Introduction

Luís Pires, a free *Pardo* of indeterminate age, left his home and went on the run early in March, 1799. He had been found guilty of helping to organize a rebellious conspiracy against Portuguese rule in the city of Salvador da Bahia and was wanted for questioning by the High Court. Yet he was also wanted for a second but no less significant charge of sedition. According to the Portuguese legal code, the *Ordenações Filipinas*, sedition was considered high treason and was defined as any attempt to publicly incite subjects to engage in acts of disloyalty to the Portuguese crown.[1] Both charges dated back to August 12, 1798. On that morning, in market squares, public plazas, and in front of churches, handwritten demands for ending race discrimination and slavery, as well as increasing soldiers' pay, accompanied the announcement of a coming rebellion. Death threats to the clergy were scrawled out on the walls and stoops of church facades. Punishments for such actions varied. Sometimes it was just a hanging. Other times the guilty were drawn and quartered by horses, or perhaps cudgeled and broken on wheels. Regardless of the scenario, a gauntlet of death was pursuing Pires, looming on his horizon.

Pires must have surely known this. No one who was interrogated admitted to having seen him leave. He could have been hiding nearby in the countryside or perhaps even somewhere in the city. Regardless of how he got away or where he went, the only thing that mattered, for both officials and for those he had planned a rebellion with, was that he could not be found. He was given a death sentence in absentia, an act that was

[1] "Titulo VI: Do crime da Lesa Majestade," *Ordenações Filipinas, Livros IV e V* (Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1985), 1153.

intended to show how much control the crown had over the life and death of its subjects.[2]

Pires was not the only man to run from prison and certain death. Pedro Leão, a white male with no profession of any sort, also ran away.[3] There was no telling where he was or whether he and Pires were together or separate. Neither of them would be located and brought in for questioning, conviction, or punishment before the investigation into the planned rebellion was concluded. In both cases, the men almost certainly got away with the help of allies, friends, and associates. It was more than common for people to seek this kind of help if they were eligible for military conscription or if they were trying to avoid slave catchers. People avoided being captured in part because of their web of relations, whether those relations were social, economic, or political in nature. In such cases, when the ability to avoid capture makes it impossible for us to know what ultimately happened to an individual, we can still ask questions about who they knew and how social networks helped transform such relations into insurgent movements. In between the covers of this book, I have written with an abiding concern for such relations. In many ways, then, one of the central questions of this book is simply this: What kind of social relations sustained or protected this one particular group of people, in this one particular place and time, who decided they wanted to fight against their government? Relatedly, how might this help us better understand individuals who did not engage in revolutionary meetings but participated in different ways, such as staying quiet about meetings or being conduits for sending messages? Engaging with questions of relations is to engage in questions of socialization. And to think through socialization as an active, never neutral process is to engage with the concept of the political in enslaved societies. This book attempts to do no less.

While Pires and Leão escaped, there were four other men connected to the same crimes who were not so fortunate. João de Deus do Nascimento was a formerly enslaved *Pardo* tailor. Lucas Dantas was a free *Pardo* and a soldier. Luís Gonzaga das Virgens e Veiga was a free *Pardo* soldier as well. Finally, there was Manuel Faustino dos Santos Lira, who was also a

[2] "Quantos aos reos auzentes Luiz Pires, pardo, e Pedro Leão, branco," June 12, 1799, Arquivo Publico do Estado da Bahia (APEB), Autos da Devassa da Conspiração dos Alfaiates (ADCA), vol. 2, 1068.
[3] Ibid.

tailor.[4] They were all declared guilty of leading a seditious conspiracy against the crown, and they were all executed. After the hangings, their arms, legs, and heads were severed and displayed on pikes and poles in public locations across the city.

The Tailors' Conspiracy, as it came to be known, was marked by a high degree of publicity. The executions took place in the city's busiest plaza; the body parts were displayed on roads leading into city markets; even the effect that rotting flesh might have on public health was a matter of concern. Equally important, however, was the fact that the bulletins were posted in the most public places where anyone could see them. In other words, the conspiracy to rebel was not discovered by authorities, but was revealed through a series of pronouncements written by anonymous hands. It was not the intent to rebel that was kept secret, but the numbers and names of those who planned or supported rebellion. Perhaps this is why colonial officials and the High Court chose to refer to the events of 1798 according to two different legal designations. On the one hand, it met the criteria to be labeled a criminal conspiracy, a categorization that focused on the relation between illegality and secrecy – namely any intent to accomplish something legal through illegal and secret means.[5] On the other hand, the High Court and the governor of Bahia also classified the 1798 conspiracy as a case of sedition, a categorization that focused more on the relation between publicity and legality – namely any intent to accomplish something illegal through public and legal procedures.

