

Runaway Slave Town: Mexico, 1769 to the Present

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Abstract

This article follows various forms of colonial governmentality in Mexico and their legacies in the present. Beginning in the late eighteenth century and through reconstruction following the Mexican Revolution, state officials have attempted to construct the futures of residents of Amapa, a town founded by black runaway slaves. The article discusses how past and present townspeople have created and practiced distinct temporalities, incorporating the often-failed material and political potentials that were imagined for them.

Introduction

Amapa is a present-day Mexican town located in the north of the state of Oaxaca, very close to the Veracruz state border. Black runaway slaves, or maroons, founded the town in 1769 after negotiating with colonial state and local officials. For colonial officials, the town was a political project that would secure the future of the colonial order by transforming its new settlers into “civil” colonial subjects. Over a century later, state agents conformed these future-oriented colonial governmental techniques to fit new political eras, and continued to transform culture in and around Amapa. Since its foundation and through the late twentieth century, Mexican state officials have used the future, as both promise and failure, to construct Amapa.

This article considers how competing and tangled visions of ruin and promise have built Amapa. The (im)possible futures envisioned for Amapa are inscribed in the town’s documentary, material, and oral records. Historical documents record the promise of Amapa, as conceived by colonial officials, and the ultimate failure of this vision. Today, various above-ground ruins stretch across Amapa’s landscape and archive the town’s defunct colonial ideals. Residents of present-day Amapa also chronicle the political futures that clashed in their town. However, Amapa’s various archives also provide a lens for

understanding how past and present Amapa residents have contested official perspectives of the future and modified state authorized notions of futurity in their daily experiences. The maroons who settled Amapa, and the town's contemporary residents, did not and do not simply conform to governmental modalities. Instead, they have incorporated the failed futures which were imagined for them and created alternate temporalities and horizons. Amapa consequently disturbs neat temporal trajectories as overlapping temporalities explicitly construct the town's social and material fabric.

Defending the Colonial Future by Reinstating the Past

The town, Our Lady of Guadalupe of the Black Residents of Amapa (Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los morenos de Amapa), was founded in 1769 after years of negotiations between a black runaway slave collective, sugar plantation owners, and colonial officials. Amapa was a *reducción*, a noun referring to a place and a process through which Spanish colonials sought to create colonial subjects (Cummins 2002; Hanks 2010; Van Valkenburgh 2017). The verb *reduzir* (to reduce) appeared in the first Spanish-language dictionary in 1611 and its past tense form, *reduzido*, was defined as “convinced, and *returned* to a better order” (Covarrubias Orozco 1611, R:5, translated and emphasis added). The notion of *reducción* as restoration was consistent with sixteenth-century understandings of historical time and Iberian political expansion (Koselleck 1985; Hamann 2011). During this time, political conquest was understood as the reinstatement of a previously lost religious and political order. However, in the late eighteenth century the notion of restoration was replaced with progress and the practice of *reducción* by late eighteenth-century colonial officials was therefore caught between these two understandings of change. A new horizon of expectation opened as the idea of progress allowed colonial officials to predict the gradual transformation of maroons into civil colonial subjects. But the future nonetheless remained in the past, as *reducción* continued to be an attempt to reimplement an earlier colonial supremacy and secure its position in the future.

Maroons were a danger to colonial power. In part, plantation owners and administrators commanded power on colonial plantations by restricting black mobility (e.g. Camp 2004; Browne 2015), but maroons disputed this power by reclaiming control over black bodies, recovering their spatial and corporal sovereignty. Maroons thereupon challenged

the perceived racialized spatial order by abandoning enslaved black places, such as the plantation, for oftentimes uncharted space. Maroons were also simply a hazard to the reiteration of capital since they contributed to a disordered enslaved labor population by providing an alternate model of existence. Colonial officials in central Veracruz therefore viewed the *reducción* of maroons as a remedy for the ruination of colonial social, material, and economic order. The future of the eastern sugar-producing region of the colony was in the recovery of an illusory past that colonialists once controlled, and they trusted *reducción* to re-establish and safeguard this belief.

Before the eighteenth century, maroon *reducción* was primarily defined by military exploits.¹ Armed campaigns intended to restore structure through the violent destruction of maroon settlements (*palenques*) and the re-enslavement of its inhabitants. But by colonial officials' own admission, militaristic *reducción* had failed to restore order in the region by the late eighteenth century.² A local executive officer therefore argued for a shift from force to hegemony and proposed that authorities reduce maroons through spiritual and architectural means instead. In 1769, the Amapa settlers became the first experimental subjects.

