“His Master (if any he has)”: Race, Slavery, Newspapers, and Black Seafarers in the 18th Century Anglo-Atlantic

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On the night of November 12th, 1773, a Black sailor named Nath saw his chance. He fled from the schooner *Two Brothers*, docked in Boston Harbor. The next day, the man who claimed to be his master would publish a notice in the Boston Gazette, offering a reward for Nath’s return.[1] This would be one of many such notices published in the British colonies of North America as enslaved Black sailors used their skills and their lives at sea to resist their enslavement. The newspapers of the 18th century, written by and for a white audience, preserve the struggles of African sailors and the ongoing construction of race in the Anglo-Atlantic world. This article examines the references made in those newspapers to Black sailors, to locate both the racial construction of the 18th century, and the resistance of Black sailors. Black sailors made regular efforts to escape or resist slavery, and that resistance is clearly visible in the record.

Race as a category of identity had emerged from European society by the middle of the 17th century, but its construction was not and never could be complete. In the Anglo-Atlantic world, the socio-political environment which tied together England and her colonies, race would continue to be developed throughout the early modern period, and, indeed, through to the present. What emerges from the newspapers of the Anglo-Atlantic is that, to white society, Blackness and slavery had been made almost entirely synonymous. Still, Black individuals sought constantly to negotiate these terms or resist their enslavement. The 17th century had seen

[1] "Advertisement." *Boston Gazette* (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 971, November 15, 1773: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

an explosive rise in maritime and coastal trade in the Atlantic World. This rise continued into the 18th century, supported by an enormous class of sailors drawn from and forming a new working class in England, the Caribbean, and the English North American colonies.[2]

The 18th century began with a relatively fully developed colonial system incorporating both the Caribbean and North America, saw the last great age of piracy, and ended with the English North American colonies achieving independence.[3] The new class of laborers who supported the Anglo-Atlantic of the 18th century included a large number of Black sailors, particularly in the Americas.[4] While the labor of all sailors in the period was frequently compelled, only Black sailors had to contend with the institution of racial slavery.[5] Their appearances in the newspaper record of the 18th century both document the constructed racial system in which they existed, and the ways in which Black sailors could negotiate and resist that system. The life stories of Black sailors were almost never directly attested in the newspapers of the 18th century. However, references to Black sailors and their conditions were a constant of the newspaper network. One described how a Black sailor named Robin "ha[d] often absented himself before, and at those times used to follow fishing."[6] These short references both showcase the views held about Black sailors by the elites who claimed to own them, and provide important details about their life history and even preferences, such as Robin's apparent preference for working as a fisherman while free.[7]

While other forms of unfree labor existed, particularly in the form of indentured servitude, slavery was far more extreme and almost wholly inescapable. While not perfectly

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[2] Marcus Rediker. *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*. Cambridge UP, 1987. 77.
[3] *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*. 75.
[4] W. Jeffrey Bolster. *Black Jacks*. Harvard UP. 1997.
[5] Peter Linebaugh. Marcus Rediker. *The Many Headed Hydra*. Beacon Press, 2000. 60. and *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*. 31, 81, 100.
[6] "Advertisement." *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina) XVI, no. 3368, May 23, 1798: [4]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[7] "Advertisement." *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina) XVI, no. 3368, May 23, 1798

mappable to modern racial categories, a very strong distinction had been made between Black, those who could be enslaved, and white, those who could not be. Native Americans, whose enslavement had been common early in the colonial period, moved into a unique third category as African slavery became the dominant form of slavery. Roxann Wheeler's article "Colonial Exchanges: Visualizing Racial Ideology and Labor in Britain and the West Indies," demonstrates that as the enslavement of Native Americans became less common in the late 18th century, characters in several prominent works including *Robinson Crusoe* changed from being portrayed as "Indian" to being portrayed as African.[8] While Wheeler argues that this was the result of race being viewed as malleable, it is also consistent with a late 18th century view of 'Black' as being synonymous with 'slave.' This system of racial categorization fundamentally relied on the dehumanization and commodification of enslaved Black labor, a process described by Stephanie Smallwood in "Commodified Freedom."[9] As a key example, white indentured servants regularly appeared with last names in newspapers, while Black slaves did not.[10] Black freedmen appear in the record with last names, but this state was precarious at the best of times.[11]

The story of racial construction at sea is complicated by the overwhelmingly male environment aboard the ships of the 18th century. Sailing in the 18th century was a mostly (though not entirely) male occupation, and so women appear infrequently in the newspaper record for sailors.[12] At least one group of runaways mentioned in the newspaper record who attempted to

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[8] Roxann Wheeler. "Colonial Exchanges: Visualizing Racial Ideology and Labor in Britain and the West Indies". 37-38.
[9] Stephanie Smallwood. "Commodified Freedom: Interrogating the Limits of Anti-Slavery Ideology in the Early Republic" in *Journal of the Early Republic*.
[10] "Advertisement." *Providence Gazette* (Providence, Rhode Island) I, no. 29, May 7, 1763: [4]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
"Advertisement." *Pennsylvania Journal, or, Weekly Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), no. 464, October 10, 1751: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[11] "Advertisement." *Weekly Advertiser of Reading, in the County of Berks* (Reading, Pennsylvania), no. 70, September 2, 1797: [4]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[12] Introduction. *Iron Men and Wooden Women*. ed. Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling. John Hopkins UP, 1996. ix.

