caution us against rash generalizations. We also need to keep in mind that the texts Picornell wrote for popular audiences were destroyed, so we have to rely on court testimony to get a sense of what they might have said. Yet, court testimony requires more complex con-

10 The *Discourse* is no longer part of the file, but copies of a text with the same title authored by Picornell, can be found elsewhere in the files of the conspiracy.

11 For an analysis of the diverse groups that were eventually subsumed under the *Gual y España* label, see Aizpurua Aguirre 2007.

12 For a detailed analysis of the way in which local circumstances and agendas were reflected in the texts that circulated and the role of the free people of color, see Soriano forthcoming.

textualization and cannot be taken at face value. The texts that did survive certainly merit a close textual reading (more than can be done in the space of this article). I will here limit myself to signaling some striking aspects of the materials that have not found the attention they deserve.

Even considering the complexity and heterogeneity of the evidence, there are a few aspects that seem fairly clear. Spanish rule is denounced as tyrannical and exploitative and slavery as a crime. A new, more egalitarian government would liberate America from oppression and open commerce to all nations. The primary goals of the conspiracy were free trade, the immediate abolition of slavery (with compensation to slave owners), the elimination of Indian tribute, racial equality, and the abolition of taxes and tariffs. In one of Picornell's more formal texts, titled *Constituciones*, a provision regarding racial equality is included as Article 32:

Se declara la igualdad natural entre todos los habitantes de las Provincias y Distritos: y se encarga que entre Blancos, Yndios, Pardos y Morenos reyne la mayor armonia, mirandose todos como hermanos en Jesu-Cristo iguales por Dios, procurando aventajarse solo unos a otros en merito, y virtud, que son las dos unicas distinciones reales y verdaderas que hay de hombre a hombre, y habra en lo sucesivo entre todos los Yndividuos de nuestra republica. (López 1955: 354)

One of Picornell's texts written for popular instruction is described in court testimony as a *Dialogue between a black Lieutenant-Colonel of the French Republic and a black Spaniard, his cousin* (see Soriano forthcoming: chapter 5). Apparently it took the form of a catechism and told the story of a black 'Spaniard' who encounters his 'French' cousin dressed in full military regalia, who tells the 'Spaniard' that in France all men were equal and free, and that people of color had equal access to military and political positions.<sup>13</sup> Another text is sometimes referred to as *Revelación al venerable Siervo de Dios Fray José María de la Concepción*. According to court testimony, it told the story of a priest who had a dream vision of José Leonardo Chirino, the leader of the antislavery rebellion in Coro, 1795, who was executed by the authorities. In the dream, Chirino appeared as a martyr who exhorts the *americanos* to recover their liberty and assures them that they could count on the Almighty for help. The priest who reports the revelation to the bishop is promptly accused of sedition and incarcerated. When he appeals to God for help, he is miraculously granted pen and paper and proceeds to write down a *Discurso a los americanos*, thus

<sup>13</sup> I use single quotation marks for French and Spanish because neither term should be read as an unequivocal indication of origin. Both could either refer to colonial or metropolitan origins. Given the context, I am inclined to believe the former was intended.

giving a fictitious origin story for another text in fact authored by Picornell. Presumably, this is the same text that had been included in Lafont's letter from Saint Domingue. Equally interesting is a text referred to as the *Letter from a Grandfather in Cádiz to his Grandson in America*, in which the grandfather tells his grandson that Spain is suffering under tyranny and that agriculture, commerce, and the arts have fallen into neglect. He then relates to have heard rumors of rebellion in America and exhorts his grandson to join the struggle for liberty.

Lest we believe that 'liberty' was simply code for independence – a reading not supported by the textual evidence – secession was not the main goal of the 1797 conspirators. To be sure, the term is mentioned in a few of Picornell's texts, most notably in his *Constituciones* of 1797, but it never became the rallying cry. Demands for equality and liberty rights did. And while Picornell's texts by and large advocate for a republican form of government, related archival materials suggest that some of his allies thought that the main problem was not monarchy itself, but rather the way in which it ruled over the colonies.

The most important topic in Picornell's educational texts is racial equality. This centrality probably needs to be understood in part as an attempt to gain the support of the free people of color and does not necessarily indicate that racial issues were at the top of the agenda of the leaders of the conspiracy. Yet, the way the issue is presented merits our attention.<sup>14</sup> Along with a reference to universal liberty and equality in France, we find an appeal to Christian beliefs: The black leader of a slave revolt is a "martyr" and all humans are "brothers in Christ." The fact that the "Frenchman" is a high-ranking black soldier deserves notice, too, since military regalia is not a right but an honor (see also [Soriano forthcoming: chapter 5](#)). The scene certainly bears witness to a concern with racial equality; however, the staging shifts our attention away from mere legal equality and abstract citizenship toward social equality and prestige. It thus roots the claim for racial equality in the history of the Spanish Empire and perhaps the restrictive *castas* system rather than French universal rights declarations.