Contesting Colonial Futures

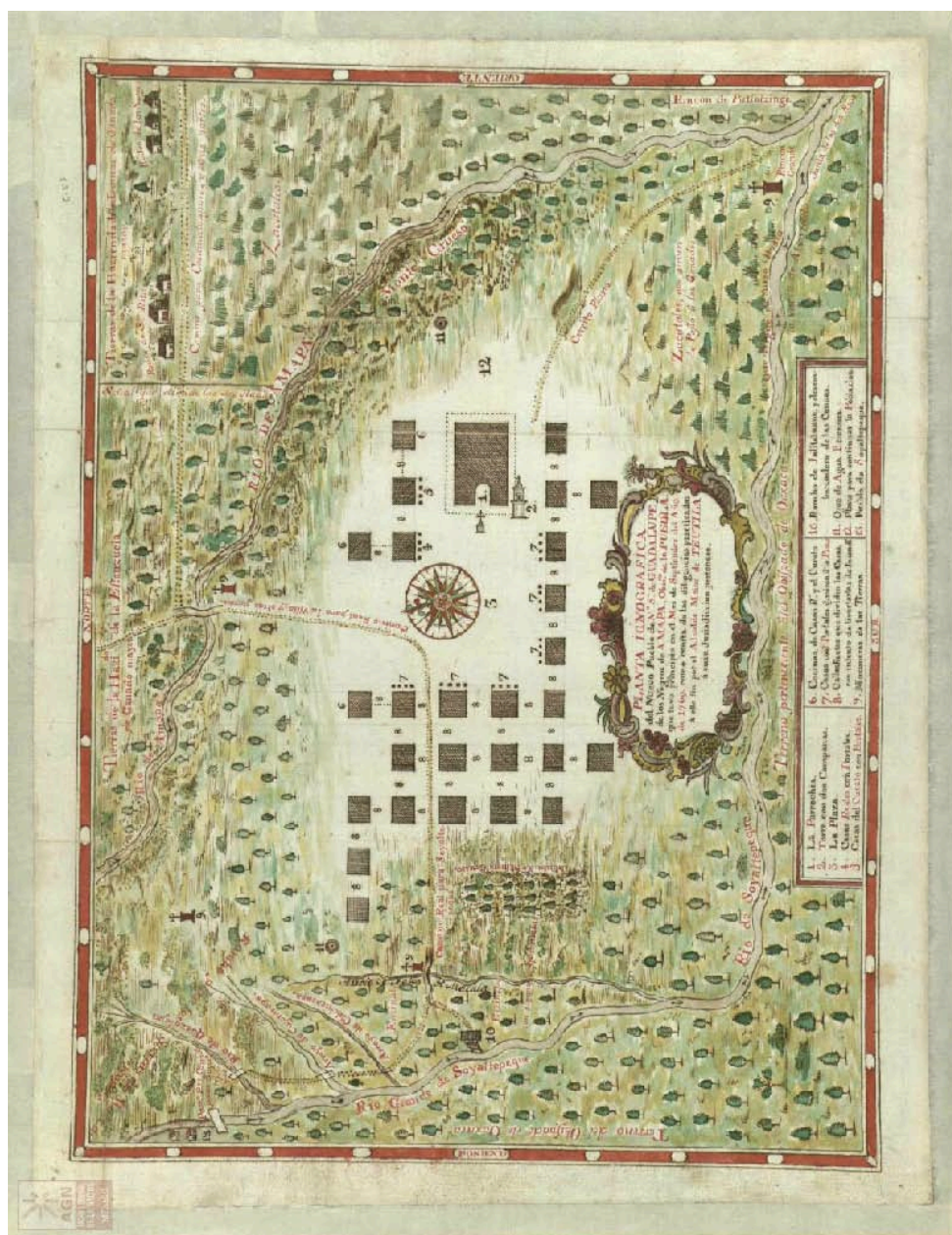
Amapa was an attempt at scalability (Tsing 2012), an attempt to expand the colonial plantation order by propagating its fundamental components. Spanish colonial plantations were inscribed in a material and symbolic order rooted in and organized around cities, jurisdictions, and political institutions. Spanish towns were material representations of that outlook on power, replicating elements of urban life that centered around key architectural features organized spatially in an orderly grid (e.g. Low 1993; Kagan 2000). Local officials would uproot marronage writ large using cloned elements of the larger colonial project: towns and subjects. Supporters of the *reducción*, including the maroons, also stated that Amapa was the "legitimate throat to enter the *palenques*".³ The new settlement and settlers would therefore act as colonial shields and the *reducción* would be the course through which to dismantle marronage.