disguise themselves as sailors included a woman, but this group was composed of (white) convict laborers, not enslaved African sailors.[13] Compelling research, however, has been done showing that the construction of race in many ways began with Black women. In Jennifer Morgan's "Some Could Suckle over their Shoulder," she writes that European authors conveyed the 'savagery' that they were associating with African and Amerindian populations through the women of those societies. Female physical features were particularly emphasized by these authors, particularly those that had to do with reproduction.[14] In even the most positive depictions, African women were used to illustrate the 'savage nature' of the rest of their peoples.[15] Morgan writes that "By about the turn of the seventeenth century, as England joined in the transatlantic slave trade, assertions of African savagery began to be predicated […] on production via reproduction."[16] Another key belief developed by European explorers and colonizers was that African women were immune or resistant to pain, including in childbirth.[17]

This belief allowed African women to be identified as productive laborers, who could be exploited in both production and reproduction. This belief produced not just a construction of otherness, but a construction of *race* that was permanent and immutable, in which status as the racial other of 'Black' denoted first and foremost the potential for labor exploitation. This construction of race, while drawing upon the statements and writings of men from all over Europe, would prove to be particularly influential in England and its colonies. There, it was not

[13] "Advertisement." *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg, Virginia), no. [1166], December 2, 1773: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[14] Jennifer Morgan. "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder": Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770. in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Jan., 1997, Vol. 54, No. 1, Constructing Race (Jan., 1997). 181.
[15] Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder". 184.
[16] Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder". 187.
[17] Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder". 189.

in conflict with other constructions of race, such as the somewhat more mutable one that developed in the Spanish colonies.[18]

It was in this environment that the Black sailors of the Anglo-Atlantic World lived and labored, and the context in which the Anglo-Atlantic racial construction was further developed. This Anglo-Atlantic is the application of the broader idea of the Atlantic World, the shared environment encompassing the colonies, the West African coast from which Black people were seized to work in the colonies, and the European imperial metropoles, to England and its colonies. This world was tied together by Keith Dawson's concept of "cultural hydrography".[19] The idea of cultural hydrography is that the Anglo-Atlantic world shared a common approach to the maritime and littoral environments, and that this approach welded together colonies that were geographically far apart. This is a development of the idea of cultural geography, the "organiz[ation] [of] Atlantic Africa into cultural spaces with shared traditions and histories," which Dawson identifies as originating with scholars such as Boubacar Barry.[20]

This shared culture, both maritime and terrestrial, can be seen clearly in the newspaper network of the British American colonies. A shared print culture developed in the colonies of the Anglo-Atlantic world, usually written for, but perhaps not always read by, the privileged elite of British colonial society. News stories could easily spread across the colonies, being reprinted and often rewritten in multiple colonies, when a story was considered particularly shocking or noticeable.[21]

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[18] Rebecca Earle. "If You Eat Their Food". in *American Historical Review*. June 2010.
[19] Kevin Dawson. "Enslaved Ship Pilots in the Age of Revolutions". *Journal of Social History*. 2013 74 and 89.
[20] Dawson, 74.
[21] "Extract of a Letter from Charlestown, in South Carolina, January 23d 1733, 4." *Boston News-Letter* (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 1567, February 14, 1734: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
And
New-York Gazette (New York, New York), March 11, 1733: 2. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers.*

The Newspaper Evidence

For Black sailors, the greatest body of newspaper evidence lay in the runaway notices, like the one which identified Robin as a fisherman, that were constantly produced in every colony as slaves and indentured servants ran away from their masters.[22] These notices, predictable and formulaic in their structure, are revealing of both the ways in which race was understood by the white community, and of the ways that Black sailors negotiated and resisted that construction. Nath's runaway notice, a fairly typical example of the genre, was published in Boston on November 13th, 1773, by Samuel Lightbourn. It read as follows:

> "Ran away last Night from on Board the Schooner Two Williams, lying at the Hon. John Hancock, Esq'rs Wharff, a Negro Man, named Nath. of a yellow Complection, about five Feet seven Inches high, 28 years of age; a likely well made Fellow, and a good Sailor. — Had on when he went away, a blue Waistcoat, lin'd with Red.
> Whoever shall apprehend and secure him, so that his Owner may have him again, shall have SIX DOLLARS Reward. And all Masters of Vessels and others are hereby cautioned against entertaining or concealing said Negro, as they may depend on being prosecuted according to Law."[23]

Typically contained in the advertising section of the newspaper, subscribers would take out adverts, often for days, weeks, or even months, in order to notify the literate white community, and, inevitably even if unintentionally, any racial others able to read, of the escape of their slave or servant. These notices follow a highly predictable structure: the name of the runaway, their physical description, a description of the clothes they were wearing and their profession, if they had one, a reward, and then, in many cases, a postscript, usually phrased as *N.B.* for *nota bene*, separate from the rest of the text, addressed to "owners and masters of vessels."

