
MATHIEU DA COSTA AND EARLY CANADA:

POSSIBILITIES AND
PROBABILITIES

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Mathieu Da Costa and Early Canada¹

Sometimes what we do not know is even more intriguing than what we do. The story of Mathieu Da Costa and the part he may have played in the early exploration of Canada is a fascinating case in point.

What is stated or implied in the surviving historical record is that Mathieu Da Costa was a free Black man who in the early 1600s was hired by Europeans, both French and Dutch, to act as a translator or interpreter on voyages to North America. There was a clash between French and Dutch interests over his services, which eventually led to a court case in France which dragged on from 1609 until 1619. There are other details in the historical documents, but not enough to determine exactly where and when he might have worked as an intermediary along the coasts of Atlantic Canada. Nonetheless, a number of authors have gone into print with assertions that Mathieu Da Costa was at Port-Royal in the early 1600s.² Their conclusion was based on the fact that Da Costa signed a contract to work as an interpreter for Pierre Dugua de Mons (sometimes identified as Du Gua de Monts), the leader of French colonization efforts at St. Croix

¹The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance and advice provided by several people in the preparation of this paper. First and foremost, the research carried out by Hilary Russell and Barbara Schmeisser on Mathieu Da Costa has been invaluable. Thanks are also due to David States and Ruth Whitehead for the suggestions they made as I was exploring the topic.

²Hilary Russell summarizes the evolution of the published references to Da Costa in her unpublished manuscript, *Looking for Mathieu da Costa*, ms. on file, Parks Canada, Halifax. The first mention of Mathieu Da Costa in a published work occurred in 1939 with William Inglis Morse, *Pierre du Gua, Sieur de Monts, Records: Colonial and Saintongeais* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1939), p. 51, note 1. More recent books in which Da Costa has been mentioned are: Morris Bishop, *Champlain, The Life of Fortitude* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1963), p. 98; Leo W. Bertley, *Canada and Its People of African Descent* (Pierrefonds: Bilongo Publishers, 1977), p. xi; Elizabeth Jones, *Gentlemen and Jesuits* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), pp. 260-261; Bridglal Pachai, *Peoples of the Maritimes: Blacks* (Tantallon: Four East Pub, 1987), p. 7. Da Costa has also been treated in a few films and is mentioned in at least two websites. The most common statement made about Da Costa is that he was at Port-Royal as part of Pierre Dugua de Mons settlement group.

in 1604 and at Port-Royal in 1605.³ The difficulty with using the contract as evidence, however, is that it was signed in Amsterdam in 1608 to take effect beginning in 1609. Unfortunately there are no subsequent references to confirm that the interpreter subsequently crossed the ocean as the contract specified.

The fragmentary nature of the evidence surrounding Mathieu Da Costa presents a problem for those who want to state exactly where and when he travelled and worked in early Canada. If we can set aside for a moment our desire for certainty, not an easy thing for an historian, we should be able to suggest a range of possibilities concerning this enigmatic figure in Canadian history. Our starting point will be in Africa, a century or more before the birth of the man we have come to know as Mathieu Da Costa.⁴

European Exploration and Trade along the West African Coast

A familiarity with the African context in which European exploration took place is essential if we are to grasp how and why Mathieu Da Costa likely found himself along the coasts of Atlantic Canada at the turn of the 17th century.

³George MacBeath, in his biography in Vol. 1 of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, pp. 291-294, calls the man Du Gua de Monts. More recent scholarship, notably by Jean Liebel in a dissertation undertaken in France, identifies the personage as Dugua de Mons. That is also how the Sieur de Mons actually signed his own name and how Samuel Champlain referred to him in writing..

⁴Even the name by which the man called himself is not known for sure, as it differs in the historical record according to the language of the person making the reference. French documents identify him as Mathieu De Coste ; and Dutch ones as Matheus de Cost, een Swart genamd Matheu or some other variation. Most of the relevant French documents were published in Robert Le Blant and René Beaudry, eds., *Nouveaux documents sur Champlain et son époque*. Vol. 1 (1560-1622), (Ottawa, 1967), esp. documents 105, 106, 110, 114, 117, 168 (also p. 226, 212). The Dutch references are provided by Hilary Russell, in a report entitled Documents from Gemeentearchief Amsterdam, which she prepared in October 1998 after conducting research in Holland. That manuscript is on file in Parks Canada offices in Ottawa and Halifax.

Beginning in the 1440s, Portuguese navigators and traders moved beyond North Africa, an area they had long known, and out to the Madeira, Canary and other islands well off the coast of Morocco. The years that followed saw the Portuguese sail farther and farther down the west coast of Africa, reaching the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) in 1470.⁵ Initially, the Portuguese were seeking to trade for gold with the Africans, and later for pepper and other commodities. A trade in slaves also developed early on, with consequences that became increasingly tragic as the centuries wore on. The eventual development in the Americas of plantation economies based on slave labour for the cultivation of sugar, tobacco and cotton would result in the transportation of millions of African across the ocean.