However, less than 10 years after Amapa was founded, the

jurisdiction's new executive officer compiled a case against the town. In the 1776 indictment of Amapa, colonialists proposed to either relocate the town near the immediate reach of colonial rule or physically eliminate it.⁴ The written legal proceedings included vocal testimonies from six neighbors and two priests, while the responses of Amapa residents were almost inaudible. The residents were charged with the decay of public and material life in and around Amapa. According to a 1770 map of the town, it was constructed using the distinctive Spanish colonial urban grid (Figure 1). Domestic houses were arranged in neat rows around three principal structures: a church, plaza, and administrative building. At the time when Amapa had been constructed, colonial officials had marveled at the town's infrastructure,⁵ but in 1776, critics described a town in architectural ruin and ascribed this to the ruined moral character of Amapa's residents, whom they described as indolent and drunken.⁶ Witnesses also testified that the Amapa settlers had illegally seized the town's lands from an indigenous community. The uprooted natives, whose labor had been exploited to construct the town, consequently also declined into moral degeneracy. In particular, the critics reported that indigenous people frequented Amapa to drink illicit spirits and often ended up dead on the road after leaving the town intoxicated.⁷ One priest testified that the local death toll had increased since the town's foundation and attributed the broader social and material breakdown to the "perversion" of the individuals and "the dominant devils Asmodeus and Bacchus"⁸ who inhabited Amapa.⁹ Amapa's supposed ruin was unbound and residents were compared to contagions that "infested the curacy" and "attracted considerable damage".¹⁰

From the point of view of people who neighbored the ruins of Amapa, expectations of the maroons being remodeled into "civil" colonial subjects were lost in the past. The attempt to extinguish Amapa was a violent political project that aimed to lay ruin to a black town that represented the failed assessment of a scalability project oriented to the future. In 1776, from the outside looking in, the material and social consequences of the Amapa *reducción* had created a catastrophic spectacle. Black maroons' possession of a colonial town, the paragon of white civility, inverted colonial social, spatial, and material roles.

Figure 1: 1770 Amapa plan map (AGN, Collection MAPILU: Mapas, Planos



Instead of restoring order, the Amapa *reducción* exposed and unintentionally legitimized the political and material flaws of the colonial system. Moreover, not only had the Amapa residents not materialized into their future selves, but marronage and the insurrection¹¹ of enslaved laborers in general persisted in the area.

The former maroons who inhabited Amapa thus visibly reshaped the future that colonial officials had expected, and Amapa remained in explicit political and material dispute through the 1780s. Although colonial state officials denied the appeal to demolish Amapa, local administrators continued to impose their colonial destinies by aiming to take over the town using capitalist and racial monopolies. In April 1781, a fire damaged several buildings in Amapa including an *estanco*, a crown-owned store that sold tobacco.¹² A tobacco monopoly had been developed in the colony under Bourbon rule, and by 1765, tobacco cultivation and products were a hugely profitable colonial enterprise. The crown limited the zones of tobacco cultivation and controlled the small number of shops licensed to distribute tobacco products to the internal market (Deans-Smith 1992). Placing this *estanco* in Amapa was yet another means to reduce the town using commerce and consumption. If capitalist markets can smell profits (Coronil 2001), the Spanish colonial market certainly sensed economic potential in Amapa. Colonial bureaucracy and market capitalism were thus co-constituted in the attempt to socially transform the Amapa residents into governable consuming subjects.

Spaniards, indigenous people, and other taxonomies of mixed-race people (*castas*) were also encouraged to settle in Amapa, overruling a founding stipulation that expressly prohibited this.¹³ According to a complaint filed in 1784, Amapa's distinctly marked *black* founders challenged the new colonizers, who were racially unmarked, by violently confiscating their houses.¹⁴ The 1781 fire report also did not mention the racial category of the individual who ran the *estanco* (the *estanquero*) and the absence of this identification suggests that this person was not a person of color, but perhaps one of the new non-black settlers.¹⁵ The colonial biopolitical management project therefore persisted as officials attempted to subject Amapa using non-black colonizers.

Archaeological investigations carried out in Amapa between 2013 and 2018¹⁶ also suggest that the founders of Amapa envisioned its

constitution in alternate ways. Extensive excavations have been conducted within the initial parameters of the settlement, which were determined by identifying extant geographical features which were referenced on Amapa's colonial-period map. However, while the maroons were expected to transform into sedentary agricultural peasants through routine movements in the *reducción*, excavations have not uncovered sufficient material evidence that supports sustained urban dwelling in Amapa. This contrasts with material remains of daily life that typically have been encountered in *reducciones* in other parts of the Spanish colonies (McNaspy 1987; Rice 2011; Wernke 2013; Van Valkenburgh 2017). This lack may be due to the sinking topography in Amapa, but the absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. It is possible that Amapa's first settlers continued to practice "maroon" lifeways that included multiple settlements, for example (Amaral 2017). In effect, the founders of Amapa twisted their critics' linear temporal understandings, rearranging the rhythm of their own social transformation and thus invalidating the colonialists' projected future.

Approximately 20 years after the *reducción* was constructed, Amapa remained a disputed ground where competing political futures imagined by colonial officials and Amapa's founders collided. Subsequent archaeological investigation can provide much-needed evidence of how this confrontation transpired, and allow us to construct a more detailed account of the town's point of view.