While it is difficult to draw out the details of individual lives from a mode of text so deeply formulaic, the formulas and phrasings used in these notices and adverts reveal how the

[22] "Advertisement." *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina) XVI, no. 3368, May 23, 1798
[23] "Advertisement." *Boston Gazette* (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 971, November 15, 1773: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

racial identity of Black sailors was understood and constructed by white society. The first clue to the understanding of race that is visible in the notice is Nath's name. Nath is referred to only as Nath, without a last name.[24] No runaway notice, out of approximately 30 surveyed, listed a last name for an escapee who was identified as Black. Similarly, and unsurprisingly, while phrasing along the lines of "so that his Owner may have him again" was a feature of almost every runaway notice, including those referring to indentured servants, only those referring to Black sailors referred to an "Owner," with those referring to white indentured servants (and many Black sailors) using the word "Master" instead.[25]

In these notices, there was a total overlap between the categories of Black and slave. These two categories were collapsed into the single adjective "Negro," used to identify almost every Black person named or referenced in the newspapers. The meaning of this term can be seen in the total absence of the use of the word slave in the runaway notices. In fact, the term slave is used exceedingly rarely in the newspaper record, especially in notices, though it appears in articles about plantation rebellions.[26] For the Anglo-American society of the 18th century, the word "Negro" alone was enough to identify someone as a slave, without any further specification. This synonymous meaning of the two words can be seen in two of its key exceptions and contrasts: free Black sailors, and white indentured sailors subject to some of the same restrictions on free movement and legal penalties. This second category was not, as will become clear, subject to the same processes of commodification and identification with slavery.

The first case —the case of the free Black sailor— was highly individualized: print sources produced by white authors could prove fairly sympathetic to free Black sailors, at least in

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[24] "Advertisement." *Boston Gazette* (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 971, November 15, 1773
[25] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy* (New York, New York), no. 474, February 17, 1752: [4]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[26] "To Charles Yorks, Esq.." *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) X, no. 1266, September 29, 1796: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

cases of tragedy, while still assuming that unknown Black sailors were the slaves of unknown masters. For instance, in 1764 in Maryland, the Black sailor George Hartford was murdered by his friend and shipmate William Jacques.[27] The response in the Maryland Gazette was a condemnation of Jacques in the strongest terms, and a general recognition of George Hartford as an upstanding member of the Maryland community. Hartford was, by 1764, a free man, though unfortunately the means by which he achieved his freedom is unknown. The details of the description of Hartford stand out in the article, as they are radically different from the usual treatment of Black sailors, particularly enslaved sailors appearing in runaway notices.

First, Hartford is described as "a Black" in the first mention of his race in the text, which begins to establish Hartford's status as different and more respected by the white community in which he existed, even though the article does then revert to the usual use of the term "negro."[28] Second, the article makes the fact of his freedom clear: Hartford is said to have "been formerly a servant to William Liston […] but late his shipmate onboard the *Stag* Man of War, and had been discharged at the same time".[29] This sentence firmly establishes Hartford's status as a free man in the community, not only by making it clear that he was no longer bound to his former master, but also by the note of his discharge from the man-of-war *Stag*. Sailors, often pressed into service with the Royal Navy, could find themselves in situations in which they were not free laborers, even if they were paid, and the article firmly establishes Hartford as outside of that category. Hartford, released from obligation to both former master and to his ship, was therefore, to the writers of the newspaper, an acceptable free Black sailor, and deserving of respect. Hartford is

[27] "Dantzick May 16." *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, Maryland), no. 1006, August 16, 1764: [1]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[28] "Dantzick May 16." *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, Maryland), no. 1006, August 16, 1764
[29] "Dantzick May 16." *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, Maryland), no. 1006, August 16, 1764

further described as “the generous Negro,” while his murderer is “this execrable Wretch” “lost to all sense of Gratitude.”[30]

To identify Hartford as a free man, the newspaper had to take explicit steps, by writing that he had “been *formerly* a servant” (emphasis mine).[31] Without this information, clearly, the newspaper editor or article author believed that the audience would identify Hartford as a slave, not as a free man. George Hartford was also now George Hartford, instead of simply George. Hartford, released from slavery, was granted the dignity associated with having a last name of his own, or at least one associated with him, instead of leaving him with only a first name. This too indicated to the audience that Hartford was free, as the use of last names was non-existent in runaway notices, and the use of names at all was quite rare in other newspaper entries such as sale notices for slaves.

Cases involving runaway indentured servants were less common by the 18th century, but still existed. These were identifiable as white in the newspaper record by their contrast with the records of enslaved Black sailors. These men, such as John Hervey of New York, were sometimes identified by their national (English or Irish) origin, but never by a racial category.[32] Hervey, an Englishman, ran away from John Denyce on the 3rd of January 1752. In the details of its structure, the notice taken out by John Denyce is mostly indistinguishable from the one taken out about Nath: the same physical description: Hervey was “short but well set;” his clothing identified in the same way: a “blue Ratteen Waistcoat with Slash Sleeves;” given the same identification of past laboring experience: he “ha[d] been used to the sea” and so on.[33] The differences, therefore, stand out all the more strongly. John Hervey is identified as English, not as

[30] "Dantzick May 16." *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, Maryland), no. 1006, August 16, 1764
[31] "Dantzick May 16." *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, Maryland), no. 1006, August 16, 1764
[32] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy* (New York, New York), no. 474, February 17, 1752
[33] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy* (New York, New York), no. 474, February 17, 1752

white, because whiteness was the absence of blackness, not really its own racial category. John Hervey receives the dignity of his last name, and, furthermore, the reason that he is appearing in the paper is elucidated: he is an "English serving-man."[34] It is his specific laboring position in life, not his intrinsic status, that identifies him as a candidate for a runaway notice. For Nath, and for any other Black sailor, it was enough to be identified as a "Negro Man," a category that had been deliberately and entirely associated in its meaning with servitude, with exceptions being rare and carefully explained.

