

*The*  
MANY-HEADED  
HYDRA

*Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the  
Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*

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BEACON PRESS

BOSTON

ist, rivers provided an image of freedom; for James Joyce, the smithy of the Irish soul, rivers transmitted languages. A recent student of rivers writes, "They are forever picking up solid matter in one place and putting it down in another."<sup>15</sup> Rivers divaricate. From Putney, after 1647, would flow the ideas and practices of both freedom and slavery. A man, woman, or child might there embark upon a boat and, apart from transfers to other types of vessels, not disembark until reaching the harsh estuarial waters of the Shannon or the Liffey (Ireland); Bridgetown or Port Royal (the Caribbean); the Gambia or the Niger (West Africa); the Chesapeake or the Potomac (Virginia).<sup>16</sup>

#### NAPLES, 1647

On July 7, 1647, a Neopolitan fisherman named Masaniello led a protest by the market women, carters, porters, sailors, fishermen, weavers, silk winders, and all the other poor, or *lazzaroni*, of the second- or third-largest city in Europe.<sup>17</sup> The rebellion began in the marketplace of Naples, where producers rural and urban discovered that the Spanish viceroy had levied a new *gabelle*, or tax, on the city's fabled fruit (Goethe believed that the Neapolitans had invented lemonade).<sup>18</sup> The rebels turned the world upside down: galley oarsmen became captains, students were given books, prisons were opened, and tax records were burned. Nobles were forbidden to wear expensive garments, while their palaces were marked for destruction and their furnishings burned in the streets. "These Goods are got out of our Heart's Blood; and as they burn, so ought the Souls and Bodies of those Blood-suckers who own them, to fry in the Fire of Hell," cried one of the insurgents.<sup>19</sup> The rebels decreed that anyone caught looting might be executed, so "that all the World may know, we have not enterpris'd this businesse to enrich ourselves but to vindicate the common liberty." The price of bread fell to rates consistent with a moral economy. This was the essence of the revolt, which Masaniello expressed in "savage eloquence." His preferred figure of speech, however, was not to be found in the rhetorical handbooks of the Renaissance; rather, it was the price list: "Look ye here, my Lads, how we are ridden, Gabel upon Gabel, 36 Ounces the Loaf of Bread, 22 the Pound of Cheese," et cetera, et cetera. "Are these things to be endured? No,

my Boys; Get my Words by Heart, and sound them thro' every Street of the City."

Although it lasted only ten days, the revolt of Naples in July 1647 marked the first time that the proletariat of any European city seized power and governed alone. Michelangelo Cerquozzi, the baroque painter, recognized the gravity of the event and painted *The Revolt of Masaniello* (1648) as a battle scene. Amid the tents and booths of the crowded market, the traffic of commerce, the herded livestock, the great barrel on the water wagon, that the hundreds of people have begun to take action is shown by new gestures of men bending for rocks, of bare arms raised, of pointed fingers. His is a sober assessment of an urban insurrection, equally without condescension or heroism.<sup>20</sup> An eighteenth-century historian raised his eyebrows and gasped, "After Ages will hardly believe what Height of Power this ridiculous Sovereign arrived to, who, trampling bare-foot on a throne, and wearing a Mariner's Cap instead of a Diadem, in the space of four Days, raised an Army of above 150,000 Men, and made himself Master of one of the most populous Cities in the worlde."<sup>21</sup>

Masaniello's story had special importance for the centers of European seafaring, England and Holland. English merchants had recently eclipsed their Italian counterparts in Levant shipping and now sent as many as 120 ships and three thousand sailors to Naples each year, with attendant desertions and turnovers. Sailors were a major source of information about the revolt. Less immediately effective but more lasting were the medallions struck in Amsterdam, the drama surreptitiously produced in London, and the translations of the first history of the uprising.<sup>22</sup> In 1649 T. B. published a play entitled *The Rebellion of Naples or the Tragedy of Massenello commonly so called: but rightly Tomaso Aniello di Malfa Generall of the Neapolitans. Written by a Gentleman who was an eye-witness where this was really acted upon the Bloody Stage, the Streets of Naples*. In 1650 James Howell, an entrepreneur, a royalist, and literary man with connections to the Levant Company, translated Alexander Giraffi's *An Exact History of the Late Revolutions in Naples; and of Their Monstrous Successes*, and in the same year *The Second Part of Masaniello . . . The End of the Commotions*.<sup>23</sup> These were dedicated to the governor of the Levant Company with the reminder that,

*The people is a beast which heads hath many  
England of late shew'd this more than any.*

Power and solidarity were themes of the play *The Rebellion of Naples*. On the frontispiece of its published text appeared an illustration of Masaniello himself, bare-legged and bonneted, overlooking a sky with a bare forearm hurling thunderbolts at a squadron of warships; Neptune raises his trident as squares of pikemen fail to prevent a few mariners from hauling the entire city of Naples from the sea to the beach. In his first monologue, Masaniello compares himself to a galley oarsman. The first words from the crowd, meanwhile, are the sailor's abiding principle of solidarity and the particular cry heard during the mutinies of 1626: "One and all, One and all, One and all."<sup>24</sup> Alluding to the English Levellers and John the Baptist (whose June feast day had been canceled in Naples for fear of tumult), Masaniello's adviser promises to "level the high walls of government with the earth they stood on: The Axe is already laid to the root." The Spanish viceroy refers to the furious beast with many heads and shamelessly asks, "How will you make your sauces, if you will not squeeze your Oranges? Or Wine, if you will not presse the Grape?"

Slavery, Africa, and the women of Naples were major concerns both of the play and of the translated history. One of Masaniello's advisers had been a slave in Algeria for nineteen years, and another had been a galley slave. The slave of a duke, a Moor, was freed. Masaniello had a daughter who was a blackamoor, who sang a song in praise of blackness. During the summer-festival ritual that actually provided the flashpoint of the insurrection, Masaniello led a group of teenagers masked in blackface who attacked a mock fort in the middle of the mercato. Giraffi compared the armed women and girls of Naples and their decisive street-fighting skills to so many Amazons. Masaniello's own wife was imprisoned for failing to pay the gabelle. The women vowed "they would burn the City, and themselves and Children along with it, before they would be Beasts of Burden any longer, and bring up their Children to be Slaves and Pack-Horses to a proud and haughty Nobility." T. B. compared the women to Ursula, the symbol of disorder in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. An old woman observing the black daughter suggested that she and the white daughter stop scrutinizing one another and instead look elsewhere, to "see what becomes of all the Money, and all the Land." *Cui bono*.