Aspirations Delimited within the Legacies of Colonialism

The futures contested during the colonial period resulted in a synthetic post-independence present. Despite officials' efforts to raze the colonial black town in 1776, Amapa survived as a town primarily inhabited by people of color following Mexican independence in 1821. Most children born in Amapa during the early nineteenth century and their parents, for example, were described racially as *mulata(o)*.¹⁷ At the same time, though, the ideal town that officials envisioned also transpired—just before independence, over 700 people resided in Amapa and the town was recognized as a patriotic, religious, and economic hub.¹⁸ By the late nineteenth century, Amapa had become a municipal center involved in the large-scale cultivation of cotton, banana, and pineapple.¹⁹ In 1899, even Ricardo Flores Magón, the future father of anarchism in Mexico, foresaw economic opportunity in Amapa and opened a company in the

thriving town.²⁰ Just before leaving Amapa, he wrote that he expected to one day reminisce on the “stupid festivals of these blacks”.²¹ His racial characterization of Amapa residents suggests that the town continued to be inhabited by people of African descent, at least according to an outsider’s perspective.

Today, Amapa is a town (*localidad*) in the state of Oaxaca, located within the municipality of San Juan Bautista Tuxtepec and part of the district of Tuxtepec. It is an agricultural town where wealthy families cultivate lime, sugar cane, and livestock. With a small population of just over 300 individuals, social disparities are palpable. The area where Amapa was constructed in 1769 is at present entwined with visible ruins dating roughly between the early and mid-nineteenth century and contemporary houses. Today, no one in Amapa self-identifies using any racial categorization denoting black ancestry, nor does anyone express a strong connection to Amapa’s maroon past.

While the pasts of the Spanish colonial period are not mobilized in Amapa’s present, contemporary residents do remember how the politics of the Mexican Revolution and its failed promise of the future shaped their town.²² Two brothers, who were children in Amapa at the time of the revolution, generated the oral histories of the revolution that circulate in Amapa today. Before passing away in 2008 (according to townspeople at the age of 108), one of the brothers had his “lived experiences”²³ transcribed in a two-page hand-written narrative titled *La Revolución Mexicana en el año de 1910 (Narración), Amapa Tuxtepec, Oa* (hereafter *LRM*). The memories recorded in *LRM* also intersect the discursive present, as the brothers’ stories are retold verbally by their descendants and a large portion of Amapa residents.

According to their account, the counterrevolutionary Felicista faction set up four camps within a mile of Amapa, and the town was a site of conflict between this group, representing the political elites of the past, and the Carranzistas, representing the new elite, throughout the civil war phase of the revolution (1913–1920). *LRM* relates that in 1913, Venustiano Carranza’s troops ransacked Amapa and ordered the residents to vacate the town, although present-day townspeople blame a generalized “rebel” for the forced evacuation (interviews, March 2012). The abandonment occurred abruptly, and the residents left behind livestock and ripe crops (*LRM*; interviews, March 2012). The forced migration split families as individuals settled in different towns and

cities in Oaxaca and Veracruz or sought refuge and wage-labor jobs in local ranches (*LRM*; interviews March 2012). The town, however, became synonymous with the rebellion and the town's rebel image accompanied the displaced Amapans across space. The displaced residents were slighted in their new locations since they were assumed to be rebels and viewed with suspicion (*LRM*).²⁴ Residents of Amapa either gave up their futures in their town entirely, joined the rebels, or were indiscriminately "hung by the government" (*LRM*).²⁵

More than 100 years after the colonial-period attempt to demolish Amapa, the town was practically ravaged during the revolution's military clashes. In February 1920, a newspaper reported a battle between national troops and rebels in Amapa's plaza that undoubtedly left it in ruins.²⁶ *LRM* similarly documents that Carranza's troops were ordered to torch Amapa and destroyed the town's municipal building, jail, "and so everything else,"²⁷ leaving only the church. Amapa's architectural composition no longer includes a plaza. Archaeological excavations were conducted in the areas where the plaza was located at the town's founding and where present-day residents place the long-gone plaza. Except for a ruined foundation, delimiting an enclosed rectangular space, in the area where the colonial-period plaza was pictured on the 1770 map little material trace of any activity has been recovered.

In 1920, one-fourth of the original population returned to live in what was materially left of Amapa (*LRM*). The individuals who repopulated the town rebuilt their huts (*jacales*), but "business people" did not return since their "capital remained in rebel hands" (*LRM*).²⁸ The hut structures referenced in *LRM* likely resembled their contemporary counterparts, which can include a cement base, but always consist of upright wooden poles or planks, and a thatched palm leaf roof. According to current residents, several of Amapa's above-ground ruins were former domestic houses that were abandoned after the revolution. Unlike hut structures, these had been constructed with what was referred to at the time, as well as today, as "material". Although huts are certainly "material" in the sense that they are composed of tangible constituent elements, these components did not and do not warrant this characterization, which in the context of architectural structures signifies costly brick-and-mortar components and class status. The Marrones, a family who formed part of the old upper class in Amapa, were among the business people who, according to present-day residents, abandoned one of these now ruined

buildings.