This process of racial construction can also be seen in a second major category of references to Black sailors in the newspaper record: the catch notice, the runaway notice's opposite. These notices, published by local jails, detailed the arrest of servants or slaves who had committed crimes or were believed by the jailer to have violated the law, even, as will be seen, merely by the fact of their existence in society.[35] These notices, unlike runaway notices, often portrayed substantially more ambiguity as to the status of those who had been arrested. It appears that, in many cases, it was not entirely clear to the jailer if the arrested was a runaway or a free man.

For instance, a Black man named Jeremiah Gibbs was arrested in 1797 in Reading, Pennsylvania, and a notice was put out in the local paper by the jailer. Gibbs was described as wearing sailor's clothing, but the jailer was ultimately uncertain as to Gibbs' status. In the notice, he asks the "Master or Owner of the above Negro Man" to "take him away and pay charges" or Gibbs would be "released from confinement."[36] The jailer, therefore, believed that Gibbs was likely enslaved or a servant, but he could not be entirely certain, and was willing to release Gibbs

[34] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy* (New York, New York), no. 474, February 17, 1752
[35] "Advertisement." *Weekly Advertiser of Reading, in the County of Berks* (Reading, Pennsylvania), no. 70, September 2, 1797
[36] "Advertisement." *Weekly Advertiser of Reading, in the County of Berks* (Reading, Pennsylvania), no. 70, September 2, 1797

if no one was willing or able to make a claim to him, including paying the costs of keeping Gibbs imprisoned. The arrest notice for Gibbs was also published with his last name, Gibbs, instead of leaving him without one, which also contributes to a sense that his status was not entirely determined.

A similar story is seen in the New York Gazette in 1769. The notice reports the arrest of a Black sailor "who calls himself Sam." While the notice says that "he says his master's name is Capt. Johnson," it ends by asking "his Master (if any he has) to come immediately, pay Charges, and take him away."[37] Clearly, the jailer believed that Sam was likely enslaved, but could not be certain of this. Another enslaved sailor, "who called himself BOATSWAIN," arrested in Jamaica, was supposed to set out on a journey to England, but was threatened by "some of his countrymen" who "suaded him, that if he went again [illegible] water he would be eaten" and so escaped.[38] None of these three cases of the arrest notice provide any information as to why the men in question had been arrested. None of the men were charged with a crime, they were simply detained and held for their "masters […] if any [they] had" to come and retrieve them. This lack of charges suggests strongly that these men, even though some of them may have been free, could be detained exclusively for being Black. A Black sailor named Tom Cuffee was "taken up" in Charleston, S.C., and held for "any person who can lawfully claim a right to the above described fellow," though Cuffee claimed that "he has no master in this country."[39] If they could not prove their freedom, any local jailer could seize them and wait days or weeks to release them, putting out notices in the local papers. This could even happen, as is the case with Sam, if

[37] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy* (New York, New York), no. 1393, September 11, 1769: [4]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[38] *Gazette of Saint Jago de la Vega* (St. Jago de la Vega, Jamaica), January 17, 1782: 4. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[39] "Advertisement." *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina) XV, no. 3104, July 14, 1797: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

the man in question was to claim servitude, if the claimed "master" was not present.[40] According to an entry from 1797 in the Baltimore Gazette, in Maryland, if an "owner" was not to "come and take him away" a detained Black person could be "sold for his gaol fee, according to law," though, as this wording is unique to Maryland, and contrasts with the planned release of Jeremiah Gibbs, it may have been unique to that colony (state, at that time).[41]

As demonstrated by these catch notices, even the status of a free Black sailor was hazardous in the 18th century. While white sailors had to fear the press gang, free Black sailors were unable to escape the threat of a return to slavery.[42] Frequently, free Black sailors captured on board a ship belonging to a hostile government would be re-enslaved and sold off, in order to make money for the captain and crew of the warship that had taken the prize.[43]

Olaudah Equiano, an enslaved Black sailor who managed to purchase his freedom and ultimately testified in front of the British Parliament against the slave trade, provides more insight into this real threat and constant source of terror in his autobiography. Equiano, possibly the most famous Black sailor of the 18th century, learned to read and write and was able to turn these skills towards producing testimony and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, a memoir and autobiography describing his experiences in slavery at sea, and arguing against the continued existence of the slave trade.[44] Equiano personally was able to avoid re-enslavement, but he writes that free Black people "live[d] in constant alarm for their liberty; and even this is but nominal," shortly after witnessing the spectacle of a man generally regarded as a freedman being "carried away, and probably doomed never more in this world to see [his

[40] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy* (New York, New York), no. 1393, September 11, 1769
[41] "Advertisement." *Federal Gazette & BALTIMORE Daily ADVERTISER.* (Baltimore, Maryland) VII, no. 1222, October 10, 1797: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[42] Alan Gregor Cobley. "That Turbulent Soil" in *Seascapes.* Hawai'i UP, 2007. 157.
[43] "That Turbulent Soil" in *Seascapes,* 157.
[44] Olaudah Equiano. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano.* Chapter 6.

wife and children] again."[45] The threat of re-enslavement did not, however, replace the threat of the press gang for Black Sailors. Instead, the threat was always doubled; both state-sponsored and individually organized gangs of armed men were given the authority and power to board ships and seize Black sailors for unfree labor.