*Masaniello and his army of fisherman capturing Naples. T. B.,  
The Rebellion of Naples, or the Tragedy of Massenello . . . (1649).  
Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University.*

*The Rebellion of Naples* combined persons, events, and ideas from both Naples and London, demonstrating a circulation of the experience of insurrection and suggesting a unity of class conflicts in a diversity of locations. The people had discovered their own strength; this was an autonomous insurrection whose force and power had to be respected—it could not be laughed off the stage. It remained a source of fear to the emerging politics of the bourgeois state; it also remained an example of hope for actual proletarians searching for justice, such as Thomas Spence, as we shall see later. In a notebook, Spinoza portrayed himself in the guise of the fishmonger.<sup>25</sup> John Locke sported with Masaniello to ridicule the divine right of kings. His friend James Tyrrell argued that even when the mobile, or urban mob, murmured at grievous taxes, it could not be justified in revolting because that inevitably led to vast spoilage of property, as Masaniello had proved.<sup>26</sup> Authorities in Maryland, New York, Massachusetts, Virginia, and London used the name of

Masaniello to tar political opponents. Tom Paine feared the name, but the soldiers, sailors, and commoners of the English Revolution did not. In November 1647, only a few days after the debates at Putney, a speaker in London said, "The same business we are upon is perfected in Naples, for if any person stand up for monarchy there, he is immediately hanged at his door."<sup>27</sup>

#### LONDON, 1649

If the Masaniello revolt and the Putney Debates of 1647 represented a high point of revolutionary possibility, the downfall began in 1649 with two exemplary executions. One seemed to kill the old regime of monarchy and hierarchy, the other the hope of a new regime based on neither of those. The first was the beheading of King Charles on January 30. A poor woman named Elizabeth Poole, of Abington, had twice advised the General Council of the army that though God "hath a controversie with the great and mighty of the earth," they should have no "respect of persons" and therefore should not execute the king.<sup>28</sup> Many other radicals, Levellers included, also hesitated over the death of the king, but to no avail. An executioner disguised as a sailor decapitated him, and the Cromwellian republic was born in the bloodletting. The execution by firing squad of Robert Lockyer, a soldier, on April 27, originated in the grumblings of unpaid soldiers against what they called the "cutthroat expedition" to Ireland, which escalated into mutiny at Bishopsgate in April. Cromwell, fearing a general rising of "discontented persons, servants, reformadoes [and] beggars," rode to Bishopsgate with Fairfax to lead the suppression of the mutiny, arresting a number of men, finding five guilty, and condemning Lockyer, a leader among the soldiers, to be shot at Saint Paul's. When the moment of execution came, Lockyer disdained a blindfold and appealed to his executioners, brother soldiers, to put down their guns. They refused, fired, and killed him. Thousands, wearing green (the color of the Levellers and of Thomas Rainborough), thronged the streets of London at his funeral.

The executions of the king and the soldier came at a time when a portion of the revolutionary movement had begun to challenge capital punishment. The subject had attracted study by Thomas Browne, who in

1646 had published his thoughts concerning the biomechanics of decapitation, suffocation, crucifixion, and illageneation, and the various theatrical effects produced by each.<sup>29</sup> The critique offered by soldiers and religious radicals made the same connection that had been drawn in the Putney Debates, between expropriation and slavery. Samuel Chidley, a Leveller and a minister, once commented that if felons transported to America were "sold as slaves," then "it is a worse slavery, yea, a great tyranny indeed, to take away their lives" by hanging.<sup>30</sup>

Within a month of the execution of the king, the Council of State received information from Walton-on-Thames concerning Robert Everard, who had come to George's Hill in Surrey "and sowed the ground with parsnips, carrots, and beans," the signature action of the Diggers. The gesture was humble, but the Diggers' hopes were not, for they saw their commune as a solution to the problems of expropriation, imprisonment, hanging, and slavery, not to mention hunger:

This freedom in planting the common Land, will prevent robbing, stealling, and murdering, and Prisons will not so mightily be filled with Prisoners; and thereby we shall prevent that hart breaking spectacle of seeing so many hanged every Sessions as they are. And surely this imprisoning and hanging of men is the Norman power still, and cannot stand with the freedom. . . . This freedom in the common earth is the poors right by the Law of Creation and equity of the Scriptures, for the earth was not made for a few, but for whole Mankind, for God is no respecter of Persons.

Later the Diggers asked,

What need have we of imprisoning, whipping, or hanging Laws, to bring one another into bondage? and we know that none of those that are subject to this righteous law dares arrest or inslave his brother for, or about the objects of the earth, because the earth is made by our Creator to be a common Treasury of livelihood to one equall with another, without respect of person.

By taking direct action to repossess the land and by building about a dozen communes, the Diggers delivered themselves from slavery.<sup>31</sup>

To the Council of State, Everard's planting seemed "ridiculous, yet

that conflux of people may be a beginning whence things of a greater and more dangerous consequence may grow." Worried, Lord Fairfax interviewed Everard and Winstanley at Whitehall in April. They refused to remove their hats. Everard echoed the prophecy of Sarah and Dinah when he "said he was of the race of the Jews . . . but now the time of deliverance was at hand, and God would bring his people out of this slavery, and restore them to their freedom in enjoying the fruits and benefits of the Earth." Winstanley defended himself in court in language that echoed Rainborough's words at Putney: "I shew by the law of righteousness that the poorest man hath as true a title and just right to the land as the richest man." Fairfax concluded that the alternative example of the Diggers was too dangerous to escape destruction. He personally led a troop of horse to the most important of the communes, George's Hill, and drove the commoners off the land, breaking their spades, trampling the crops, and destroying their houses. Among the first acts of the leaders of the young English republic was thus direct military intervention on behalf of private property. They feared that rural commoners and the city proletariat might join forces in the conflux as they had done in Naples.

Winstanley and the Diggers more broadly believed that the death penalty was logically related to the enclosure movement. Kingly power "hedges the weake out of the Earth, and either starves them, or else forces them through poverty to take from others, and then hangs them for so doing."<sup>32</sup> Given that the poor were forced to work beneath subsistence, "this Law that frights people and forces people to obey it by Prisons, Whips, and Gallows, is the very kingdom of the Devil, and Darknesse, which the Creation groans under at this day." Robert Coster queried "whether the Lords of the manors, do not hold their Right and Title to the Commons, meerly from the Kings Will . . . and whether the strongest point in their Law for the keeping up their Title, be not, *Take him Jaylor?*" The author of *Tyrannipocrit Discovered* advanced similar arguments in 1649, and with Atlantic scope. This abolitionist tract denounced the slavery being developed in America, of both poor people and Indians. The idle rich commanded others to labor, the thieving rich commanded others not to steal, and together they made thieves by Act of Parliament and hanged them. Yet God was no respecter of persons.<sup>33</sup>