Also relevant for a full appreciation of the scene of the *Dialogue* are local precedents. In 1794, the French commissioner Victor Hugues retook Guadeloupe from British forces and French royalists by recruiting those who had been enslaved for the service of the Republic and tying emancipation to this service ([Dubois 2004: 192–194](#)). Clearly, the news would have traveled; but we should also remember that there were over 1,000 deportees from French and

<sup>14</sup> The files contain various accounts of the educational texts by witnesses and the accused. For a survey of the various texts and testimonies about them, see [Soriano forthcoming: chapter 5](#).

Spanish Santo Domingo in La Guaira and that these deportees had been in conversation with local people. It was in the French colonies rather than in France that the meaning of equality was taken to center around racial equality, and it was the uprising in the early 1790s in Saint Domingue that launched an idea of universal liberty that was incompatible with black slavery. At the same time, we see in Picornell's *Dialogue* traces of the racial history of the Spanish Empire. There is, first of all, the derivation of racial equality from Catholic doctrine rather than secular principles of universal rights; but just as important is the fictional staging of specific grievances of the free people of color under colonial hierarchies of color. Both sources for framing racial emancipation – one French Caribbean, the other Hispanic – point toward intercolonial and cross-Caribbean flows of influence that are obscured when the *Gual y España* conspiracy is presented as a 'French-inspired' event and a precursor to Venezuelan independence.

The second issue that stands out in the texts produced in the context of the La Guairaconspiracy concerns the puzzling presence of Spain. What lessons did Picornell expect to derive from a fictitious letter of a Spanish grandfather to his grandson in the colonies? Why did he not simply argue that the *peninsulares* in the colonies should cut their ties to the homeland and join forces with the *criollos*? This is what Bolívar and other leaders of (the) nineteenth-century independence movement(s) did. But Picornell's argument does not try to drive a wedge between *criollos* and *peninsulares*. Quite to the contrary: We find time and again the assertion that once the insurrection had started, Spanish soldiers would not take up arms against their American brothers, that the Spanish king was sympathetic to the cause of the *americanos*, and that there was support in the Spanish government. Consider the following passage from a *pasquín* written by Manuel Gual:

Levántense pues españoles con alusión a este pasquín puesto en las esquinas de Madrid y del Palacio Real en que figuraban varios españoles sentados en una mesa sin nada para comer, preguntándose ¿qué hacemos? y responden. Levantarse [...]. Españoles paisanos y soldados se os ofrece la ocasión de formar vuestro gobierno independiente, vuestras leyes arregladas a la justicia que distingue el hombre político del hombre salvaje, conservando vuestra religión en toda su pureza las iglesias y los ministros. (Gual en [Michelena 2010: 391](#))

Starvation in Spain is invoked to incite resistance in the colonies – resistance that is of both *españoles*, *americanos*, and *uropeos*. Like Picornell's *Letter from a Grandfather in Cadiz*, Gual's *pasquín* invites us to think of a colonial uprising not in opposition to Spain, but as the realization of a revolution that failed in Spain. Further research may well turn up the *pasquín* Gual refers to in his text

and help us to understand better the thinking behind this vision of Atlantic relations. It is possible that the *pasquín* pertained to the San Blas conspiracy; but it is also possible that it was drafted at the time of the Esquilache uprising, when a great number of satirical pamphlets were in circulation. Among the papers confiscated at Gual's home was, after all, a copy of an anonymous pamphlet which had circulated in 1766 titled *Constituciones y Ordenanzas para un nuevo cuerpo en defensa del Rey y de la Patria*. Therefore, it would seem that the Venezuelan conspirators had an (at least minimally) active interest in the 1766 events in Madrid and thought of their activities in a transatlantic context. But given that there is plenty of court testimony that recounts Picornell's story of the events in Madrid and thus connects the goals of the San Blas conspiracy to those of the conspiracy in La Guaira, we can take this a step further. It seems that Picornell and Gual did not think of the interests of Spanish subjects in Europe and in America as necessarily in conflict. Spain may well benefit from the *americanos* taking political initiative. Even the Spanish king is included in this list of potential beneficiaries and supporters of the planned colonial rebellion. The conspirators at times present themselves as royal emissaries, and Picornell apparently maintained that the Spanish monarch would prefer to let go of the colonies in America as a means for putting Spain's economy back on track, just as he had done in the case of the Plaza de Oran on the Northafrican coast. In this context, we may wonder whether it was not a mistake when one of the most thorough studies of the 1797 conspiracy reprints a text titled *Soneto Americano*, one of the revolutionary songs used by the conspirators in their meetings, but leaves out two verses that read "Viva el Rey Supremo y el Vicario actual." (López 1955: 375)<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, the Spanish king did not support Picornell and his co-conspirators (though it is possible that there was some support for the plot from within the local administration). The more consequential point, however, is that the conspirators seemed to have thought that the interests of *españoles americanos* and *españoles europeos* actually coincided. Picornell clearly thought that the Spanish population at large would follow suit if the colonies shook of the yoke of tyranny. Might he not have thought that starting a revolt from the colonies might achieve what he had failed to achieve in Madrid? And if Picornell did have some support from elite circles in Madrid in 1795, he might very well have thought that some segments of the government would support him if he turned out to be more successful in the colonies. If that was the picture the conspira-