Therefore, even though it was possible for Black people to win or be granted freedom, this freedom existed directly at odds with the understanding of the society that they lived in. In the 18th century Anglo-Atlantic, Black freedom could only ever be understood as an aberration, as an exception to the rule. A Black sailor could be "formerly a servant of," or otherwise marked explicitly as free, but to be Black in the text of a newspaper article without other qualification was to be marked as an enslaved laborer.[46]

In addition to the runaway and the catch notice, there existed a third type of notice, which was yet more explicit about the commodification of Black labor. This category was the sale notice, describing enslaved men and women who were to be sold at auction or by private sale. The sale notice eliminated even the first name of the sailor who was to be sold, providing only a physical description, a description of their skills, and, usually, an assurance that the enslaved sailor was being sold for "no fault whatever."[47] This was, in some way, the final development of the role of the "scrimp" and the "spirit." These men were responsible for coercively acquiring labor for ship captains and masters, which they did by convincing drunk or inexperienced sailors to sell their labor to the scrimp.[48] While the scrimp could target a free white sailor, and would in many cases seize a drunk sailor and carry him onto a ship, the sale of labor could be made even more systematic when it was applied to enslaved Black sailors.

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[45] Equiano, Ch. 6.
[46] "Dantzick May 16." *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, Maryland), no. 1006, August 16, 1764
[47] "Advertisement." *City Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina) XVI, no. 3321, March 27, 1798: [3]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[48] Rediker. *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*. 81-2.

This system of renting out enslaved labor was common across the British colonies, but was particularly prominent in the West Indies.[49] This was the result of a severe shortage of free labor in the West Indian colonies, as the vast majority of the colonial population consisted of enslaved African laborers. This both increased wage pressure in the West Indies, meaning free sailors in the West Indies earned more than many contemporaries, but it also caused the West Indies to be the source of many of the enslaved sailors of the period.[50] From there, or from whatever port of origin they had, Black sailors could travel the whole span of the Anglo-Atlantic. Sam, for instance, was arrested in New York, but had come from Barbados.[51] The man who called himself "Boatswain" did not ultimately move far, but he had intended to set out on a substantial journey, far away from the American colonies to the other end of the Anglo-Atlantic world.[52]

Resistance

The ability to travel provided Black sailors and seafarers with a marked advantage in their efforts to resist the racial hierarchy to which they were subjected. To return to Keith Dawson's 2013 article "Enslaved Ship Pilots in the Age of Revolutions," Dawson demonstrates that some slaves, specifically, enslaved pilots, managed to use the green-water littoral as a transitional, liminal space, unbound by the either land-based or maritime forms of authority, and able to exert considerable influence over the ships that they were, for short times, able to control.[53] This framework of the transitional and liminal space, which Dawson draws from Greg Dening's work

[49] "That Turbulent Soil" in *Seascapes*. 155.
[50] Rediker. *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*. 136.
[51] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy* (New York, New York), no. 1393, September 11, 1769
[52] *Gazette of Saint Jago de la Vega* (St. Jago de la Vega, Jamaica), January 17, 1782
[53] Kevin Dawson. "Enslaved Ship Pilots in the Age of Revolutions". 71.

in *Islands and Beaches*, is useful not only for understanding the literal littorals, but also the entire zone of transition from land to sea, beginning with the coastal ports and ending with the maritime hierarchies and systems of the open sea, as a zone of negotiation and resistance for enslaved sailors.[54] The water removed many enslaved Black sailors from the direct control of their masters, even as it often left them subjected to the whims of capricious ship captains and masters. Even though the newspaper network could publish particularly shocking stories from across the British American colonies, most stories stayed local, and someone who was able to get away to another colony could become essentially undetectable. The runaway notices showcased the ways that those subjected to these systems of unfree labor were able to attempt escape. Those who were able to make it to the ports of the Atlantic world had access to plausible avenues of escape and economic self-sufficiency. The ports they sailed from marked the beginning of the liminal, transitional space of the littorals and ultimately the open ocean. Even if the maritime hierarchy of the open ocean was horrifically brutal, and even if sailors could be swept up by the press gangs of the Royal Navy or have their wages stolen from them, slaves and indentured servants trapped on land saw their chances at sea.[55]

This chance did not at all go unnoticed by those who wrote runaway notices. Especially for those slaves and servants with recognized connection to the ocean, but even for many of those without any initial connection to the ocean at all, runaway notices constantly sought to warn about the threat of escape to the sea. This was done in two key ways. First, all possible explicit connections were drawn between the fleeing slave or servant and the ocean. For those who had served aboard ship before, this was mentioned, either by referring to the experience and the quantity of it directly, or by referring to the man in question as a sailor. This set of

[54] Dawson, 74.
[55] *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea.* 82, and Beckles "From Slave to Sea". 81.