Samuel Chidley considered the death penalty an abomination that

defiled the land with blood. He petitioned the Lord Mayor in June 1649, announcing that since the penalty is "inhuman, bloody, barbarous, and tyrannical," capital laws "are no rules for me to walk by." He also petitioned the Council of State, warning that "the foundations of the earth are out of course." He visited the Old Bailey, where he "observed that the [inmates] . . . are poor labourers, and such creatures, who stole things of a small value, peradventure, for mere necessity." The magistrates threw him out. He advised Parliament to lay the ax to the root: "Certainly the law cannot be good, that forceth all men to prefer the meanest thing before the greatest, that is, a little wicked mammon with an idolatrous badge upon it, before a man's precious life." In 1652, as lay minister at Christ Church, Newgate, he published *A Cry Against a Crying Sin*, which was printed in red ink. He tried to nail the book to the Tyburn gallows, but the crowd was too dense, so he was "forced to nail it to the tree, which is upon the bank by the gallows," where it was read by many. An anonymous writer joined Chidley in pointing the finger of shame: "For man to inclose all Lands and Creatures from his kind, is utterly unnatural, wicked, and treacherous. . . . Mark this you great Cormudgings, you hang a man for stealing for his wants, when you your selves have stole from your fellow Brethren all Lands, Creatures, &c."<sup>34</sup>

Following the regicide, the Levellers sought to ally with, in turn, the rural poor, the urban proletariat, and finally the soldiers in the army, but the execution of Robert Lockyer indicated the beginning of their end. Cromwell thumped the table and explained to Fairfax, "I tell you sir, you have no other way to deal with these men [the Levellers] but to break them in pieces," for "if you do not break them they will break you." Two weeks later the military power of the Levellers was tested at Burford. Levellers were rounded up and imprisoned, assassinated, executed, and exiled, but their ideas could not be contained. Despite near famine conditions, the London bourgeoisie gloated with a day of feasting. Abiezer Coppe objected in the most powerful single rant of class-war jubilee of the time, called *A Fiery Flying Roll: A Word from the Lord to All the Great Ones*. Levellers "were the cause of many turbulent commotions, which like Hydra's heads, one being lopped, others instantly sprouted up," as was observed as late as 1656.<sup>35</sup> So the killing of Lockyer, while not a martyrdom on the royal scale, helped to assure the survival of the ideas of the Levellers:

*Their self-will is their law, stand up now, stand up now,  
 Their self will is their law, stand up now.  
 Since tyranny came in they count it now no sin  
 To make a gaol a gin, to starve poor men therein.  
 Stand up now, stand up now.*

*The gentry are all round, stand up now, stand up now,  
 The gentry are all round, stand up now,  
 The gentry are all round, on each side they are found,  
 This wisdom's so profound, to cheat us of our ground.  
 Stand up now, stand up now.*

“The Digger’s Song” ended on a Francis note: “Glory here, Diggers all.” Once the antinomian challenge had been defeated, the way was open to conquer Ireland, to wage war against the Dutch and the Spanish, to stabilize Barbados, to seize Jamaica, and to establish slavery more broadly than ever by linking West Africa with the Caribbean.

#### IRELAND, 1649–1651

On March 29, 1649, the day after the Leveller leadership had been crushed by the arrest of John Lilburne, William Walwyn, and Richard Overton, Cromwell agreed to take charge of the expedition to conquer Ireland. Thus commenced “the Via Dolorosa of the Irish,” as James Conolly wrote, and, its historical corollary, the beginnings of the “green Atlantic.”<sup>36</sup> Once Cromwell’s Irish expedition had been announced, opposition to it grew quickly throughout the army in April and May. The author of *The English Soldiers’ Standard* warned that the officers intended to enslave the soldiers and advised the election of new agitators. The newsbook *Mercurius Militaris*, published by John Harriss, explained that “this Irish Design” was meant “to keep this nation in slavery.” The Levellers, for their part, circulated the mildly titled *Certain Queries Propounded to the Consideration of such as were Intended of the Service of Ireland*, which posed questions far from mild: “Whether Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, William Duke of Normandie, or anie other the great Conquerors of the world, were anie other then so manie great and lawless thieves?” The Levellers knew the Irish expedition was a diversion:

“If they could but get us once over into Ireland (they thinke) they have us sure enough: either we shall have our throats cut, or be famished, for they are sure we can never get back againe over the Great Pond.” A Leveller leaflet questioned the right of Englishmen “to deprive a people of the land God and nature has given them and impose laws without their consent.” The author wondered whether the Irish were not justified “in all that they have done . . . to preserve and deliver themselves from the usurpations of the English,” and declared that it was the duty of every honest man to oppose Cromwell’s campaign. While open resistance was quelled, thousands deserted.<sup>37</sup>

Cromwell departed Bristol in July for Dublin. His destination was Drogheda, where massacre was dealt out. Cromwell described his approach: “Every tenth man of the soldiers killed, and the rest shipped off for the Barbadoes.”<sup>38</sup> Cromwell estimated that 2,100 were killed; Hugh Peter placed the number at 3,552. Two years later Ireton, the defender of property in the Putney Debates, laid siege to Limerick on the Shannon. “Ireton was content to rest his hopes mainly on famine and on the plague which raged within the walls,” writes one historian, but we must add that he had the heavy guns and the gallows with which to enforce the famine. “One old man desired to be hanged instead of his daughter, ‘but that,’ says Ludlow, ‘was refused, and he with the rest driven back to town.’ A gibbet was then raised in sight of the walls, upon which condemned criminals were hanged, and this stopped the exodus.” Thousands perished during the siege, including Ireton himself, who caught cold and died.<sup>39</sup> According to Gardiner, a new capital-punishment statute for Ireland put eighty thousand at risk of execution. Sir John Davis had argued a generation earlier that Ireland was barbarous precisely because, unlike other, well-governed kingdoms and commonwealths, it did *not* have a death penalty.<sup>40</sup>

Cromwell next turned his attention to seizing land, in order to pay the soldiers and the investors in Adventures for Lands in Ireland (including, at two hundred pounds apiece, Thomas and William Rainborough).<sup>41</sup> The Army Council debated whether “to eradicate the Natives” or merely “to divest them of their Estates.”<sup>42</sup> A few years later, in 1652, the preamble of the Act for the Settlement of Ireland decided the issue: the landlord system was installed. It was “not the intention of parliament to extirpate that whole nation,” for the land could not be cultivated “without the





*A "poore Souldier" in the New Model Army in Ireland.*  
The humble Petition of us the Parliaments poore  
Souldiers in the Army of Ireland (1647).

help of the natives." Fixed enclosures replaced open fields, single dispersed farms replaced nucleated settlements or the clachan, commercial tillage and an increase in agricultural labor replaced subsistence strips and environmental egalitarianism. This ruthless transfer of the land of Ireland to an immigrant landlord class was accompanied by a major cadastral mapping enterprise, Sir William Petty's Down survey of the 1650s, which put Ireland "down" on paper.<sup>43</sup> And it brought a wave of "rude persons in the country, [by] whom [the landlords] might expect often to be crossed and opposed," also known as tories, a name that

was first officially applied in 1647 to masterless men living a life of brigandage.