15 López argues that the original *Soneto americano* was composed by Manuel Cortés (one of the accused conspirators) and that the verses in praise of the king were added by a certain Montesinos Rico later and thus do not belong to the original.

tors were working with, it would not be surprising that they would insist on solidarity between European and American populations.

All of this creates a complex framework for rethinking the potential impact of the revolution in the French colonies on the Spanish American mainland. It is clear that Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe were not simply the model for the conspirators in La Guaira. Some conspirators, probably including Gual, believed that a rebellion in La Guaira would be a preventive strike against slave revolts and race war. Yet, there is no indication that any of the conspirators were opposed to the agenda of abolition and racial equality. Unlike many slaveholding *criollos* the conspirators of La Guaira may have drawn a clear distinction between slave revolts (and the violence that inevitably came with them) and a politically constituted postslavery state. But Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe may have served as a model in another respect as well. The relationship between the colonies and the metropolis had changed considerably in the French empire in the 1790s. The French colonies in the Caribbean had in fact achieved a high degree of autonomy; they had abolished slavery and warfare had, at least for some time, come to an end. The coalition of antislavery forces and French republicans had kept French royalists at bay in the colonies. Toussaint Louverture and the French Commissioners had arrived at a power sharing arrangement, and Saint Domingue was all set to be an equal partner in a republican French empire. That is not how things worked out in the end, but it is what it looked like in 1797. If a radical reversal in the relations between metropolis and colony was on the horizon for the conspirators in La Guaira, it may well be that France's brief experiment with a transatlantic empire of equal citizens was one of the possible alternatives to what had become the Spanish model of imperial governance. But that, too, put the issue of slavery and racial relations squarely in the center of the agenda.

With Madrid in the grip of an entrenched bureaucracy and the Spanish state utterly dependent on colonial revenue, the conspirators may well have hoped that a revolution in the colonies would shift the balance of power in the empire and inaugurate something akin to France's short-lived empire of equal citizens. If the American colonies could be turned into a lever to dislocate tyranny in Spain, then imperial relations would certainly be transformed, whatever state form was adopted. Looking at the materials of the twin conspiracies of 1795 and 1797, one is struck how relatively unimportant the issue of state form seems to be. In the case of the San Blas conspiracy, it is difficult to say whether the goal was to bring about a change in state form in Spain. In La Guaira, there was plenty of talk about creating republics in America but that coexisted with pledges of allegiance to the king. There was some talk of independence, but it was never clear who exactly would be the subject of a declaration of independence. Freedom from tyranny and racial equality were the cen-

tral concerns. As the example of the French colonies showed, they could be attained through a number of political arrangements and the local elites were not necessarily a good guarantor for these goals in the colonial territories.

It is not surprising, then, that Picornell would have gone to Toussaint Louverture's Saint Domingue to discuss his future plans, and from there to Guadeloupe, to talk to Victor Hugues. Chalking up Picornell's agenda to an 'influence of the French Revolution' clearly does not even tell half the story. It is through the cross-currents from imperial Spain to Venezuela, from Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe back to Venezuela, and from Venezuela back to Spain, that we can come to understand why Picornell ended up writing intelligence reports on Bolívar's endeavors: National independence was not his main agenda, and Bolívar had no interest in exporting his revolution to Spain. If we map intellectual history through independence revolutions, we stand to lose sight of these complex flows of influence and, with it, of an intellectual culture that fully understood that liberationist politics in the Caribbean were unthinkable without addressing the issues of slavery and racial hierarchies.<sup>16</sup>

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