Due to the fact that no rebellion actually took place, one might be tempted, as some historians have, to argue that the violent repression of this movement was far out of proportion to what had occurred.[6] Yet what if the bulletins that were displayed on public structures for any and all to see, the very thing that made them "seditious," appealed to more than just

[4] "Auto para perguntas ao Reo João de Deos do Nascimento pardo forro, com tenda de alfaiate na rua direita de Palacio, e prezo nas cadeas da Relação," September 4, 1798, APEB, ADCA, vol. 1, 445; "Perguntas feitas a Luís Gonzaga das Virgen e Veiga, Soldado da Companhia de Grandadeiros do Primeiro Regimento desta Praça," August 31, 1798, APEB, ADCA, vol. 1, 101; "Perguntas feitas a Lucas Dantas de Amorim Torres, pardo Soldado do Regimento pago de Artelharia, e prezo nas cadeas desta Relação," September 18, 1798, APEB, ADCA, vol. 1, 588; "Perguntas feitas a Manoel Faustino dos Santos Lira, homem pardo forro alfaiate," September 22, 1798, APEB, ADCA, vol. 2, 699.

[5] "Titulo VI: Do crime da Lesa Majestade," 1153.

[6] Kenneth R. Maxwell, *Conflicts and Conspiracies: Brazil and Portugal, 1750–1808* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 223.

the enslaved and people of color? What is the significance of the fact that these papers publicized the creation of a radical party but kept the names of those who participated in the movement concealed? In short, how might we understand sedition and publicity alongside secrecy and conspiracy? These last questions are the point of departure for this study. In this book, I offer the first full monograph in English on this series of events that have occupied an important place in the historiography of Brazil. To be sure, it is not the first book in English to discuss the conspiracy; that honor belongs to historians of Brazilian independence.[7] Yet no study produced by American or British scholars has analyzed the 1798 conspiracy in its own right and explored what it may tell us about Afro–Brazilian politics during the so-called crisis of Portuguese imperialism during the Age of Revolution. This study thus represents a significant contribution to the historiographies of colonial Brazil and Afro–Latin American studies.

In the chapters that follow, I advance three interlocking arguments. First, I argue that by thinking about the Tailors' Conspiracy as both conspiracy and sedition we get a better sense of why colonial elites and officials felt so threatened about a rebellion that never happened. They knew that they were not just facing a planned uprising but also a plot made by multiple groups of men, most of them free(d) or enslaved, who asked the people, directly and explicitly, to join their uprising. It was a public challenge to the crown, and we cannot underestimate the significance of either the public *pasquins*, as the handwritten bulletins were called, or the public audience whom the writers were trying to persuade. Second, I present the 1798 conspiracy within an empire-wide context that connects India, Angola, and Brazil into a pattern of insurgency. Between 1787 and 1798, Portuguese officials had to contend with a series of conspiracies and rebellions not only in Brazil but in India and West Central Africa as well. In other words, by the time the 1798 conspiracy in Bahia occurred, it was actually part of the tail end of a wave of insurrectionary activity that Portuguese officials dealt with at the end of the eighteenth century. Far from only being a story about Bahia or Brazil, the 1798 conspiracy was part of an empire-wide historical process. My third argument, and the core of this book, is that among those who took part in the conspiracy, the place of care and relationality within their project marked fresh

[7] See Maxwell, *Conflicts and Conspiracies*; Leslie Bethell, *Colonial Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 339–40; Roderick Barman, Brazil: *The Forging of a Nation, 1798–1852* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 33–38.