The labor of the dispossessed Irish would now be deployed on the estates of English masters, not only in Ireland but across the Atlantic. Cromwell sent thousands of Irish to Jamaica.<sup>44</sup> This was not a wholly new experience, as indicated by Hugh O'Neill on the eve of the defeat at Kinsale in 1601: "We Irishmen are exiled and made bond-slaves and servitors to a strange and foreign prince." A thousand Irish slaves had been sold to Sweden in 1610.<sup>45</sup> Sir William Petty estimated that one sixth of the adult males, some thirty-four thousand men, were shipped out of Ireland and sold abroad in the aftermath of the 1649 conquest. By 1660 there were at least twelve thousand Irish workers in the West Indies, and nine years later, eight thousand in Barbados alone. "Though we must use force in taking them up, . . . it is not in the least doubted that you may have such numbers of them as you see fit," wrote Henry Cromwell in response to a request from Jamaica for a thousand Irish girls and a thousand boys. The poet lamented,<sup>46</sup>

*Tribeless, landless, nameless,  
Wealthless, hostless, fameless  
Wander now thine aimless  
Children to and fro.*

In addition to the boys and girls and land, knowledge was taken, too. Robert Boyle received huge masses of Irish lands, the profits from which helped to maintain the Royal Society, which also benefited from the trade secrets that Boyle appropriated from the art and mystery of the Irish craftsman. He was impressed, for example, by "a smith, who with a hammer . . . can out of masses of iron, forge great bars or wedges, and make those strong heavy chains, that were employed to load malefactors, and even to secure streets and gates" in order to protect property in Ireland and to produce more of it overseas.<sup>47</sup>

#### BARBADOS, 1649

Irishmen were among the conspirators who plotted in 1649 to make themselves freemen and masters of Barbados. The successful cultivation of sugar, brought by the Dutch from Pernambuco, Brazil, to the island

in 1640, had intensified the exploitation of plantation workers. Richard Ligon, an eyewitness, believed the conspiracy involved a majority of the servant class, which at the time numbered near ten thousand. He saw the event as a direct response to the cruelty of the masters, which caused the servants to seek freedom or die in the act. They never reached the moment of action, however, as an informer alerted the authorities to their plan. Hundreds were arrested, many tortured, eighteen executed. The leaders were “so haughty in their resolutions, and so incorrigible, as they were like enough to become actors in a second plot.” Despite the executions, resistance to slavery continued, including a new plot organized by Africans.<sup>48</sup>

By the late 1640s the masters of Barbados had much wealth to protect from those who had produced it. After visiting the island in August 1645, George Downing wrote, “If you go to Barbados, you shall see a flourishing island, many able men. I believe they have brought this year no less than a thousand Negroes, and the more they buy, the better able they are to buy, for in a year and half, they will earn (with God’s blessing) as much as they cost.” When Richard Ligon first arrived in Bridgetown, in 1647, he counted twenty-two ships in the harbor, “quick stirring and numerous.” The 1651 charter of Barbados noted that the principal source of “wealth of the inhabitants of the island consisteth chiefly in the labour of their servants.” Barbados became England’s wealthiest colony, and “one of the richest Spots of earth under the Sun.”<sup>49</sup>

Barbados was described as “the dunghill whereon England doth cast forth its rubbish. Rogues and whores and such people are those which are generally brought here.” True enough: the first cargo of convicts reached Barbados in 1642. An act of 1652 permitted English magistrates summarily to seize vagrants or beggars and ship them to the plantations. A shipload of prostitutes from the jails of London was transported to Barbados as breeders. Besides these, the island was inhabited by all sorts: English, French, Dutch, Scots, Irish, Spanish Jews, Indians, and Africans. Heinrich von Uchteritz, a German mercenary who fought for Charles Stuart, was sold to a plantation that had “one hundred Christians, one hundred Negroes, and one hundred Indians as slaves.” The Native Americans were mostly Guianese Arawaks, who came to the island early on as free people but were enslaved by 1636. English servants and African slaves ar-

rived in the first English ships in 1627, and the Irish in the 1630s; two thousand per year came from England in the 1640s, and three thousand in the 1650s. They were sometimes sold according to their weight. Many were veterans of the English Revolution—soldiers, “familists”—who became poor planters, propertyless freemen, and indentured servants. Some of them, in antinomian fashion, denied all ordinances. George Fox visited Barbados in 1671 and preached similar notions to “the *Blacks*, the *Taunies*, and the *Whites*.”<sup>50</sup> The planters moved against religious radicals suspected of involvement in the conspiracy of 1649 by banishing 122 men.

The sugar planters imposed a puritanical work discipline, which to the slave embodied a Satanic principle in both the physics and the economics of accumulation: “The Devel was in the English-man, that he makes every thing work; he makes the *Negro* work, the *Horse* work, the *Ass* work, the *Wood* work, the *Water* work, and the *Winde* work.”<sup>51</sup> It took four decades to clear the island’s xerophilous forest, with its ironwood, rodwood, tom-tom bush, and hoe-stick wood. The final phase of deforestation began in 1650, after which coal had to be imported from England to keep the sugar boiling. The successful cultivation of sugar relied upon a labor process of multiracial gangs in the canefields:

*trash, windmill, crack bubble o vat in de fac’try*  
*load pun me head, load in de cart, de mill spinnin spinnin*  
*syrup, liquor, blood o de fields, flood o’ the ages.*

The workers of the early plantation system were chattels; their labor was organized and maintained by violence. Floggings and brandings left bodies scarred beyond the imagination, or so thought Father Antoine Biet, who witnessed these punishments in 1654. Orlando Patterson has written that “the distinction, often made, between selling their labor as opposed to selling their persons makes no sense whatsoever in real human terms.” The same Devil controlled all.<sup>52</sup>

Resistance included running away, arson, murder, revolt. The Irish, according to Governor Searle in 1657, wandered around as vagabonds, refusing to labor. James Holdip, a planter, watched cane fields worth ten thousand pounds go billowing up in flames in the year of the conspiracy, 1649. In 1634 servants had conspired to kill their masters and make them-



selves free, then to take the first ship that came and go to sea as buccaneers. Their leaders, John and William Weston, had experienced the antienclosure riots surrounding Bristol in the 1620s and 1630s.<sup>53</sup> Cornelius Bryan, a redheaded Irishman, was flogged, imprisoned for mutiny, and eventually deported. “As he was eating Meat in a Tray,” he said “that if there was so much English Blood in the Tray as there was Meat, he would eat it, and demanded more.” The cooperation between such redshanks and African slaves was a nightmare for the authorities. The Governor’s Council announced in 1655 that “there are several Irish Servants and Negroes out in rebellion in ye Thicketts and thereabouts,” making a mockery of a law passed in 1652, “An Act to Restrain the Wanderings of Servants and Negroes.” The first recorded group of maroons in Barbados was interracial, as was the cage in the capital, Bridgetown, into which recaptured runaways were thrown. “What planters feared most of all was a rebellious alliance between slaves and servants,” explains the historian of Barbados, Hilary McD. Beckles. Irish and Africans conspired together in plots of 1675, 1686, and 1692. The “Black Irish” emerged as a regional ethnicity in Montserrat and Jamaica.<sup>54</sup>