While not forming part of today's oral histories, the chronicle of armed political clashes in Amapa during the revolution echoes an earlier episode. Amapa had previously been torched by combatants during the wars for Mexican independence that began in 1810, and the town's then population of 758 had similarly been displaced.²⁹ In a similar manner to how the town's maroon founders were described before their *reducción*, the evacuated residents of early nineteenth-century Amapa were compared to animals living in the mountains.³⁰ Amapa's long-time resident priest, Benigno Carrasco, declared that he would rebuild Amapa with God's help, and he petitioned the colonial government in 1817 for reconstruction funds.³¹

Residents of Amapa both post-independence and post-revolution undoubtedly experienced life as a temporal aftermath where the present was stalled and characterized by the ruin left over from the clash of competing political futures (Scott 2014). These temporal upheavals were inscribed through various material means. For instance, there was a break in Amapa's baptismal record between 1812 and 1819 during which Carrasco made no entries. In explaining this lapse, he referred the reader to the town's burial record to gauge the "sorrows and troubles,"³² he had experienced during the document's missing years. The break in existential temporalities was also recorded through the unimpeded growth of plant life. In 1819, Carrasco wrote that he had returned to an overgrown brush, rather than a town.³³ Present-day residents also relate that the church was engulfed with bush when early twentieth-century residents returned. Amapa's archaeological record also registers the material memory of the revolution and its temporal upturn, with fragments of arms and ammunition as well as a lull in everyday refuse associated with the era. However, unlike the founders of Amapa, the majority of Amapa residents during the armed phase of the revolution and the wars for independence were not invested in the futures contested in their town; rather, they were casualties caught in the middle of opposing political futures advanced by divergent revolutionaries. Describing the residents of Amapa at the time of the revolution, the author of *LRM* wrote that they were "pacifists" who were fond of their town and "did not want any problems".³⁴

Post-revolution, Amapa and its surroundings became the focus of renewed forms of colonial governmentality through which state agents

sought to re-tool the natural environment and its people. During the late 1940s, state workers constructed a detour (*desviación*) through Amapa, thus formally breaking with the colonial grid pattern. While the urban composition of colonial Amapa was reshaped by its founders and undoubtedly by subsequent populations, the physical presence of the colonial gridiron had largely remained ironclad until the mid-twentieth century—the colonial central government consented to Father Carrasco’s pleas and financed the town’s renovation with a proviso that it be rebuilt with spatial and material symmetry.³⁵ Present-day above-ground ruins, built sometime after the town was incinerated by independence insurgents, are testament that the clause was indeed observed.

Today, the ruined buildings of this reconstruction phase still flaunt the mandated architectural conformity and disclose that the reconstructed town replicated the colonial-period grid. The new, nineteenth-century structures were even built above areas where foundation-period buildings once stood. Reassembled Amapa was a palimpsest, a temporal material mishmash in which even the function of the first colonial-period buildings was materially superimposed on the present, but in restored form (e.g. Olivier 2004; González-Ruibal 2006; Bailey 2007; Dawdy 2010, 2016). The now ruined houses which were erected post-independence match the location of houses depicted on Amapa’s 1770 map; and residents of Amapa have built their houses in these same places up to today. Yet unlike the wooden structures that likely characterized foundation-period houses, the nineteenth-century constructions (and *some* twentieth- and twenty-first-century houses) were modernized using “material” as well as salvaged rubble from past wreckages, such as shattered mason bricks and ceramic roof tiles.

The detour that cut through Amapa in the 1940s also replaced the town’s main road, which was constructed during its foundation and labeled a “Royal Road” (*Camino Real*). Because of Amapa’s unstable topography, the old colonial road, renamed Principal Road after independence, was already collapsing by mid-twentieth century. This surface erosion created the sharp ditch observed today which bisects the initial settlement area and surely erased a portion of the colonial town from the archaeological record. Many of the neat walkways illustrated on Amapa’s colonial map also began to erode. The physical options through which to “civilly” navigate Amapa, that were inscribed in the colonial period and re-iterated post-independence, began to crumble

from geographic existence. During the colonial period, Amapa was a small material assembly, harnessed by the grid, that was meant to restore a past political order. But in the late 1940s, president Miguel Alemán envisioned a country that would progress toward a new order. In constructing the detour through Amapa, workers slashed through nature and cleared a road moving forward.

In addition to ostensibly transforming material and spatial practice, the new roadway was one materialization of post-revolution governmentality projects aimed at constructing a modern nation. The detour was connected to a larger federal project that re-imagined the future of the largely Mazatec indigenous northern Oaxaca Sierra Madre, where Amapa is located. In 1947, the Mexican government commissioned the building of a dam 17 km southwest of the town. The Papaloapan River Valley Project was a modern scientific approach to agricultural development and nation building that would modernize Mexico by conforming nature and its human inhabitants to the service of the country (Schwartz 2016). The detour ended at the newly founded town, *Las Margaritas*. Similar to the Amapa founders nearly 200 years prior, displaced Mazatecs were relocated to Las Margaritas, where they would be integrated into the Mexican nation as modern farmers. The new town was not to everyone's liking, however, and one family instead settled in Amapa. The child who settled in Amapa with his family in the 1940s remains a resident to this day and once recalled the pride he felt when then presidential candidate, Miguel Alemán, visited his town during the campaign. He also remembered the betrayal he felt when shortly after winning the presidency, Alemán announced his new vision of an industrialized modern future that entailed the social and material devastation of his town (interview, July 2014).