Well before that era, in the 15th century, the Portuguese found trading along the Atlantic coast of Africa to be lucrative. So much so that they tried to keep it hidden from other European nations. They forbade their sailors from talking about where they had been and they kept maps of the area in restricted circulation. Nonetheless, it was only a matter of time before word of the trade circulated and attracted commercial voyages by Dutch, English and French mariners. Those colonizing powers would eventually largely supplant the Portuguese in Africa. Spain's absorption of Portugal between 1580 and 1640 hastened that process.

African Interpreters

At the time of first contact, the Portuguese and the peoples along the west coast of Africa had no language in common. The first communication and ensuing commercial deals were presumably carried out with gestures and a minimal exchange of dialogue. Soon a makeshift language, known to linguists as a *lingua franca* or pidgin, emerged. It offered a blend of Portuguese vocabulary interspersed with African terms and it followed African grammar and

⁵Wyatt MacGaffey, Dialogues of the Deaf: Europeans on the Atlantic coast of Africa, in Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 249-267.

syntax.⁶ The number of words and expressions required to carry out commercial transactions is not known, yet it was clearly much less than was needed to discuss weighty subjects or to become a storyteller. A few dozen catch-phrases may have been sufficient for most transactions.

In time the original pidgin used along the African coast evolved into a more formal language known as a creole. This occurred when the interim pidgin was passed along to others and developed as a full-fledged language. The new language was described by the Portuguese as Crioulo, and by other Europeans as Black Portuguese. For the Africans who spoke this creole, it was the second or third language they understood. It is a language still spoken by some Africans as we enter the 21st century.

The Portuguese were little inclined to learn either the native African languages or the new creole.⁷ They preferred to hire and use Africans as their interpreters. That preference of having Africans act as intermediaries was also adopted by other European nations—the Dutch, English, French, and others—in their trading contacts with Africa. Perhaps the lack of interest in learning the African languages reflected a European belief in their superiority, in that they thought the incomprehensible languages were beneath them. In any case, the Portuguese-based Crioulo

⁶For an introduction to the topics of pidgin and creole languages, see Jacques Arends, Pieter Muysken and Norval Smith, ed., *Pidgins and Creoles, An Introduction* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 1994), and Bill Hymes, ed., *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, April 1968* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

⁷The term creole can be used in at least three different contexts, always relating to the creation of something new as a consequence of blending previously separate elements. The word itself seems to derive from the Latin term *criar* meaning to create. In the scholarly literature on creolization the word can refer to languages and to people. The former concept is at the heart of this paper, while the latter has two separate meanings. At one time the term creole referred to a European who was born in the colonies; later it came to mean a person of mixed race. For a range of articles on creoles and creolization as the concept relates to archaeology, see the complete issue of *Historical Archaeology*, Vo. 34, No. 3 (2000).

became the most widely used of the pidgins and creoles which developed along the Atlantic coast of Africa.⁸

The Portuguese dependence on African interpreters led first to the emergence of specialized and highly valued individuals called *grumetes*. They carried out translation work and were often active in the trading process itself, assisting with and even carrying out barter and exchanges. *Grumetes* also sometimes helped with the navigation along the coast of western Africa. Over time, a number of Portuguese men chose, or were selected, to live ashore among the Africans in the principal trade posts. (When other Europeans reached the west African coast to set up trading ventures, there were about two dozen such trading posts.) The European men who lived ashore were known to the Portuguese as *lançados*, which derived from the verb to throw oneself. It was an evocative term for the Europeans had put themselves in a situation unlike any they had experienced before. The *lançados* were typically permitted by the Africans to take wives from the local population, generally from the families of leaders or other influential persons. It was a way of strengthening ties with their trading partners.⁹

The largest and best-known of the coastal settlements was Elmina on the Gold Coast. By 1682 it had grown to have a population of between 15,000 and 20,000. Its name referred to the nearby gold mine. Thanks to a strong fortification, Elmina developed into the most infamous of European strongholds and slave factories on Africa's west coast. By the 18th century, 30,000

⁸There is a summary of the evolution from pidgin to creole languages in the context of west Africa in John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1992]), pp. 211-216.

⁹There is a discussion of *grumetes* and *lançados* in George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p. 124, pp. 136-37.

slaves were passing through Elmina each year on their way to the Americas. Built by the Portuguese, the castle at Elmina was later controlled by the Dutch and the English.¹⁰

To return to the story of the Portuguese *lançados* and their African wives, their children were Euro-Africans or African Europeans. They were a small but distinct group who found themselves in the sometimes advantageous and sometimes difficult situation of bridging two cultures. Many of the trade interpreters, perhaps a majority, came out of these mixed marriages. They understood the languages, cultural traditions and business approaches of both sides. They were therefore ideally suited to act as go-betweens when it came to trade or other matters. It is therefore not surprising that they came to be regarded as indispensable to the inter-cultural process. On the other hand, the Euro-Africans sometimes found themselves the objects of discrimination from both sides since they did not belong completely to one group or the other. Two historians of Africa, Africans and African-Americans, George Brooks and Ira Berlin, offer the following descriptions of the Euro-Africans:

[They] dressed in European-style clothing and wore crucifixes ... They spoke Crioulo, which was for many their first language. They flaunted Portuguese family names and first names and asserted that they were whites. They lived in distinctive rectangular-shaped dwellings that they furnished with some European articles.