conceptualizations of the political. This is an insight that emerges from a number of scholars who have demonstrated an orientation towards care for the other at the center of their work. Jessica Marie Johnson's explorations of how African and African-descended women merchants "mothered spaces of care and celebration" helps rewrite the politics, social relations, and economic transactions of the slave trade.[8] Robin D. G. Kelley has also taken note of how people in such spaces often cultivated "a revolutionary culture of care that met all basic needs, that eliminated racism, patriarchy, and poverty, and that democratized knowledge and power."[9] For people of African descent, this usually meant developing political consciousness behind the doors of slave cabins. As the historian Stephanie Camp argued gently but brilliantly, the "secret life of slave cabins offers glimpses of the practices and ideologies that lay behind the development of visible slave resistance."[10] Black Feminist philosopher Joy James has observed that these practices included extending care beyond the blood ties that slavery routinely broke, like an enslaved woman adopting an enslaved child after having had her own children sold away.[11] This was also seen in *Malungos*, shipmates during the middle passage who were sometimes able to reconnect with each other in the Americas, sometimes even when they were enslaved in different locations that were far apart.[12] In other words, the political consciousness of enslaved people and their descendants was constantly changing, taking shape, and recalculating old patterns for new occasions. The challenge in episodes of resistance is to try and follow the different changes in peoples' commitments to the conspiracy and their changing relations to each other, and to do it all with a source

[8] Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 9.

[9] Robin D. G. Kelley, "Getting to Freedom City," *Boston Review* (Oct. 7, 2020), www.bostonreview.net/articles/robin-d-g-kelley-getting-freedom-city/.

[10] Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 94.

[11] For philosopher Joy James, this act is one among many expressions of the "Captive Maternal," a "process of a function" (i.e. slavery) that produces beings who are "phenomena of complicity and resistance." The enslaved mother who adopts the child whose mother has been sold away both complies with an expectation of the enslaver and resists the logic of slavery that continually breaks up the Black family. Joy James, *In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love, Precarity, Power, Communities* (Brussels: Divided Publishing, 2023), 245, 249–50.

[12] Robert Slenes, "Malungu, ngoma vem!: África coberta e descoberta do Brasil," *Revista USP*, no. 12 (Dec.–Feb., 1991–92), 51–54; Alex Borucki, *From Shipmates to Slaves: Emerging Black Identities in the Rio de la Plata* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 61.

base that is overwrought with elisions, ignorance, defamations, improper recordings, distortions, and more. The court investigation into the 1798 conspiracies produced nearly 1,300 pages of transcript. Even with all of its flaws, it is rich with details on relationships of all sorts, relationships between the conspirators but also between "the people" of Bahia. We see a populace defined by relation as well as by rank, even though relation is seldom free from inequity. This resulted in a landscape full of "uneven diversities," formations of people from different ranks who could protect or conceal one another without ever losing a sense of the unequal power dynamics between them.

In this book, relation is more than simply a mode of existence between blood kin or friends. It is a manner of seeking out sociability and community without demanding a synchronicity of thought between self and others. This amounts to building networks out of care and concern, rather than just from ideological foundations, and in the process making care and concern for community a central pillar of revolutionary organizing. In enslaved societies, resistance was based on relation because it first had to come into existence as a secret between one or more individuals. The notable exception to this pattern is flight from enslavement, which usually became relational if a fugitive hoped to stay free. Yet relation is more than just one catalyst among others that propels people into conflict. It is also a principle and a practice that sustains people in the midst of political struggle. What does practicing relation in a revolutionary moment entail, and how does it rise to the level of the political? The preceding question implicitly rejects "the life of the mind" as the proper organon of the political, or rather it rejects a split between the life of the mind and the life of the sensuous.[13] Providing care and concern for comrades, or giving protection and cover to fugitives, were calculated actions that drew on both psychic and emotional energies. If we pay closer attention to relation in rebellions or conspiracies, we see people full of conviction who know how to support, provide for, and nourish one another, physically and spiritually, better than the state. In other words, the life of the mind was only secured for them through attending to and caring for each other's hurts, concerns, and celebrations. Thus, while the ideology of a

[13] This split became essential in theories of early twentieth-century revolution and political philosophy. The most well-known, and quite distinct, exponents of this fissure between the life of the mind and the life of the sensuous are Hannah Arrendt and Jurgen Habermas. See Hannah Arrendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

movement may speak in terms of immediate redress regarding the basic necessities of life, what sustains that movement is a conception of politics in which mind and sensuality make a dual imprint on a political situation and on relationships.