connections included, in virtually all of these adverts, some sort of allusion to the level of sailing ability that the enslaver believed to be possessed by the runaway. In some cases, slaves and servants had their skills denigrated, or were assessed as not being actual sailors, seeking instead to "pass for a" or "affect [a]" sailor,[56] while in others, perhaps to emphasize their economic productive value, they were called out as "prime."[57] This section could alternately include a description of their duties, saying that a man "had been a privateer," or, for instance, had "come on the sloop *Mary.*"[58] The next step was to emphasize the likelihood of passing for a sailor being carried out successfully by reference to the man's clothing. While generally common, these formulations appear particularly frequently in cases where a runaway had not yet been described as a sailor. When one had, it was common for clothes to escape mention, whereas in cases where the man was described merely as having "come from a sloop," or those where the escapee appears to have been a landsman, sailors' clothing was brought up frequently.[59] Robbin, who ran away from the brigantine *Fanny*, was described as wearing "a sailors old frock and trousers, a dirty handkerchief around his head, and is bare-footed," but his occupation is not described as being that of a sailor.[60] Jordan, a "prime sailor," has his clothing described extensively, a "grey Coat, one white and one striped Jacket, two Pairs of Trowsers, one Pair of blue Cloth

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[56] "Advertisement." *Providence Gazette* (Providence, Rhode Island) I, no. 29, May 7, 1763: [4]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
"Advertisement." *Pennsylvania Journal, or, Weekly Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), no. 464, October 10, 1751: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[57] "Advertisement." *New-York Mercury* (New York, New York), no. 476, September 14, 1761: Supplement [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[58] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette* (New York, New York), no. 134, August 3, 1761: [4]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[59] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette* (New York, New York), no. 134, August 3, 1761
[60] "Advertisement." *New-York Mercury* (New York, New York), no. 668, August 13, 1764: [1]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
Robbin appears to have been particularly poorly treated by the author of the notice, Thomas Stevenson. The clothes he is described as wearing are far worse than what is normally described, and had earlier attempted to slit his own throat.

Breeches…" but his clothing is not described as that of a sailor, nor can it be identified as sailors garb with any certainty.[61]

In part, this may have been the result of attempted disguise among those who were able to run away. As some enslaved sailors were well known to the towns in which they escaped, wearing clothes indistinguishable from that of a landsman may have helped them, while landsmen may have sought to convey the opposite impression. The detail of the descriptions of runaway clothing suggests that slaveholders could be fairly certain of the clothes in which runaways had made their escape, though a few do note that the runaways were, of course, likely to seek to change their clothes as quickly as possible. In a few cases, it appears that the men running away also took with them multiple outfits, perhaps all of the clothing that they had, or potentially having taken more from the estate.[62] These connections to the sea were drawn because the sea was recognized as a place of escape, and the potential for a ship's captain or master to take on a runaway was certainly present, as shown by the second way in which slaveholders expressed their fear of the sea.

This second warning about the threat of escape to the sea was direct, legal, and addressed to other privileged members of colonial society. At the end of over half the runaway notices sampled for this essay is a postscript, a *nota bene*, to use the terminology usually employed in these notices, threatening legal action. For instance, in the Oct 18th, 1737 edition of the New England Weekly Journal, a runaway notice taken out against a "Negro Man Servant" by the name of Cuffee concludes with the following: "all Masters of Vessels are hereby warned against carrying off said Servant on penalty of the law in that Case made and provided."[63] This, or very

[61] "Advertisement." *New-York Mercury* (New York, New York), no. 476, September 14, 1761
[62] "Advertisement." *New-York Mercury* (New York, New York), no. 476, September 14, 1761
[63] "Advertisement." *New-England Weekly Journal* (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 548, October 18, 1737: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

similar phrasing, was used in 17 of the 30-some cases analyzed in this project. While Cuffee was described merely as "understanding something of the business of a sailor," these warnings extended to both those described as "good" or "prime" sailors and to runaways who were not sailors, or who slaveholders wished to portray as unskilled. [64]

The inescapable conclusion of this phrasing, therefore, is that, while fears of slaves being able to escape to sea and there gain employment as members of a free society, even if it was one that was harshly hierarchical, may have been overblown, cases of this occurring must have been known to the privileged of white society in the Anglo-American colonies. Ship captains were desperate for labor, and, once at sea, Black sailors could sail to an entirely different part of the Atlantic world and there disembark. Even though news articles would spread throughout the colonies, it would have been tremendously difficult for a slave owner to successfully recapture a man who had escaped to Jamaica from New York or the reverse, and the sea provided the best avenue available for such an escape.

The ocean was therefore a geographic, or perhaps hydrographic, space in which Black sailors could remove themselves from the racial hierarchies of the land, even as their white fellow sailors and officers attempted to reinstate these hierarchies. Black sailors were often given the worst jobs aboard ships, notably the position of ship's cook, but they also often earned wages in the same way as the white sailors around them, even as those wages were often taken from them.[65]

Newspaper catch notices showcase this reality even more plainly, by pointing out the cases of Black sailors who had been disconnected from the slave systems of their origins. Sam, from Barbados, had been disconnected from the systems of slavery that he had been enmeshed

[64] "Advertisement." *New-York Mercury* (New York, New York), no. 476, September 14, 1761
[65] "That Turbulent Soil" in *Seascapes*, 159, and Bolster, *Black Jacks*. 7.