The most skillful ... acquired influence in widening social and commercial networks among elites and traders in their own and neighbouring communities.¹¹

The people of the enclaves – both long-term residents and wayfarers – soon joined together genetically as well as geographically. European men took African women as wives and mistresses, and, before long, the offspring of these unions helped people the enclave. Elmina sprouted a substantial cadre

¹⁰Elmina is a World Heritage Site; its story can be found in many books on Africa and the slave trade. There are also a number of websites which provide a synopsis and images of the buildings which are still standing.

¹¹Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*, p. 194, pp. 195-96.

of Euro-Africans (most of them Luso-Africans) men and women of African birth but shared African and European parentage, whose combination of swarthy skin, European dress and deportment, knowledge of local customs, and multilingualism gave them an understanding of both African and European ways while denying them full acceptance in either culture.¹²

We are unlikely ever to know for sure, but it is certainly a strong possibility that the individual we have come to know as Mathieu Da Costa was from a Euro-African background similar to that described above. That would explain the references to him as a *naigre*, the Portuguese-sounding name by which he was identified, and his occupation as an interpreter on a trading venture. Depending on his age, Da Costa may possibly have been a third or fourth generation descendant of an original marriage or relationship between a *lançado* and an African woman. Where the interpreters of the intervening generations might have travelled and worked, and with whom they had families, is unknown. Yet what is probable is that each generation of interpreter(s) developed matrimonial and other strategies so they could keep the secrets of their specialized occupation within their defined family unit. For if the skills and knowledge that made them so valued became too widely known, it would have had a detrimental effect on their livelihood.

Another possibility is that Da Costa and his predecessors were Africans without a Portuguese or other European ancestor. That is, he could have been a *grumete* or the descendant of a *grumete* who assisted the Europeans as interpreters and trade intermediaries on African coastal voyages. To have subsequently been hired for voyages to the Americas seems a more difficult transition than for a Euro-African who straddled both cultures. Yet it would not have been impossible. One author, Jack Forbes, writes that Portuguese vessels were noted for having crews of diverse national and racial origins. From Madagascar to Japan, crews were often of

¹²Ira Berlin, *From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America*, in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Series, Vol. 53, No. 2, April 1996, p. 257.

African or Indian (South Asian) origin.¹³ What lends support to a theory that Da Costa (or an ancestor) may have made the transition from Africa to Europe is the realization that there were many Portuguese merchants in Antwerp in the 1500s. Another variation could be that the Dutch, who clearly had a familiarity with Da Costa and his skills if we are to judge by their interest in employing him in 1607-09, may have first come in contact with the interpreter as a result of one of the many Dutch captures of Portuguese ships in the period after 1590. According to Forbes, many of the crew-members of those ships were non-white; and some were sent to Dutch ports in the Americas, of which New Amsterdam (as New York was first known) was one.¹⁴ The proof is not there to make such a connection in Da Costa's case, but the circumstantial evidence makes it possible.

Of course, there is also a possibility that Da Costa was not descended from a line of trade interpreters. A definite longshot would be that he or his family were descended from the 30 to 40 sons and kinsmen that King Alfonso I of the Kongo sent to Europe in the late 1400s to study to become priests.¹⁵ More plausible, though still a stretch, is the possibility that Mathieu Da Costa or his ancestors travelled northward to Europe or westward across the Atlantic, perhaps as slaves, with no particular background lineage or experience as an interpreter. In that imaginary scenario Mathieu would have had to have demonstrated such an uncommon gift for languages that his skill lifted him out of whatever situation he was in, and resulted in him being offered a position as a paid interpreter on trading voyages to the northeastern corner of the continent. Such an explanation is, in our opinion, less likely than the probability that he came out of a background as a trading interpreter in Africa, or as the descendant of such a person.

¹³Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 38.

¹⁴Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁵Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 64.

Whatever the details of Mathieu Da Costa's personal background and family tree, it is undeniable that the native languages spoken on the west coast of Africa were not those of the indigenous peoples on the east coasts of North and South America. How could Da Costa and others like him, coming out of a European or African background, have acquired a familiarity with one or more languages of the Americas, so as to be contracted by the French and the Dutch to sail as an interpreter to North America in the early 1600s?

There are three main possibilities. First, Mathieu Da Costa had spent sufficient time in the Americas to learn the languages of one or more of the Aboriginal peoples from the other side of the Atlantic. Second, he had met Amerindians in Europe who had taught him enough of their language(s) so he could serve as an interpreter when he eventually made the trans-Atlantic crossing in person. Third, the pidgin and creole languages that worked in Africa also worked well, with some variations, in the North American context. Before we examine these three possibilities in more detail, let us look briefly at the connections which developed among Europe, Africa and the Americas beginning in the late 15th century.