To stabilize their regime, the rulers of Barbados separated the servants, slaves, and religious radicals from each other. This they accomplished in the 1650s and 1660s, with inadvertent help from Oliver Cromwell, microbes, and the “spirits.” In Cromwell’s *Western Design* of 1655, a naval squadron headed by Venables and Penn stopped off at the island and carried away some four thousand servants and former servants of Barbados to attack Jamaica and seize it from Spain. Most of them died of yellow fever. As servants left the island or perished, the big planters replaced them with African slaves, who by the 1660s were being provided by slave traders in greater numbers and at lower prices than traders of indentured servants could offer. The upper class also used informal policy to create division, instigating criminality and taking comfort as workers quarreled among themselves. Morgan Godwyn explained this as the politics of “Tush, they can shift”:

An effect of their scant allowance of Food to their Slaves [is] the many Robberies and Thefts committed by these starved People upon the poorer English. Of which, I should affirm their owners to

be the occasion, by thus starving of them, I think I should not hit much either beside, or beyond the Mark. That they are not displeased at it, if dexterously performed, is the general belief and sense of the Sufferers: And this is said to be the true meaning of that customary reply, Tush, they can shift, to the Stewards and Overseers requests for a supplie of the Negro’s want of Provision.<sup>55</sup>

In this scenario, starvation produced theft, to which the poor English responded by shooting the thieves dead. The division between servant and slave was codified in the comprehensive slave and servant code of 1661, which became the model for similar codes in Jamaica, South Carolina, Antigua, and St. Christopher. The planters legally and socially differentiated slave from servant, defining the former as absolute private property and offering the latter new protections against violence and exploitation. The effort to recompose the class by giving servants and slaves different material positions within the plantation system continued as planters transformed the remaining servants into a labor elite, as artisans, overseers, and members of the militia, who, bearing arms, would be used to put down slave revolts. The policy of “Tush, they can shift” was institutionalized as a permanent structural characteristic of American plantation society. Once the abolitionism of the English Revolution was defeated, sugar production increased threefold in Barbados.<sup>56</sup>

#### THE RIVER GAMBIA, 1652

Following the executions of 1649, the Irish invasion, and the defeat of the servant rebellion in Barbados, two of the main rivals of the era, Oliver Cromwell and Prince Rupert, took different paths to same destination, West Africa—one politically, the other actually. Rupert, the opponent of Rainborough at the siege of Bristol in 1643, nephew of the beheaded King Charles I, and cousin of the future King Charles II, took to the seas as a royalist privateer with his brother, Prince Maurice. Cromwell meanwhile pursued an aggressive strategy designed to reduce Dutch might and establish England as the preeminent maritime power of the Atlantic. The two halves of the English ruling class (the “new merchants” and the old aristocrats) met and clashed at the river Gambia, where they created

the triangular slave trade. The English were the major slavers in Africa at the end of the seventeenth century, but not at the beginning.<sup>57</sup> In fact, in 1623 one English trader, Richard Jobson, when presented in Gambia with “certaine young blacke women,” made answer, “We were a people who did not deale in any such commodities, neither did we buy or sell one another.” This would change by 1649.

The drama of the slave trade lies in the way the people of the river were caught between two historic forces, commonism and slavery. Léopold Senghor, the poet of Négritude, says that the “Negro African society . . . had already achieved socialism before the coming of the European.”<sup>58</sup> W. E. B. DuBois revered the human warmth of the West African village. Walter Rodney characterized political organization as chieftancies and “ethnicities organized communally.” The river Gambia is a major water-course of Africa, navigable for five hundred miles. Jobson observed that the Mandingo agriculturalists seeded their fields using a series of iron-tipped hoes: “One leading the way, carries up the earth before him, so many others following after him, with their several Irons, doing as he leadeth, as will raise up a sufficient furrow.”<sup>59</sup> Rice grown by Jola women in freshwater swamps was the major subsistence crop and would later form the basis for the South Carolina rice culture. The chief estuarial commodity was salt. Canoes traded in fish and the oysters of the mangroves. James Island was fortified in 1651, and rights were negotiated with the Niimi people to hew wood and draw water on the mainland. The Jola people on the southern bank would never recover from the slave trade. Nasir al-Din (d. 1674), a religious revolutionary and Berber cleric, preached naked in the villages to overthrow the dynasties corrupted by the slave trade, which would become a state enterprise by the end of the century.<sup>60</sup>

In the storied year of 1649, British merchants ordered the construction of a trading fort, or factory, on the Gold Coast.<sup>61</sup> At the same time the Guinea Company, first founded in 1618, was scrutinized by the “new merchants” and the Council of State, receiving a new charter in 1651, when ships were dispatched to West Africa. Matthew Backhouse, a representative of the Guinea Company and a triangulator of trade among England, Africa, and the West Indies, sailed to the river Gambia in September 1651 with Captain Blake aboard the *Friendship*. Their purpose

was to establish regular trading relations and to obtain fifteen or twenty “young lusty Negers of about 15 yeares age” to carry to Barbados. Backhouse himself traded for twenty-five elephant teeth and African textiles, the esteemed “Mande country cloth” whose staggered bright colors influenced the visual traditions of Brazil, the Caribbean, and the United States.<sup>62</sup> They arrived in Gambia soon after a previous English ship had suffered a mutiny in which the slaves “got weapons in their hands, and fell upon the Saylor, knocking them on the heads, and cutting their throats so fast” that the master, in despair, “went down into the Hold, and blew all up with himself; and this was before they got out of the River.” Such events caused the Guinea Company to stock its ships with “shackles and boults for such of your negers as are rebellious and we pray you be veary carefull to keepe them under and let them have their food in due season that they ryse not against you, as they have done in other ships.”

After Prince Rupert was defeated by Rainborough at Bristol, he escaped to Kinsale, the Irish port, where he provisioned and manned a small fleet before setting out to roam the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, hoping to keep Barbados royalist. In December 1651 Rupert watered at Arguin, tucked under Cape Blanc, near the waters of the dreadful disaster memorialized in Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*. Rupert hired a pilot in the Cape Verde Islands, then another in the mouth of the Gambia River, then a third, a *grometta* named Jacus. A creole population of mixed African and Portuguese, beginning in the fifteenth century and known as *lançados*, acted the part of intermediaries. For his part, Jacus served first the Cromwellians and then the royalists.<sup>63</sup> Upriver in a tributary on March 2, Rupert captured two English merchant ships, the *Friendship* and the *Supply*, whose crews were weakened by malaria, before sailing on March 18 for Cape Mastre and the town of Reatch.