in, and even though the racial system of the Anglo-American Atlantic prevented him from achieving full freedom, it could allow him to negotiate a transitory identity within it, no longer fully enslaved, if he was able to maintain his status as a sailor and "come in on a sloop."[66] While they were perhaps most visible in in-shore operations and the littoral environment, particularly as pilots and fishermen, Black sailors regularly traversed large stretches of ocean, and were able to use the distance put between them and their place of origin to loosen the restrictions placed upon them, making their exact status, as slave or free man, less clear to those who operated the systems in which they were enmeshed.[67]

On rare occasions, Black sailors used their positions to gain substantial influence in their own communities, or even to appear in front of the English Parliament. As discussed by Dawson, ship's pilots were particularly likely to be powerful, being required to navigate vessels through the extremely dangerous littoral environment in many areas, especially near islands.[68] These pilots could effectively negotiate their way to freedom or to a much greater degree of leeway than was common. While pilots were advantaged by the particular conditions of the inshore environment, other enslaved sailors were also able to succeed in negotiating the hierarchy that Anglo-American colonial society sought to impose.

Access to literacy was a key part of this resistance to the racial hierarchy. Bolster writes that the first six autobiographies written by Black people in English were written by Black sailors, including the work of Olaudah Equiano. Literacy among waged sailors has long been identified by historians of maritime history as an important skill, and tied to the emergence of a "proletarian" class. Literacy, while still a minority skill, was much more common among sailors than in the general population, and it allowed sailors to read the contracts that they were bound

[66] "Advertisement." *New-York Gazette, or Weekly Post-Boy* (New York, New York), no. 1393, September 11, 1769
[67] "That Turbulent Soil" in *Seascapes*. 156.
[68] Dawson 72, 76-77

by and negotiate them. While explicit contract negotiation was not an option for an enslaved sailor, it would have been for a free Black sailor.

More than that, however, English literacy allowed Black sailors to directly counter the narratives of white society, not just through the words written, but through their existence alone. Black sailing autobiographies, by their inherent individuality, provided a counter narrative to the commodifying narrative of the newspaper notices and advertisements. They also, sometimes quite explicitly, sought to prove that Africans were not a "barbarous people."[69] Equiano, for instance, repeatedly draws comparison between the religious practices of his people and that of the Jews. Equiano works to suggest that his people should be understood as a long-lost group of Jews, or as a Hebraic religious group separated from the rabbis and the temple.[70] In doing so, by linking the history and practices of the West Africans to those of the Jews, Equiano can be seen as rejecting the racial categorizations of England, preferring to align himself with a group that, though frequently oppressed, was recognized as literate, cultured, and tied to Christianity through history and holy texts.[71] Religious and presumably ethnic ties to Judaism would link the West African peoples to Adam and Eve, and, therefore, to the white population, a link which English writers sought to deny, often using reproduction and childbirth to do so.[72]

These forms of resistance to the racial hierarchy were not the only ones available to Black sailors. Black sailors not only participated in the work stoppages, strikes, and mutinies of white sailors, but also engaged more heavily in other forms of direct resistance to the hierarchy of Anglo-American colonial society.[73] In particular, the two options that were most often taken

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[69] Morgan. "Some Could Suckle Over their Shoulder," quoting Richard Jobson's *The Golden Trade or a Discovery of the River Gambra*. 182.
[70] Equiano, ch.1.
[71] Equiano, ch.1.
[72] Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder". 189. Morgan discusses how English (and other European writers) sought to deny that Africans were related to Adam and Eve at all, which would make them different from all other people and therefore uniquely enslaveable.
[73] *Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 92.

by Black sailors were that of marronage, fleeing to a community of Black runaways in inaccessible areas, and that of piracy, seizing control of a ship at sea and seeking to operate completely unconstrained by the authority of Anglo-Atlantic society.[74]

Marronage and Piracy

The first option, marronage, existed throughout the history of slavery, both at sea and on land. Sailors, if they could manage to steal a boat, or, better, an entire ship, were well placed to take advantage of marronage at sea, fleeing to either the islands of other powers or to islands thought of by the European powers as not worth the investment, or still firmly under the control of native populations, such as the Caribs.[75] Marronage allowed Black sailors, and other Black runaways, to establish identities and communities almost totally separate from the racial hierarchy which controlled most of the Caribbean.

However, Black sailors and escapees also had a complicated relationship with the other distinct racial category of the 18th century: the Native American population. Black maroons often formed communities with indigenous peoples, in both the West Indies and in mainland North America. These maroon communities spoke their own languages and existed outside the rest of Anglo-American society, though both maroons and communities located near their communities engaged in trade. The story of maroon-indigenous integration was certainly not smooth, however. In the 1600s West Indies, for instance, Carib tribes on some islands ultimately requested intervention against maroon communities who were increasingly encroaching on Carib land.[76]

[74] Beckles, 79.
[75] Beckles, 86.
[76] Beckles, 90.