The Atlantic World

Though Europeans had travelled to North America at least as far back as the year 1000, when Norsemen sailed to L'Anse aux Meadows and other locations along the northeastern reaches of the continent, an entirely new period of European exploration began with the first voyage of Christopher Columbus to the West Indies in 1492. (It is relevant to note that between 1482 and 1484 Columbus was aboard a Portuguese ship that sailed to the Gold Coast.)¹⁶ Basque, Breton, Portuguese and other fishers may well have preceded Columbus to the offshore banks and coasts which lay on the other side of the Ocean Sea (as the Atlantic Ocean was then called). It was Columbus' voyages, however, that ushered in an era of unprecedented change. There began a series of developments that led ultimately to a massive transfer of European and African

¹⁶MacGaffey, *Dialogues of the Deaf*, p. 252.

populations to the Americas. That demographic shift, along with the diseases the people carried, had a deadly impact on millions of Aboriginal peoples in North and South America.

The Portuguese and Spanish were the first off the mark in exploring and exploiting the resources of what the Europeans called a New World. The Dutch, English, and French followed with voyages of their own. The earliest documented explorer to the waters of what is now eastern Canada was John Cabot (Giovanni Cabota) in 1497. The more the European ships made the trans-Atlantic crossing, the less the ocean was a barrier to travel. It soon became a busy sea-going highway linking the four continents. An Atlantic world was created, stretching from Africa and Europe on one side to South and North America on the other.¹⁷

If we begin with the assumption that Mathieu Da Costa was not the first of his family to act as an interpreter for European traders which seems plausible but impossible to confirm then a transition from African to North American voyages becomes easier to understand. We need to recall that the early modern era was a time when craft skills were commonly handed down from father to son and from mother to daughter. There is no reason to think that it was any different in African or Euro-African families where the father plied his trade as a cross-cultural interpreter. The knowledge passed on to a son who showed an interest in or a talent for that line of work would have included geographical knowledge about areas and the peoples who lived there, word lists, short expressions and useful gestures, customs and practices, and some tricks of the negotiation or bargaining process. If the individuals were literate, some of the information could have been written down. Otherwise, it formed part of an oral tradition. As the secrets of that particular trade could bring in a relatively comfortable living, the information would not have been spread widely beyond the family unit. Marriage partners might well have been chosen from other interpreter families so as to limit the number of rival competitors.

¹⁷There is already a vast literature on the subject of the Atlantic world and it is growing steadily. The books and articles cited in Ira Berlin's article from *Creole to African* offer an excellent starting point. New York University has developed an Atlantic World Workshop, about which more can be learned at www.nyu.edu/pages/atlantic/.

It is possible, though once again there is a total lack of documentation, that at some point in the 1500s Mathieu Da Costa's grandfather, father or maybe an uncle or older brother, accompanied a Portuguese or some other nation's voyages to one or more trans-Atlantic destinations. Certainly by the mid-1500s there were hundreds of voyages and thousands of mariners coming from Europe to the northeastern corner of North America. An account from 1578 stated that on the banks off Newfoundland there were generally 100 Spanish vessels taking cod, another 20 to 30 Spanish ships hunting whales, 50 Portuguese vessels, 150 sail of French and Bretons, and 50 English vessels.¹⁸ The primary economic activity was out to sea, harvesting bountiful marine resources. Yet there was occasional contact ashore with the Aboriginal peoples. Many of those contacts involved trading European manufactures for furs. The way in which the Mi kmaq came out to greet Jacques Cartier as he sailed by the Gaspé peninsula in 1534, waving furs they were anxious to trade, shows that it was already well-known by that date that Europeans wanted furs and would exchange manufactured goods to get them.

Generally speaking, the 1500s witnessed far more European voyages to harvest cod or whales or to trade with Amerindians than it did attempts at founding year-round colonies. One short-lived colonizing initiative in Atlantic waters was a Portuguese venture. Joao Alvares de Fagundes established, or tried to establish, a colony on Cape Breton Island in 1521.¹⁹ Such an undertaking, especially given its Portuguese context, could have offered opportunities for an interpreter -- say a relative of Da Costa's -- to gain experience with the Mi kmaq. Then again,

¹⁸Richard Brown, *A History of the Island of Cape Breton* (Belleville: Mika Publishing Co., 1979), [1869], p. 34.

¹⁹Neither David B. Quinn, *North America from Earliest Discovery to First Settlements. The Norse Voyages to 1612* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 352, nor Carl Ortwin Sauer, *Sixteenth Century North America, The Land and the People as Seen by the Europeans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 49-51, conclude that Cape Breton Island was definitely the locale for the Fagundes colony. Champlain, however, wrote this of Niganis (Ingonish): The Portuguese formerly tried to occupy that island, and spent one winter there; but the harshness of the weather and the cold forced them to abandon their habitations. Champlain is cited in J.G. Bourinot, *Historical and Descriptive Account of the Island of Cape Breton and of its Memorials of the French Regime*, (Montréal, 1892), p. 138.

there is no reason why a Euro-African interpreter could not have come across the Atlantic on a French, Dutch, Spanish, Basque or English ship. Like free agent sports stars today, skilled ship captains, pilots, navigators, and crew members often changed the flags under which they sailed. Interpreters would have been no different.