Jacus advised a stop. “Some of them stole off in one of their canoes a sailor of Prince Maurice’s, a native of that place, who lived long among Christians, and was become one himself; but upon promise of the others that he should return aboard again, he went with them to visit his parents.” The muster books of the era reveal scores of absences from any given ship, so this was hardly unusual. Nevertheless, the prince, resolving to capture the sailor by force, sent a hundred men after him, who were

dislodged from their boats in the surf. Two gentlemen, Holmes and Hell, were taken hostage. Of Hell we know little, but Holmes helped to form the imperial nation. Here followed a rapid series of events on sea and shore in which nautical power confronted indigenous people (“the beach of dreams, and insane awakenings,” wrote Césaire). A canoe paddled out to treat. One of the men was slain. The prince ordered out another hundred musketeers. The natives “sent a considerable party of men into the sea, as high as their necks, to impede our landing who, as soon as they saw us present at them, dived under water to avoid the execution of our shot; and then appearing, gave us a volley of arrows . . . until one of their arrows unfortunately struck his Highness Prince Rupert above the left pap, a great depth into the flesh, who called instantly for a knife, and cut it forth himself.”

This was enough, and thanks to Jacus, the others were rescued, rowed quickly back to their ships, and sailed away. Jacus himself remained, declining the offered rewards of Rupert, preferring the intermediating topography, the beach or estuary, between land and sea. Oral historians of the locality, the griot, remember not only Kunta Kinte and the “saga of an American family,” for this was the region of *Roots* (1976), but multitudes of sagas of centuries of European violence on the beaches.<sup>64</sup> Why was this African sailor so important to Rupert? Was it his linguistic ability? His knowledge of the region? His skills as a mariner? Or was it his transatlantic knowledge of American slavery, which might prove dangerous to English interests in the region? The tale we tell is not a family saga but one of class forces at the critical meeting of the sailor of the European deep-sea ship and the boatman of the African canoe. This meeting contained the possibility of cooperative resistance against a common enemy who in this case would bear the scar of it for the rest of his days.

No sooner had Rupert begun to retreat than a mutiny broke out on one of his ships and carried it away. A second mutiny then occurred in the Cape Verde Islands, led by William Coxon. With him were the cooper, the gunner, the boatswain, the master’s mate. Such officers spearheaded the 1648 mutiny. Capp quotes a gunner who claimed to be “above ordnances.”<sup>65</sup> The ship had 115 men on board—French, Spanish, Dutch, English, and many Africans. Twenty-five of this multilingualistic, multiethnic crew became active mutineers.<sup>66</sup> They changed the name of the

ship from *Revenge of Whitehall* (Charles Stuart had been beheaded at Whitehall) to *Marmaduke*, under which name it would sail in 1655 to the Caribbean with Venables and Penn. In 1649 the tenth query to the troops going to Ireland had been “whether those that contend for their freedom (as the English now) shall not make themselves altogether unexcusable, if they shall intrench upon other’s freedom; and whether it be not an especial note and characterizing badge of a true pattern of freedom, to endeavor the just freedom of all men as well as his own?”

The encounters on the river Gambia in the year 1652 continued to shape the lives of Prince Rupert and Robert Holmes, who in turn shaped the course of English Atlantic history. Robert Holmes would twice return to Gambia, first in 1661 to seize what would become James Island, the main English fortification on the river, and later, in 1663–64, to attack the Dutch factories. When he sailed by the place where he and Rupert had battled the boatmen years before, he remembered, “At this Portudally [Portugal] if it had not been for God’s providence I had been murdered by some of the Blacks of the Country on shore.”<sup>67</sup> Building his career at a time when the navy was becoming the formative institution of the nation, Holmes personally precipitated two world wars. James Island in particular and the river Gambia in general became “the main stronghold of the English in the northern part of Africa during all the history of the African Companies.” Dryden praised him: “And Holmes, whose name shall live in epic song . . . who first betwitched our eyes with Guinea gold.” Dryden praised Rupert, too, as an eagle, a messiah who “shook aloft the fasces of the main.” Rupert became the driving force in the rechartering of the Royal African Company in 1660 and again in 1663, after the restoration of Charles II to the throne. This charter laid pompous claim to the entire maritime interface from the Pillars of Hercules to the Cape of Good Hope, “and all the singular Ports, Harbours, Creeks, Islands, lakes, and places in the parts of Africa.” The weird speech-act of magical usurpation can be compared with the bat in the baobab tree who poked his head out to tell the first king (or *mansa*) of Niumi, “I do not deny your claim of having found a country, but whatever country you have found, it has an owner.”<sup>68</sup>

So the incident of Rupert’s breast wound reminds us, first, that the workers in the slave trade participated only under certain conditions—in

this case, a sailor's being permitted shore leave to say farewell to his family—and second, that the fastest-growing parts of the proletariat were sailors and African slaves. The sailors were multiracial—Irish, English, African—and a center of this Afro-maritime world was London. Although Backhouse himself was unable to return to London, his cargo did, and it included “one niger boy” at a time when “Black Tom” was becoming a London stereotype. In Westminster Tom introduced himself to an old miser: “Gwide Maystre, Me non Inglangt by mine Phace, none Inglangt by mine Twang; Me de grecat strawnger of Aphric, me de pherry phull of Maney.” Tom, who had never been out of England in his life and spoke no other language but English, was a trickster who manipulated the Londoners' greed and prejudice against outlanders to turn the situation to his own advantage.<sup>69</sup>

#### LONDON, 1659–1660

If the Putney Debates of 1647 revealed the English Revolution as an abolitionist movement, a 1659 Parliamentary debate on slavery and the “free-born Englishman,” held on the eve of the restoration of Charles II and the Stuart monarchy, marked a counterrevolutionary reversal. Circumstances had changed since Francis and Rainborough questioned the relationship between slavery and freedom at the peak of revolutionary possibility. Domestic repression of the radicals had made possible new adventures for the English bourgeoisie in Ireland, Barbados, Jamaica, and West Africa. On March 25, 1659, Marcellus Rivers and Oxenbridge Foyle petitioned the House of Commons “on behalf of themselves as of three score and ten freeborn people of this nation now in slavery in the Barbadoes; setting forth most unchristian and barbarous usage of them.” The ensuing debate made it clear that a convergence of ideas about slavery, race, and empire among Parliamentarians and royalists, former antagonists in the English Revolution and civil wars, would ease the way to the restoration of the monarchy.<sup>70</sup>