The timeworn colonial problem-space (Scott 1999), that was occupied by the nonwhite and non-urban countryside, persisted in mid-twentieth-century Mexican politics. As opposed to previous eras, however, post-revolution state agents used (social) scientific techniques to discern and fix the problem. This challenge was defined as the "Indian problem" (Comas 1953) and understood as the shackle on Mexican modernity. In only slight contrast to the colonial period, twentieth-century state agents sought to create citizens, as opposed to subjects, and to incorporate them into a national order, rather than a colonial one. State agents and intellectuals deliberated the "problem" and concluded that while indigenous people were not racially different, their cultural alterity nonetheless closed off their path to the modern future. Race was

therefore redefined in cultural terms and demarcated linguistically and materially against the Spanish language and the urban norms of Europeans and *mestizos*, the biological and cultural synthesis of indigenous, black, and Spanish which, post-revolution calculated ideology, became the “national race” (Dawson 2004; Lund 2012).

As a non-white rural town, Amapa did not escape the confines of the colonial problem-space nor the direct intervention of post-revolution population management. After the armed phase of the revolution, a national program for education was developed with the aim of creating and managing a unified nation through a secular western education and Spanish literacy. Cultural missions were a government-funded project developed within the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), one of the newly founded state bureaus during the cultural reconstruction phase post-revolution (Vaughan 1997; 2006). The cultural missions were groups composed of specialists from various fields including general education, home economics, hygiene, and agriculture, and program workers traveled the country primarily training the uneducated rural peasantry. Cultural missions were the present, renovated form of colonial Christian civilizing missions, and thus were arranged from past colonial spaces of experience. This parallel was not lost on its engineers, hence the program’s name. The envoys of cultural missions were even termed “missionaries”. Thus akin to colonial civilizing missions, which included *reducción*, cultural missions aimed to extend the scope and power of the government by engineering culturally uniform citizens and making them responsible for their own enculturation. The biopolitics of the twentieth-century missions included recalibrating diets, agricultural practices, and languages (e.g. Corona 1947; Bertheley 1957). Missionaries focused on establishing the foundations for a forthcoming population that would practice a deliberately planned existence and be fully convinced of the superiority of modern techniques. Typical of governmental logics, the program would only succeed if the training imparted by the cultural missionaries permeated below the realm of consciousness and into the realm of habit. However, the failures of past colonial spaces of experience were understated, or perhaps never acknowledged, since the future of post-revolutionary Mexico was open and would be superior to the past (Koselleck 1985).

Older residents of Amapa, who were adolescents at the time, remember a cultural mission “encampment” that settled in town during the 1940s (interview, March 2012). The missionaries established themselves in two of Amapa’s present-day ruins and used the vacant

houses as living quarters and instructional facilities. Locals term these ruins “*las casas de los Marrones*” (the Marron houses), a reference to the owners and occupants of the houses pre-Mexican Revolution (Figure 2). Situating the structures above foundation-period houses, an individual named Eustaquio Marron constructed the now collapsed houses by the late nineteenth century.³⁶ Among the cultural mission, older residents remember a midwife, mason, musician, seamstress, nurse, and carpenter. The missionaries believed people learned by doing, and Amapa residents recall members of the Amapa commission instructing them in domestic architectural repairs, for example. Some residents found general value in this training and remember townspeople being genuinely receptive to it. Although most residents do not give examples of personal long-term impacts, one resident cited a local woman who became the principal midwife in the region and provided her services long after the missionaries had moved out. Other residents remember the mission as a diversion, for both residents and missionaries, rather than the pressing national endeavor it was meant to be. One individual recalled townspeople carousing and drinking with the missionaries in the now ruined smaller Marron house. Instead of taking music lessons seriously, one informant remembered taking enough guitar lessons to feign proficiency and woo suitors (interviews, July 2014).

Archaeological excavations were conducted in and around the Marron houses. Within the small house, nineteenth-century deposits were bluntly separated from more recent material activities by a uniform cement tile floor just below the surface. Little archaeological evidence is related to cultural missionary activities and whatever debris that may have been left behind was undoubtedly washed down the present-day eroded slope.

By government standards, the educational program failed, as it lacked the number of bilingual missionaries needed to engineer a modern peasantry (Vaughan 2006). In 1942, for instance, there were just 30 cultural missions working in the entire country (Corona 1947). While one objective of missionaries was to erase “folk” techniques from Mexico’s future, present-day residents of Amapa, especially those who do not have economic means to access modern healthcare, continue to rely on local plant life for both minor and serious ailments.



Figure 2: Ruins of small Marron house / cultural mission facility with present-day school in background (photo by the author).