Then again, one did not necessarily have to cross the ocean to make contact with Amerindians to begin to learn elements of their language(s). Hundreds of Aboriginal individuals were taken as captives to Europe in the 1500s. A much smaller number of Amerindians crossed the Atlantic of their own free will. Da Costa or a relative might have begun to learn some key words and phrases that would later prove useful in a trading context while remaining on the European continent.

Interpreters and the Language of Trade in North America

As they had done in Africa, so in North and South America, the European explorers and traders felt a need to have interpreters to help deal with the sometimes delicate negotiations with the indigenous population. Expressed differently, the Europeans continued to show reluctance to learn the languages of the Aboriginal peoples with whom they were trading or hoping to trade. It was a task they preferred to see a specialist handle. The Basques were perhaps an exception, if Ralph Pastore's suggestion is correct that Basque fishermen-fur traders may even have made a practice of leaving young men with Native groups over the winter to learn the language and become interpreters.²⁰

It is unknown and probably unknowable how often ships sailing from Europe to the Americas carried an interpreter on board; African, Euro-African or otherwise. There is no doubt, however, that in the 1500s at least, there were many attempts by Europeans to solve their

²⁰Ralph Pastore, *The Sixteenth Century: Aboriginal Peoples and European Contact*, in Phillip A. Buckner and John G. Reid, eds., *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p . 29.

language difficulties with the Aboriginal peoples in another way. That was by taking back to Europe individual Amerindians to learn the respective European language. There were hundreds of Amerindians brought to Europe, usually as kidnap victims, during the early decades of contact with the New World. Most were carried overseas as curiosities, some were enslaved, and others, such as a St. Lawrence Iroquoian chief's son taken by Jacques Cartier, travelled specifically to learn French. The voyages to Europe were rarely voluntary, though some were; such as the Mi kmaq chief Messamouet who went to Bayonne before 1580 and there improved his French.²¹

Yet one wonders, knowing that Da Costa and others would eventually be engaged as an interpreter, whether or not doubts began to grow in the minds of the Europeans about certain Amerindian interpreters, at least in instances where those interpreters were being asked to negotiate with their own people. Sceptical Europeans may have had doubts as to whose side the interpreters were really on when it came to the bargaining process. If that was a concern, the traders likely wanted an interpreter whom they believed would work exclusively for them. If such rationalization is valid, it may be one of the factors which explains why Mathieu Da Costa was sought by both French and Dutch in the early 1600s.

The temptation to invent stories to explain Mathieu Da Costa runs strong, as can be seen in the number of authors who have done so in years gone by, and by the different hypotheses put forth in this paper. It is an understandable temptation because we know the end result – a Black man was contracted as an interpreter to deal with Amerindians – yet we lack the evidence to explain how he might have obtained his skill or knowledge. One imagined explanation may sound better than another, but it is wise to recall that individual lives often do not conform to what logic suggests should have happened.

²¹Peter Bakker, 'The language of the coast tribes is Half Basque. A Basque-Amerindian Pidgin in use between Europeans and Native Americans in North America, ca. 1640,' *Anthropological Linguistics*, 31 (1989), 3-4, p. 120.

If we lay aside the guesswork for a moment, the fact remains that there were at least two known Blacks hired by Europeans to work as interpreters in northeastern North America in the early 1600s. One was Mathieu Da Costa, who signed a contract in Europe in 1608 to begin work in 1609 as an interpreter overseas for Pierre Dugua de Mons. The other Black whose name has survived in documentation was Jan Rodriguez, who was an interpreter in the Dutch colony along the Hudson River in what is now New York State. Rodriguez was described variously as a Spaniard, a mulatto and a Black. References to him date from 1613-14.²² One assumes that the French and Dutch would not have engaged these two Black interpreters unless they possessed the skills to help out with negotiating trades or exchanges with Amerindians. Somewhere and somehow Da Costa and Rodriguez had picked up a sufficient level of familiarity with the nature and language of Amerindian trade to be able to sell their services to the organizers of colonizing ventures. In the case of Rodriguez, it seems that he was originally from Santo Domingo (Saint-Domingue) in the West Indies.²³

Perhaps there were other Africans or Euro-Africans hired to mediate contact between Europeans and Amerindians in the late 1500s and early 1600s. If so, the evidence has not yet surfaced. A candidate would be the Black man whom Marc Lescarbot records as dying aboard the *Jonas* while en route to Port-Royal in 1606.²⁴ There is no mention of the man's occupation, so he could just as easily have been a sailor, servant or slave. Unless new documentary sources are uncovered, we will never know for sure who he was or what was his intended role.

²²Peter Bakker, 'First African into New Netherland, 1613-1614,' *De Halve Maen*, Vol. 68, No. 3. The article is about Rodriguez, with a lengthy discussion of Da Costa as well.

²³Simon Hart, *The Prehistory of the New Netherland Company* (Amsterdam: City of Amsterdam Press, 1959), p. 23, p. 75.