Rivers and Foyle had been arrested for running guns for Charles Stuart and imprisoned in the aftermath of the Salisbury rising of 1654. They protested their treatment as unbecoming “freeborn Englishmen” because they were never given a proper trial and were arbitrarily jailed for a

year. They were then snatched from their prisons and hurried to Plymouth, where they were thrown aboard a deep-sea vessel. As the goods and chattels of the merchant and M. P. Martin Noell, they were locked belowdecks with the horses. Rivers and Foyle did not say how many of their fellow white slaves had died, been sewn into canvas coffins, and been thrown over the side of the ship, but if the voyage was typical, the number would have been between eight and fourteen. After several weeks the prisoners arrived in Barbados and were sold to the “most inhuman and barbarous persons, for one thousand five hundred and fifty pound weight of sugar a-piece, more or less, according to their working faculties.” The slaves were forced to work, “grinding at the mills and attending at the furnace” or digging in the fields side by side with other slaves from England, Ireland, Scotland, America, and Africa.<sup>71</sup> They lived in pigsties, they ate potatoes and drank potato water, they were whipped, they were bought and sold. Their petition implied that there were human rights against such exploitation.<sup>72</sup>

The petition provoked a heated and disingenuous debate. The M. P.'s knew that the petitioners were little different from the thousands of English men and women who had been spirited away over the previous thirty years. Noell, who had spirited many of them, was forced to admit, “I trade into those parts,” but he hastened to defend the planter class in Barbados by saying, falsely, that the work on the sugar plantations was not as hard as represented and, truly, that the island was “as grateful to you for trade as any part of the world.” He tried to lessen the impact of the petition by denying the historic importance of indentured servants in building the plantation system and by interjecting racial distinctions: in Barbados, he reassured Parliament, “the work is mostly carried on by the Negroes.”<sup>73</sup>

Some in Parliament treated the petition politically, as a royalist issue. But Sir Henry Vane, the millennialist radical who had supported Anne Hutchinson in the Antinomian Controversy in Boston in 1636–37, announced, “I do not look on this business as a Cavalierish business; but as a matter that concerns the liberty of the free-born people of England.” Arthur Annesley added, “I am sorry to hear Magna Charta moved against this House. If he be an Englishman, why should he not have the benefit of it?”<sup>74</sup> Several M. P.'s began to define English freedom against

African slavery. Edward Boscawen, who had invested in the successful campaign to capture Jamaica from Spain in 1655, explained that “you have Paul’s case before you. A Roman ought not to be beaten.” By this he meant that Englishness should be a global citizenship that protected its owners against violence. If Parliament failed to act on the petition, he solemnly explained, “our lives will be as cheap as those negroes.” Sir Arthur Hesilrige “could hardly hold weeping” when forced to think of Englishmen working alongside Africans. As the universalist claims of revolution shrank to a narrow, racialist nationalism, a few still clung to broader ideals. Sir John Lenthall worried, “I hope it is not the effect of our war to make merchandize of men.” Thomas Gewen complained, “I would not have men sold like bullocks and horses. The selling of a man is an offence of a high nature.” Major John Beake summarized the point: “Slavery is slavery, as well in a Commonwealth as under another form.”<sup>75</sup>

It was a decisive moment, as explained by Hilary McD. Beckles: “Parliament felt that the Barbadians, and other West Indians, did not really need white labour any more—black slavery was fully established and proven to be very profitable.” Meanwhile, military labor in the metropolis was proving itself to be troublesome again. Soon after the debate, the common soldiers of the New Model Army again grew mutinous and again elected agitators to represent them. The specter of Putney began to haunt the propertied; this time, they restored the monarchy.<sup>76</sup> Once back in power, the royalists acted out their conception of the “rights of the free-born Englishman” by organizing repression, including exemplary hangings, against the very people who had developed the discourse in the first place. The New Englander Thomas Venner led Fifth Monarchist workers into battle against the king in 1661, chanting, “King Jesus and the heads upon the gates”—meaning the heads of the executed regicides.<sup>77</sup> Venner himself was caught, hanged, and drawn and quartered, his head stuck up in public. *Hydra decapita*.

The development of the English doctrine of white supremacy thus occurred in the context of counterrevolution, the restoration of the monarchy, and the advance of the slave trade. England’s rulers, led and inspired by Rupert and Holmes, began to discuss writing a new charter for the Company of Royal Adventurers into Africa and waging war against the Dutch for control of the West African man-trade.<sup>78</sup> The meaning of the

expression “free-born Englishman” could never thereafter be entirely innocent or hopeful for most of the people of the world. The repression of the Restoration completed the radical diaspora. Regicides stowed away for America and Europe; Ranters, Quakers, and Muggletonians disappeared overseas. Edward Burrough, the Quaker, told Charles II, “If you should destroy these vessels, yet our principles you can never extinguish, but they will live for ever and enter into other bodies to live and act and speak.”<sup>79</sup> *Hydra redux*.

#### VIRGINIA, 1663–1676

In September 1663 a group of laborers in Poplar Spring (Gloucester County), Virginia, met secretly at midnight in a house in the woods. They plotted to seize arms and a drum, to march from house to house, appeal to others in bondage, and then demand their freedom from the governor. Several of the rebels had worn the red shirt of the New Model Army; some had been Fifth Monarchists, others Muggletonians. At the Restoration they had been sentenced to servitude and shipped to Virginia. They now aimed to capitalize on widespread labor discontent within the plantation system, planning to overthrow the governor and set up an independent commonwealth. An informer betrayed the plot. Four were hanged, and five transported. The planters determined that the day of the rising, September 13, should be commemorated as an annual holy day.<sup>80</sup> Revolutionary antinomianism had reared its head in the tobacco fields.

The early Chesapeake tobacco proletariat consisted of Newgateers, Quakers, renegades, sailors, soldiers, Nonconformists, servants, and slaves.<sup>81</sup> In 1662 the House of Burgesses erected whipping posts and granted masters the legal right to beat their servants. Complaining of the “audacious unrulines of many stubborne and incorrigible servants resisting their masters and overseers,” they promised beatings and extra service to anyone who laid violent hands on his or her master, mistress, or overseer. Summarizing the rising tensions on Virginia’s eastern shore, Douglas Deal writes that “physical violence, verbal abuse, work slowdowns, sabotage, and running away by servants all became much more common after 1660.”<sup>82</sup> As in Barbados, servants and slaves often ran

away together, prompting repressive, deliberately divisive legislation in 1661 and 1662 that made the servant responsible for the time that the slave was away from his master. In 1664 Maryland's rulers passed an act against Englishwomen who were "forgetfull of their free condition and to the disgrace of the Nation doe intermarry with Negro Slaves by which alsoe divers suites may arise touching the Issue of such women and a great damage doth befall the Masters." Virginia's big men worried in 1672 that servants would "fly forth and joyne" with slaves in maroon communities. The House of Burgesses banned the entry of Quakers into the colony, called for the imprisonment of those already there, and forbade their meetings and publications. George Wilson, a former soldier in the New Model Army who in early 1662 was chained to a post with an Indian in a stinking prison in Jamestown, denounced the cruelty and oppression of a "Company of Lazy and Leud people who not Careing to worke feed upon the Swete and Labour" of others. Wilson organized interracial gatherings at which women preached heretical doctrine. The big planters attacked interracial cooperation except where it was necessary for the production of tobacco.<sup>83</sup>