However, there were also profound complications that came from the relational nature of resistance. The most obvious complication was the havoc that slavery and the slave trade created among Black kin networks. Separated by sales or premature deaths and debilitated by injury and humiliation, the very practice of having and living with relatives was a fight that often turned out to be futile. Closely connected to the damage that slavery did to families was how slavery's assault on relations produced enormous difficulties for those who endeavored to resist enslavement and racism. First of all, time was never on the side of those who resisted. More often than not they did not own themselves or their own time, making every minute of their meetings and strategizing of paramount importance.[14] In this context, relations had to take forms in which leaders accepted followers as they came and figured out in the process how to make a movement out of people with very different intentions, interests, and constraints relative to their participation. The notion of an ideal project that moves in one direction is a luxury whose price was too steep and too privileged to entertain.

What gave the 1798 conspiracies a radical flavor, then, was not the ideological orientation of the conspirators and their plans; it was the manner in which they worked to hold themselves together in spite of

[14] Accounting for how enslaved people understood time while they were laboring, and how that impacted the formation of their rebellions, is a topic that scholars such as David Barry Gaspar have connected to the question of relations between enslavers and enslaved people, principally with regard to treatment of the enslaved. See David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 134–50; Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550–1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 439–68. The question of the treatment of enslaved people was pursued much earlier by two texts that were fundamental for the development of the subfield of comparative slavery. American historian Frank Tannenbaum and Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre both produced pioneering works that explored the question of whether the treatment of enslaved people in Latin America was better or worse than the treatment of enslaved people in the US. While they were both interested in demonstrating the more "benign" treatment of slavery in the South American continent, Gaspar was most concerned with the spectrum of behavior between resistance and accommodation. See Gilberto Freyre, *A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen: A Comparative Study of the Negro in the Americas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).

the fact that so many people who were involved came from an array of different social ranks. They crafted their political purpose not only through friendships and blood relations but also through work associations, spiritual practices, and more. Their dialogues and actions framed their conflict as a question of who had the authority to decide on and administer the basic necessities of life. This was what Lucas Dantas, João de Deus, and others fought for: not just the life of mind and debate, but also the right to *decide* on the terms of their lives.

The social relations that tied men to each other, and that caused them to join and remain invested in their conspiracy, were also decisive in shaping how they organized and when they decided to make moves. One of the key moves that they made, one that distinguishes this from the typical conspiracy in an enslaved society, is the fact that they actually moved from conspiring to performing the seditious act of placing the bulletins around the city. In other words, they announced the conspiracy before they were captured and before even trying to rebel. They made no effort to catch colonial officials off guard. It showed a remarkable degree of confidence and dedication to the project. The events of 1798 must not only be studied as a conspiracy but also as a case of something that was both conspiratorial and seditious. It affords us the chance to look at what happened to the movement when the bulletins went up and what happened afterwards. It also allows us to gauge how the conspirators related to people in the city and how they related to one another.

CONSPIRACY, SEDITION, AND SIMULTANEITY

In the field of Caribbean and Latin American history, studies of slave conspiracies have recently been undergoing thorough reevaluations. For example, a number of scholars have revisited rebellions and conspiracies against slavery with a renewed interest in the intellectual and artistic production of Black and *Pardo* subjects.[15] Others have presented new

[15] There has been a thoroughgoing revision of the Aponte Conspiracy of 1812 in Cuba, most notably by Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Haiti and Cuba in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 271–328; Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 41–56; Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro–Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). The

frameworks for studying slavery itself as a state of protracted, physical, and psychological warfare.[16]

As these recent historiographical trends indicate, we are writing more robust intellectual histories of the Black Atlantic during the Age of Revolution. When it comes to writing about conspiracies, however, the problem of "veracity" remains central to the inquiry. This way of conceptualizing Black political action is framed as a question of intent, namely whether the accused individuals were actually intending to start a rebellion or were simply the unfortunate scapegoats in a drama of white paranoia. To arrive at an answer to this question, qualifying questions are posed. For instance, did the suspected conspirators have access to guns? Can we identify a chain of command or a set of leaders? Were they seeking some type of foreign aid? Yet these are not zero-sum questions that can be solved with a singular metric of veracity. For instance, as several scholars have demonstrated, linking the realness of a conspiracy to the presence of or access to firearms discounts other weapons and styles of warfare that dispossessed groups of people make use of. Thus, fire, building tools, sticks, cudgels, and poisons are characterized as premodern, ineffective, and not worth serious consideration.[17]