²⁴Marc Lescarbot, *Nova Francia, A Description of Acadia, 1606* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1928).

It is relevant to note, in passing, that the European use of individuals of African descent as interpreters and cultural go-betweens would last well into the 18th century. Slave captains and slave traders relied on interpreters to carry on their business in the Americas as they had done in Africa. For instance, an advertisement in a Jamaican newspaper of 1790 called for information about a runaway slave who spoke the English, French, Dutch, Danish and Portuguese languages.²⁵

To return to the 17th century, our interest in Da Costa (and Rodriguez) is illuminated when we realize that the language or languages used to carry on trades with Amerindians along the northeastern coast of North America were not pure Aboriginal languages. Rather, as in Africa, pidgins developed soon after contact with Europeans. Those abbreviated trade languages took elements from both indigenous and European sources.²⁶ In the region now known as Atlantic Canada, this phenomenon was noticed at least as early as the 1540s, and possibly earlier. Not surprisingly, the European words and expressions that first showed up in the trade languages, usually in slightly modified form, were those that related to the items to be exchanged (such as the words for European articles of clothing). Various European terms – Portuguese, Spanish, French, Basque and English – may have all had their impact on the languages of the Mi kmaq, Maliseet and other peoples in the 1500s.

Whichever pidgin was first -- it may well have been Portuguese -- a Basque-influenced trade language became the most commonly used of the trade languages. The existence of one or

²⁵Extract from an advertisement cited in James Walvin, *Making the Black Atlantic, Britain and the African Diaspora* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 71. There is a discussion on the use of African interpreters in the slave trade on pp. 70-71.

²⁶The key articles upon which this section of the paper is based are three articles by Peter Bakker. Those articles are: 'The language of the coast tribes is Half Basque. A Basque-Amerindian Pidgin ... ca. 1640'; 'Two Basque loanwords in Micmac', *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 55 (1988), pp. 258-261; and 'Basque Pidgin Vocabulary in European-Algonquian Trade Contacts', in W. Cowan, ed., *Papers of the Nineteenth Algonquian Conference* (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1988), pp. 7-15.

more Basque pidgins was noted by many Europeans who left written accounts from the 1500s and early 1600s. Parisian lawyer Marc Lescarbot, who was based at Port-Royal but who travelled widely in the region, commented several times about the languages he heard and saw used. He affirmed on one occasion that the Aboriginal peoples of the Atlantic region have been so long frequented by the Basques that the language of the coast tribes is half Basque. Lescarbot was overstating the case in that remark, for he clarified the subject in another entry. He commented that the Amerindians still used their own language when they were communicating among themselves, but for the sake of convenience they speak to us in a language which is more familiar to us, with which much Basque is mingled.²⁷ Many other European observers offered similar comments.²⁸ One commentator was the author of an account of the Scottish colony established at Port-Royal in 1629, who stated that the language of the local Aboriginal people was marred with the Basques language.²⁹

The following explanation of the linguistic impact the Basques had on the languages of the coastal Aboriginal peoples was penned in 1710:

When the Basques first started fishing for cod and whales in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, they made friends with the Indians of this area, and trade with them, ... Since their languages were completely different, they created a form of lingua franca composed of Basque and two different languages of the Indians, by means of which they could understand each other quite well; the settlers of the French colonies in Canada and from the northern part of Acadia, found that this language

²⁷Both citations by Lescarbot are found in Bakker, The language of the coast tribes is Half Basque, p. 124, p. 121.

²⁸Ruth Whitehead writes that Both Micmac and Maliseet were by this time [ca. 1580] fluent in pidgin Basque, the trade language of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in I Have Lived Here Since the World Began, Atlantic Coast Artistic Traditions, in *The Spirit Sings, Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart / Glenbow Museum, 1987), p. 34.

²⁹Naomi Griffiths and John G. Reid, New Evidence on New Scotland, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. 49 (July 1992), pp. 492-508.

was already well established for a long time when they arrived.³⁰

The Aboriginal nations who used the Basque pidgin the most, according to linguistic scholar Peter Bakker, were the Mi kmaq and Montagnais (who lived along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River). Other coastal peoples, like the Maliseet and Passamaquoddy, apparently adopted a Basque-influenced trade language to a lesser extent, while the evidence concerning the Inuit and the Beothuk is not sufficient for Bakker to form an opinion. Unlike in Africa, the pidgins used along the shores of Atlantic Canada did not evolve into a creole that endured into modern times.

When we combine the linguistic evidence from northeastern North America with the likelihood that Da Costa, Rodriguez and possibly others were second- or third-generation Euro-African or African interpreters, we arrive at a plausible explanation for how and why these Black men were hired to accompany trading and colonizing ventures to northeastern North America in the 1500s and early 1600s. In that interpretation, Da Costa and others like him carried with them a body of skills and experience in using pidgin languages to carry out trades on behalf of European interests around the Atlantic world. To be sure, the Portuguese-based Crioulo of coastal Africa differed from the Basque- and Portuguese-influenced pidgins of coastal Maritime Canada. Yet there were some inevitable shared vocabularies, and the phrase list required to carry out the bartering process in a pidgin was nothing like that required to master any of the languages from which it derived. Indeed, historian Ira Berlin has written that a working knowledge of the [African] creole tongue was as valuable on the North American coast as in Africa.³¹ That being said, adaptations were undoubtedly required to speak with and understand the Amerindians, for the vocabulary and syntax of the Mi kmaq, Montagnais and other Aboriginal nations had to be incorporated. However, those modifications would have been much less

³⁰Bakker, *Two Basque Loanwords*, p. 259.