Both Black and indigenous sailors served aboard European ships as part of "the motley crew," a term developed by Rediker and Linebaugh in *The Multi-Headed Hydra* for the multiethnic proletarian seafaring labor community. On occasion, however, even as they often resisted the new racial and capitalist hierarchy, members of the motley crew could be brought into conflict with one another. For example, it was reported in the *Barbados Gazette* on Jan 9, 1733 that an "Indian" sailor had seized control of the ship he was on.[77] The particulars of the case appear tailor-made to encapsulate the fears of Anglo-American white society: the Native American sailor murdered the officers and then demanded to be treated with the respect due to a white captain, an aggravation against both the racial hierarchy and the maritime capitalist hierarchy The mutiny did not last however, and the ship was retaken by another English sloop. One of the men who joined with the Native American sailor was ultimately shot by a Black sailor aboard the sloop *Walter Parmiter*. The story, to a much greater extent than any notice, spread rapidly through the Anglo-Atlantic world, copies of the story being reprinted in the northern colonies. The story shows the important role played by Black sailors in the 18th century, and their presence aboard ships of all types. It also shows that Black sailors could be allowed more freedom than their fellows on land, as the man aboard *Walter Parmiter* was entrusted with a firearm.

While maroon communities were formed by escaped slaves, the place they occupied in the racial hierarchy of the 18th century in the Anglo-Atlantic was somewhat more complicated. Maroons were not perceived as quite the same as runaway slaves, even if their communities had begun that way. Maroon identity was often closely tied to the sea, and the idea of a desolate island, the newspaper record seeing many references to sailors being put ashore on a "maroon

[77] "From the Barbados Gazette, Jan. 9 1733." *Weekly Rehearsal* (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 128, March 11, 1734: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

key," but there was also a maroon presence on many of the major islands of the Caribbean. Maroons were, like Native American populations, separate from colonial society, though they did interact with it as outsiders.[78] They reverted, in the eyes of some colonial authors, to being "maroon savages" described as "wilder" than "Indian savages."[79]

While campaigns against the maroon communities were fairly common in the 18th century, it is also clear that maroon communities could make accommodations with the colonial racial hierarchy, in turn acquiring a separate status. For instance, the *Salem Gazette* reports a case in which an attempted slave revolt was put down by a combination of a white militia and a group of "maroon negroes, who, after arming themselves, proceeded to the estate to seize the insurgents."[80] It appears, therefore, that, while descended from rebellious slaves, maroons were able to acquire what was thought of as an 'indigenous' status, even if they remained the target of military campaigns against 'savages'.

The other option for escaping Black sailors, though it could be closely linked to marronage, especially in 'retirement,' was piracy. Rediker analyzes piracy as a response to the challenges of elite-imposed capitalist production, developing an entirely new system of organization at sea, unmoored from the wage labor system and instead tied to an equitable distribution of the profit and loot taken off of other merchant ships.[81] For those completely excluded from waged labor, that is to say, enslaved sailors, the attractions of piracy could be even greater, allowing them to break the system of brutal discipline applied both to slaves ashore and to sailors at sea. Black sailors appear to have been over-represented among pirate crews,

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[78] "Charles-Town, (South Carolina) March 2." *New-Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire), no. 80, April 13, 1758: [1]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[79] "To Charles Yorks, Esq.." *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) X, no. 1266, September 29, 1796
[80] "Kingston, (Jamaica) Aug. 28." *Salem Gazette* (Salem, Massachusetts) IV, no. 167, December 21, 1784: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[81] *Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 82.

potentially the result of either the tendency of pirate ships to cruise the African coast or of the greater likelihood of Black inshore sailors and pilots escaping to sea, though more research is needed on this subject.[82] Over half of Blackbeard's crew was Black, and the trend was not limited to him, several other famous pirates having crews that were majority or plurality Black.[83] This was known, and commented on, by newspaper writers of the time period. In April of 1717, it was reported from Philadelphia that a "Pyrate Sloop of 10 Guns has for some weeks past been plying about the Capes of Virginia," and that this ship carried "about 40 or 50 hands, some of which are Negros and Molatos."[84]

Authorities were desperately afraid of these crews, because they believed that these pirate crews were likely to be a source for major slave revolts on the plantation islands of the West Indies or the plantations of the coast. In general, this did not prove to be the case, Black sailors preferred to escape and then avoid interactions with Anglo-American white society, instead of attempting to encourage revolt[85].

The constructed racial system of the 18th century, based around the commodification of African laborers, was both simple in its essence and complex on the margins. Black sailors and other workers were identified in their essence with enslaved labor, a status which Anglo-Atlantic society took extreme measures to maintain. Free Black workers were in constant danger of re-enslavement, either in the polities they called home or through their capture, and white society was continually suspicious of their status. Pass systems were created, and then treated with incredible suspicion, and fear that enslaved workers might acquire false passes.[86] At the margins, the situation became more complex, as maroon communities were approached in ways

[82] *The Many Headed Hydra*. 65, 170.
[83] *The Many Headed Hydra*, 166.
[84] "Philadelphia, April 24th." *Boston News-Letter* (Boston, Massachusetts), no. 681, May 6, 1717: [2]. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.
[85] *The Many Headed Hydra*, 166.
[86] Beckles, 84.

substantially different from the commodified status applied to Black laborers. Ultimately, however, while Black sailors had much better opportunities to escape, and to join maroon communities, the great majority of the Black seafaring population was subject to the brutal construction of race that was continuous in the 18th century Anglo-Atlantic. Still, Black sailors used the opportunities of life at sea to escape from slavery and either establish themselves as members of the Anglo-Atlantic World, or escape from its boundaries. Black sailors resisted the Anglo-Atlantic environment through escape, literacy, piracy, and marronage, entering the records of the Anglo-Atlantic society they were enmeshed in.

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