Conspiracy of the Ladder and the revolutionary movements of 1840–44 by enslaved Africans in Cuba has also been thoroughly reassessed. See Aisha Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841–1844* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Michelle Reid-Vasquez, *The Year of the Lash: Free People of Color in Cuba and the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011). Other pertinent examples include Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), esp. 57–83, 195–223.

[16] See, most recently, Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). Susanna Hecht argues, in reference to the Canudos "Rebellion" of 1898 in the interior of Bahia, Brazil, that the settlement of Canudos might be best understood as the radical application of collective flight – or *quilombo* (maroon) politics – from an oppressive regime. The state hence becomes an invading force, drawing out the warfare of slavery beyond the end of bondage. See Susanna B. Hecht, *The Scramble for the Amazon, and the Lost Paradise of Euclides da Cunha* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), esp. 51–72.

[17] Mimi Sheller demonstrates this point in her analysis of the Piquet Rebellion and the subsequent "piquettiste movements" in Haiti in 1844–68. See Mimi Sheller, *Democracy after Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Radicalism in Haiti and Jamaica* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 111–42. Manuel Barcia makes a similar case for enslaved soldiers in Bahia and Cuba in the early nineteenth century. When they lacked firearms, Africans and their descendants fought against slavery with other weapons and tactics, including swords and fire. See Manuel Barcia, *West African Warfare in Bahia and Cuba: Soldier Slaves in the Atlantic World, 1807–1844* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

If identifying the veracity of a conspiracy is a process of stacking up affirmative responses to qualifying questions, when the answer to more than one question is negative we move one step in the opposite direction towards discounting that anything revolutionary took place. For some historians, this is an invitation to characterize the event as little more than "loose talk" that was exploited by paranoid officials.[18] Yet the central problem in this idea is not that historians raise doubts about the sincerity of historical actors to follow through on their words. Indeed, the sincerity of the claims is not what is at stake. The real dilemma that engulfs the notion of "loose talk" is that the sincerity of speech takes precedence over the *operation* of speech in a setting where slavery is legal and prevalent. There was no concept of free speech as we know it in the Portuguese empire of the late eighteenth century. Slanderous and seditious words often led to court cases and death, and both imperial subjects and enslaved people knew this.[19]

The concern that some historians show towards distinguishing "loose talk" from actual conspiracy stems from the widest held assumption about the concept of Black political life in colonial slave regimes: that persons of African descent could plan and organize only in secret, a vision of politics that forecloses the possibility of seeing seditious enslaved and free(d) peoples at war with the state.[20] But in the Portuguese empire of the late eighteenth century, seditious subjects could be and were identified across all ranks and classes of society. For example, a plot to assassinate the king of Portugal in 1758 resulted in the charge of sedition and execution of one family of nobles and their Jesuit confessor. Their crime was not simply attacking the king's coach in broad daylight but also publicly questioning his rule.[21] Later, in 1787, a seditious conspiracy to

[18] Michael Johnson refers to conversations between Denmark Vesey and his co-conspirators as "loose talk." See Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators," in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 4 (Oct., 2001), 915–76.

[19] This recall of the relationship between the law and the concept of "loose talk" in an enslaved society comes from legal historian Thomas J. Davis, "Conspiracy and Credibility: Look Who's Talking, about What: Law Talk and Loose Talk," in "Forum: The Making of a Slave Conspiracy, Volume II," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, vol. 59, no. 1 (Jan., 2002), 153–58.

[20] This assumes that the political life that enslaved people developed in slave quarters remained there. While this is indeed present in Stephanie M. H. Camp's work, she also underscores that the practices and cultures of resistance that were developed in the slave quarter were also utilized in public ways, like posting clips from abolitionist newspapers on a cabin wall; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 93–116.

[21] Kenneth R. Maxwell, *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69–86; Franklin L. Lord, "Assassination in the Eighteenth