³¹Berlin, *From Creole to African*, p. 266.

daunting for well-travelled interpreters than for the average European. Otherwise, why hire an interpreter at all?

Another consideration may be that there were more skills than simple translation looked for when one hired Da Costa and Rodriguez. It is highly likely that those men, like their predecessors in Africa, were not only adept with the catch-phrases of the trade language but also its gestures and customs. It is not unreasonable to surmise that what the Dutch and French were contracting for were more than linguists. They were also getting, or so they hoped, individuals who had a reputation for negotiating better exchanges than would otherwise have been possible. Moreover, encounters between Europeans and Amerindians were often far from friendly. Sometimes hostilities developed, violence flared and lives were lost on both sides.³² Interpreters were undoubtedly sought who were adept at helping to establish or to maintain relationships that were both peaceful and profitable.

Mathieu Da Costa: The Literal Evidence

From documents generated in Europe between 1607 and 1619³³ one can determine a number of facts. First, the earliest mention of Mathieu Da Costa dates from February 1607, when

³²Pastore gives several examples in *Sixteenth Century: Aboriginal Peoples and European Contact*, pp. 33-34.

³³Barb Schmeisser offers a most useful summary in her unpublished manuscript, *Chronology of events surrounding Mathieu Da Costa*, ms. on file, Parks Canada, Halifax. For a transcript of the known Dutch documents, see Hilary Russell, *Documents from Gemeentearchief Amsterdam*, unpub. ms. For the relevant French documents see Robert Le Blant and René Beaudry, eds., *Nouveaux documents sur Champlain et son époque*. Vol. 1 (1560-1622), (Ottawa, 1967), esp. documents 105, 106, 110, 114, 117, 168 (also p. 226, document 212). An article that should be read in conjunction is Theodore J. Kupp, *Quelques aspects de la dissolution de la compagnie de M. de Monts, 1607*, *Revue de l'histoire de l'Amérique française*, Vol. 24, no.3 (décembre 1970), pp. 357-374.

he was in Holland. At that time, Jean Ralluau, secretary to Pierre Dugua de Mons, travelled to Amsterdam to protest the Dutch seizure of Dugua's trading vessels at Tadoussac the year before.³⁴ One of the issues in the dispute as it developed was the enticement or kidnapping of Mathieu Da Costa by the Dutch. Implied but not stated was that Da Costa had been working as an interpreter, or had contracted to do so, when Dutch interests had intervened. One might conclude that Da Costa had been involved in the Dugua's trading activities along the St. Lawrence River, but that is not clarified. The following year, 1608, Da Costa signed a contract in Amsterdam that committed him to sail with or on behalf of Dugua de Mons as an interpreter *pour les voyages de Canada, Cadie et ailleurs*.³⁵ It is significant that the relevant documents specified voyages in the plural, and perhaps as well that Canada was mentioned before Acadia (Cadie). The expectation was undoubtedly to make use of Da Costa's talents in trading voyages around the Atlantic region, certainly including up the St. Lawrence River (which is what was meant by the reference to Canada). Da Costa's contract with Dugua was to take effect in January 1609 and to last for three years. The annual salary was to be 60 crowns, about 195 *livres*, which was a significant amount. Unfortunately for Dugua de Mons, however, the monopoly that the French Protestant trader had been given in 1603 was not renewed at the end of 1608. Nevertheless, the Sieur de Mons continued to participate actively in the Canadian trade and to encourage the exploration and settlement of the country until 1617.³⁶ Perhaps Da Costa participated in some of those voyages? He well might have, but not in the first few months of his contractual relationship. In the spring of 1609, Mathieu Da Costa was not on board a ship heading for North America; he was in Rouen. The next reference has him imprisoned in Le Havre in December 1609 for *insolences*. What had occurred is not known but the mention of *insolences* suggests that Da Costa possessed an independent spirit and spoke his mind freely.

³⁴The incidents of 1607 are discussed in Kupp, *Quelques aspects de la dissolution de la compagnie de M. de Mons, 1607* and Hart, *The Prehistory of the New Netherland Company*, pp. 13-15.

³⁵See Le Blant and Beaudry, eds., *Nouveaux documents sur Champlain*, document 105.

³⁶MacBeath, Du Gua de Mons, in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 1, p. 294.