Conflicting views between various experts within the SEP and between authorities at the national, regional, and local level also triggered the collapse (Vaughan 2006).

By mid-century, the government's fixation on the systematic education of the countryside was nearly abandoned (Dawson 2004). But residents of Amapa adapted and built toward the future discarded by the Mexican government. Under the leadership of *LRM*'s author, the town directed state funds to rebuild their wood-and-palm schoolhouse out of cinderblock *after* the missionaries left. This schoolhouse was also built using the architectural ruins of an early nineteenth-century house, a structure which had perpetuated the colonial ideal of material and spatial harmony in Amapa until finally disintegrating in the early twentieth century. Amapa residents have thus reconstructed the future of education out of the failed material and political objectives of the past. Present-day townspeople continue to build from state agent's discarded projects and do so in a present context of a national educational program that, unlike the recent past, dismisses the countryside instead of targeting it.

Imagining the Future Amidst the Ruins of Revolution

The benefits of post-revolutionary economic growth were disproportionately distributed to the wealthy supporters of what became Mexico's dominant national political party since the revolution (Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1993). However, the deteriorated dreams of the Mexican Revolution were shortly revived during the country's 1978 oil boom. At a time when oil prices were at a record high, Mexico discovered new oil reserves along with countless promising geological formations. Resembling Coronil's (1997) remarks on Venezuela, there was a "petroleum euphoria" in Mexico and many hopeful citizens saw the boom as the arrival of the egalitarian future promised by the revolution 50 years prior.

However, to invest in its national oil industry and public sector, the country had borrowed heavily since the early 1970s, and in the latter part of the decade this became unrestrained borrowing against Mexico's projected future oil revenues. The government ultimately borrowed short-term against long-term revenues that never materialized. Unable to pay its rising debt, the country defaulted and in 1982 the national economy collapsed, converting the future in oil into a temporality of the past. However, the oil frenzy was never experienced by millions of Mexicans, who were structurally precluded from this future and whose daily experiences in fact worsened during the boom as a result rising inflation and unemployment (Aguilar Camín and Meyer 1993). The Mexican government's failure, once again, to provide a believable future for most of its citizens was expressed locally in Amapa as several individuals pursued an alternate economic future in gold, not oil, and left a dent on the town's material and social present.

In 1983, a few Amapa residents dismantled the town's church altar in search of buried treasure. In 2017, one informant narrated what was clearly still an unimaginable scene, as she attempted to describe the mounds of dirt and the excavated pit that extended approximately one-third of the church's interior. Shortly after this incident, two individuals who were alleged descendants of the Marron family cruised into town and claimed ownership of any gold that was potentially buried within the bounds of the ruined houses. The local authority at the time denied their request to dig for treasure and the gold seekers did not push their claims further (interview, August 2013). While these instances are limited, there is a collective belief in Amapa, and among rural Mexicans in general (see Foster 1964), that affluent individuals buried their

material wealth for safekeeping during the wars for independence and the revolution. These kinds of “occult economies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) are common in the Global South, blocked from the promises of capitalist riches, and they arise as people try to make sense of how, in times of misery and deprivation, some individuals appear to prosper through effortless and inexplicable means. Magic and dishonesty are the only explanations, and unexplained prosperity comes at the expense of hard-working people (Taussig 1980; Coronil 1997). Amapa’s residents often resort to the magical or the fantastic to make sense of sudden riches or economic success: in this case, it is mysterious buried treasures from mythical times, those of the Spanish conquest or the Mexican Revolution, that make people illicitly rich overnight. While the Amapa residents who destroyed the church altar sought to secure their future prosperity through simple means during difficult times, the endeavor proved economically and socially ruinous. To avoid state-level prosecution, the individuals were forced to reconstruct the altar and invest in other architectural projects in Amapa (interview, August 2013). While the incident occurred over 30 years ago, it left a permanent impression on Amapa’s material and social constitution. The altar was not faithfully restored, and many describe the reproduction as inferior (interview, August 2013; Figure 3). The reconstructed altar is a material reminder of the plunder, and despite their repeated denial, many still believe that the individuals uncovered gold. How else could they explain these individuals’ instant financial success and their own continued hardships?

Conclusion

Since the colonial period, Amapa has been constructed with contested and entangled conceptions of the future. Amapa’s present-day material landscape is laden with the jumbled, multitemporal materials of suspended utopias. Its social and material geographies are a mix of colonial practices and their legacies in the present which have been salvaged and reincorporated into present forms or which lay ruined and abandoned. Progress is disputed by Amapa’s palpable material mosaic as the ruined political projects of the past extend into the present in reinvented and ruined forms. Borrowing from Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1999; Buck-Morss 1991), the synthesis of contrasting architectural materials from distinct eras forms a *montage architecture*, or a concrete visual of pasts that form the present and a material visual that mingles temporalities and refutes neat visions of historical time.

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LRM = La Revolución Mexicana en el año de 1910 (Narración), Amapa Tuxtepec, Oa.