The only subsequent known references to Da Costa crop up in connection with a series of court cases that developed over expenditures made by the French in retrieving Da Costa from the Dutch, and subsequently in providing living expenses for the interpreter. Pierre Dugua was on one side of the court dispute and on the other was Nicolas de Bauquemare, a Rouen merchant who at different times had acted on behalf of both Dugua and rival Dutch interests. The cases would stay before the courts for the next 10 years. That does not mean, however, that Da Costa was detained or kept from sailing for anyone during that lengthy process. Whether he had gone on to work for Dugua de Mons or for others, or had disappeared without a trace, or had died, was not mentioned in the court cases. That process was about seeking redress for previous expenditures or losses, so what had happened to Mathieu Da Costa was not at issue.

Mathieu Da Costa: In Conclusion

We have offered in this paper much speculation about Mathieu Da Costa, especially as it relates to the possibility that he was a Euro-African whose family had a history of involvement in European trading ventures. We need to make it clear just how little of this we know for sure. There is no indication of where or when Da Costa was born, who his parents were, whether or not he was married or had children, what he looked like, or where and when he died. Similarly, there are no details to indicate where or when he might have travelled in North America, how long he stayed, for whom he worked, and with whom he might have interpreted. Further research may shed some light on these questions. Until then, we are able only to wonder if Mathieu Da Costa was possibly a descendant of a marriage between a Portuguese man and an African woman; or maybe an African mariner who worked aboard European vessels throughout the Atlantic world, initially as a seaman but who demonstrated a talent for languages and eventually became an interpreter. There are numerous permutations and combinations one could invent.

Uncertain though we are about the details of his family and occupational background, we do know that Da Costa had a darker skin colour than the Europeans for whom he worked, for he was referred to as a *naigre*. As for his skills as an interpreter in matters of trade with

Amerindians, Da Costa had presumably either demonstrated those abilities on previous voyages with the French and/or Dutch prior to 1607-08, or else he had established such a reputation that he was sought to obtain those services. That suggests that the interpreter was not starting out on his career in 1607-08. To have fulfilled his role(s), Mathieu Da Costa would have needed a good understanding of French, Dutch, Basque pidgin, Portuguese pidgin, and maybe other languages through which trade and other discussions were carried on between Amerindians and Europeans at the time.

The question of where Mathieu Da Costa might have travelled either before or after the documents that date from the 1607-1609 period is impossible to answer with certainty, at least at this time. Within the northeastern corner of North America, stretching from New York to Newfoundland and up the St. Lawrence River, there were innumerable trading and exploration voyages throughout the late 1500s and into the early 1600s. Da Costa may have participated in several or many of them. The harbours and coasts most commonly identified as places of contact between Europeans and Amerindians are the most likely spots where he would have travelled. Places like Canso, the Bay of Fundy, and up the St. Lawrence River come to mind. By the early 1600s Mathieu Da Costa could have made trips to many different locations in the service of a variety of captains and merchant backers. If he had previously sailed with Pierre Dugua de Mons prior to signing the contract in Amsterdam in 1608, then the trading post at Tadoussac, on the St. Lawrence, may have been where they first came to know each other. Sieur de Mons was there in 1600 and in later years. Subsequently, Da Costa may have stopped at some point at Port-Royal, although that could not have happened in 1607-08 when he was in Europe.

On the other hand, if Da Costa was sailing with the Dutch in the late 1500s and early 1600s, he could have sailed to destinations other than those of interest to the French. He might even have been with the Dutch when the heavily armed trading vessel, the *Witte Leeuw* (White Lion), captured vessels belonging to Sieur de Mons on the St. Lawrence in 1607. Should Da Costa have had an involvement with Dutch ventures after the court proceedings began in

1609, he might have ended up sailing to New Amsterdam, up the Hudson River, or to Curaçao in the Caribbean.

The story of Mathieu Da Costa is a tale of only one man, about whom little is known for sure. Yet the Black interpreter's history is significant for it suggests fascinating links among the peoples of Africa, Europe and the Americas during the formative era of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Our hope is that more documentary sources will surface so as to shed additional light on the particular life of Mathieu Da Costa and the other Black men and women of his era.

FURTHER READING

This paper was prepared using many sources. The key books and articles are listed below for anyone who would like to pursue the subject further.

European Use of Interpreters in Africa

Ira Berlin, From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America, in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Series, Vol. LIII, No. 2, April 1996, pp. 251-288.

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Mathieu Da Costa and Jan Rodriguez

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Ch. De Beaurepaire, Notes sur Pierre Du Gua, lieutenant général au Canada sous Henri IV,
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Robert Le Blant and René Beaudry, eds., *Nouveaux documents sur Champlain et son époque*.
Vol. 1 (1560-1622), (Ottawa, 1967), esp. documents 105, 106, 110, 114, 117,
168 (also p. 226, 212)

Marc Lescarbot, *Nova Francia, A Description of Acadia, 1606*.
London: George Routledge & Sons, 1928.

George MacBeath, Du Gua de Monts, Pierre, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966, pp. 291-294.

Hilary Russell, Looking for Mathieu da Costa, manuscript on file, Parks Canada, Halifax.

Barbara Schmeisser, Chronology of events surrounding Mathieu Da Costa, manuscript on file,
Parks Canada, Halifax.

Language of Racial Distinctions

Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993.