LAN = Latin American Newspapers Series 1 and 2, 1805–1922.

UNM, CSWR = University of New Mexico Libraries, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, NM.

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Notes

- 1 One maroon *reducción*, as a resettlement project, was recorded in the colonial archive before the eighteenth century in Veracruz. The town, San Lorenzo de los Negros de Cerralbo (present-day Yanga) was constructed in 1609 just south of what would become one of the eastern sugar-producing hubs, the *Villa de Córdoba*. However, this resettlement was a military concession after a large expedition failed to reinstate a maroon group to their previous enslaved positions through combat (See AGN – Inquisición, Vol. 283, fols 186–188; Pérez de Ribas 1896; Alegre 1956; Davidson 1966; Naveda 1987; Landers 2006; Proctor 2009).
- 2 AGN – Indiferente Virreinal, Caja 2506, Exp. 002.
- 3 “Amapa es la legitima garganta para entrar a los palenques”, AGN – Tierras 3543, Book I, fs. 102.
- 4 AGN – Tierras 3543, Book III.
- 5 AGN – Tierras 3543, Book II, fs. 96va.
- 6 AGN – Tierras 3543, Book III, fs. 20.
- 7 AGN – Tierras 3543, Book III, fs. 9–9va.
- 8 “la perbesion de estos con el mal ejemplo, y Dominantes Diablos Asmodeo y Baco de dho pueblo Nuevo”. In Jewish writing (most notably, the Book of Tobit), Asmodeus is identified as a demon of lust. Bacchus is the Roman name for Dionysus, the god of wine and intoxication.
- 9 AGN – Tierras 3543, Book III, fs. 15va.
- 10 “infestar el curato [...] atraer considerable perjuico”, AGN – Tierras 3543, Book III, fs.14.
- 11 AGN – Indiferente Virreinal, Caja 2506, Exp. 002.
- 12 AGN – Real Hacienda, Alcabalas, Vol. 269, Exp.1, fs. 63.
- 13 AGN – Tierras 3543, Book III, fs. 3.
- 14 AGN – General de Parte, Vol. 66. Exp. 75, fs. 48–48va.

- 15 AGN – Real Hacienda, Alcabalas, Vol. 269, Exp.1, fs. 63–63va.
- 16 Excavations were conducted in 2013 (permit 401.B(4)19.2012/36/0754), 2017 (permit 401.B(4)19.2016/36/1318), and 2018 (permit 401.1S.3-2018/1273).
- 17 In Amapa’s case, *mulato* likely referred to individuals of mixed African and indigenous ancestry. UNM, CSWR – Paul Van de Velde Papers, *Libro Primero del Nuevo Curato de Nuestra Señora de Amapa*.
- 18 AGN – Obras Públicas, Vol. 33, Exp. 13, fs. 250–251.
- 19 BFB – Jueces Receptores, Tuxtepec, Inv. 1511, fs. 15–20; LAN Series 1 – *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, 16 October, 1944, p. 3; *Mexican Herald* – 29 January, 1902, p. 7.
- 20 Archivomagon.net/lugares/amapa-oax
- 21 20 September, 1899: “estúpidos guateques de estos negros” – archivomagon.net/obras-completas/ correspondencia-1899-1922/correspondencia-1899.
- 22 Formal interviews were conducted from 2012 to 2014 under University of Chicago Protocol H12031. Numerous informal conversations with Amapa residents and ethnographic research from 2008 to 2018 also inform this article.
- 23 “experiencias vividas”.
- 24 “nos veían con recelo ya que nos suponían como rebeldes y nos despreciaban”.
- 25 “colgados por el gobierno”.
- 26 LAN Series 1 – *El Universal*, 11 February, 1920, p. 1.
- 27 “y así todo lo demás, quedando solamente nuestra iglesia”.
- 28 “las personas de negocio no regresaron a consecuencia que sus capitales quedaron en manos de rebeldes”.
- 29 AGN – Obras Públicas, Vol. 33, Exp. 13, fs. 249–254.
- 30 AGN – Obras Públicas, Vol. 33, Exp. 13, fs. 250.

- 31 UNM, CSWR – Paul Van de Velde Papers, Libro Primero del Nuevo Curato de Nuestra Señora de Amapa, fs. 32–235va, fs. 202; AGN – Obras Públicas, Vol. 33, Exp. 13, fs. 249–254.
- 32 “penas y trabajos”.
- 33 UNM, CSWR – Paul Van de Velde Papers, Libro Primero del Nuevo Curato de Nuestra Señora de Amapa, fs. 202.
- 34 “todo este grupo eramos pacifistas, que no queriamos problemas y apreciabamos a nuestro pueblo”.
- 35 AGN – Obras Públicas, Vol. 33, Exp. 13, fs. 253.
- 36 BFB – Jueces Receptores, Tuxtepec, Inv. 1479, fs. 3–5va, 6va, 9; Inv. 1496, fs. 254va–263.