The resistance of plantation workers exploded in 1675–76 in Bacon's Rebellion, which was actually two distinct uprisings. The first, beginning in late 1675, was a war for land by freedmen and small farmers against Indians and a portion of the colonial ruling class in Virginia. The second, beginning in September 1676, was a war against slavery, waged by servants and slaves who entered the fray after being promised their freedom by Nathaniel Bacon in exchange for military service against the forces of the Virginia governor, Berkeley. By late September, the rebel army was "sum'd up in freemen, searvants, and slaves; these three ingredience being the Composition of Bacon's Army." Many of Bacon's other followers, especially those who were masters, soon deserted him.<sup>84</sup> But if the freeing of servants and slaves cost Bacon support from one quarter, it increased it from another, as poor, rugged fellows flocked to him from all around the colony. *Strange News from Virginia*, published in London in 1677, noted that Bacon's forces consisted of "Runnagado English" along with slaves and servants. The poet Andrew Marvell heard from a ship's captain that Bacon entered Jamestown "having first proclaim'd liberty to all servants and Negroes."<sup>85</sup> This was the language of jubilee.

The abolitionists burned Jamestown and looted the estates of Berkeley's supporters. When Thomas Grantham began to negotiate on behalf of the king the final settlement of the conflict in January 1677, he faced four hundred armed English and African servants and slaves; he promptly tried to divide them by offering a better deal to the servants. Some accepted the deal and went home; others deserted to Roanoke; still others wanted to fight on. Eighty slaves and twenty servants remained in arms, prompting Grantham to make repeated, though treacherous, promises of freedom. After the still-armed rebels boarded longboats to make their escape, he turned a ship's cannon on them, forcing them to surrender and to suffer reenslavement.<sup>86</sup>

Bacon was denounced as a Leveller, and his followers as antinomians. In her play *The Widow Ranter, or a History of Bacon in Virginia* (1690), Aphra Behn suggested the influence of the Ranters upon events in Virginia, seeing revolutionary continuity in the colony's seventeenth-century rebellions. She may have based the character of the Widow Ranter on any of a number of female rebels, including the prostitutes who chose to die alongside the soldiers.<sup>87</sup> Contemporaries saw in Bacon's army the fearful monstrosity theorized a half century earlier by Francis Bacon. Colonel Edward Hill lamented the many "brave, wise, just & innocent good men that have fallen under the lash of that hidra the vulgar," while Governor Berkeley wrote in June 1676 that a "monstrous number of the basest of the People" had declared for Bacon, who himself was another Masaniello. Virginia's rulers executed twenty-three rebels.<sup>88</sup>

The uprising of the plantation workers in 1675–76 shaped the subsequent evolution of the Chesapeake. Immediately after the rebellion ended, the planters charged the governor with restraining "any inhumane severity which by ill masters or overseers may be used toward Christian servants." The self-conscious segmentation of the plantation proletariat became even more evident in legislation of 1682, providing that "all servants not being christians, being imported into this country by shipping" (i.e., Africans) should be slaves for life, while those who came by land (Indians) should be servants for twelve years. European servants continued to serve only four to five years. Virginia's big planters began to substitute African slaves for European indentured servants,<sup>89</sup> a development that changed indentured servitude in the Chesapeake as it had done in Barbados. Fewer indentured servants were imported, and



those who were tended to be given skilled supervisory and policing positions. Beginning in the late 1670s legislation was enacted throughout the British American plantation colonies to encourage and protect “Christian”—increasingly “white”—colonists.<sup>90</sup>

By the 1670s antinomians were tolerated by the big planters only if they distanced themselves from the experiences of plantation labor and acted the now important part of the “white” colonist, serving in the militia to defend the colony against rebellious slaves. George Fox soothed Barbadian slaveowners by explaining in 1671 that slave revolt was “a thing we do *abhor* and detest.” If the first defeat of antinomianism in the English Revolution had helped to secure the slave trade and accelerate the growth of capitalism, its second defeat, in America, helped to secure the plantation as a foundation of the new system. The Chesapeake’s “unruly home spirits” slowly changed their colors, from motley to black, and by 1680 the day of the indentured servant and the antinomian as primary revolutionary forces in the Atlantic had passed. The planters’ fear of multiracial rebellion was replaced by fear of the slave revolt, as expressed in two acts aimed at preventing “Negro insurrections,” passed in 1680 and 1682. The transition was completed with “An Act Concerning Servants and Slaves” (1705), which guaranteed the rights of servants and defined slaves as a form of property that would constitute the basis of production in Virginia.<sup>91</sup>

The plantation was thus made fast in Virginia and Maryland by the late 1670s, but alternatives remained, one of them especially close at hand. Some who fled slavery recovered the commons in Roanoke, located in the Albemarle Sound. To the dismal swamp flew European and African American slaves (with and without indentures), felons, landless paupers, vagabonds, beggars, pirates, and rebels of all kinds, who beginning in the 1640s lived there under the protection of the Tuscarora Indians. They all fished, hunted, trapped, planted, traded, intermarried, and formed what their main chronicler, Hugo Leaming, has called a Mestizo culture. The members of the community included Nathaniel Batts, who was also known as Secotan, war chief of the Tuscarora Empire and member of the Grand Council of the Tuscaroras; African-Americans Thomas Andover (pilot) and Francis Johnson (coastal wrecker); and John Culpeper, who had left Charleston, South Carolina, because “he was in danger of hanging for laying the design and endeavouring to sett the poore

people to plunder the rich.” Culpeper had also taken part in Bacon’s Rebellion and yet another rising in New England before returning to Roanoke to lead armed mobs of former plantation workers, sailors, “Indians, Negroes, and women” against the effort to establish proprietary government in 1677. The people of Roanoke, known for their “enthusiasm,” opposition to oaths, anticlericalism, emphasis on the “inner light,” and devotion to “liberty of conscience,” were antinomian and abolitionist, calling for an end to slavery as early as 1675. The very existence of the multiethnic maroon state was a threat to Virginia, whose governor worried that “hundreds of idle debtors, theeves, Negroes, Indians, and English servants will fly” to the liberated zone and use it as a base for attacks on the plantation system. It would take years for the colonial authorities to tame Roanoke and to constitute North Carolina as an official colony, after which the struggle for the commons would shift to the seas, with sailors and pirates the new maroons.<sup>92</sup>

The defeat of the servants and slaves and the recomposition of the plantation proletariat coincided with the origins of scientific racism. The cartographer and physician William Petty weighed the matter in *The Scale of Creatures* (1676): “There seem to be several species even of human beings,” he wrote. “I say that the Europeans do not only differ from the aforementioned Africans in colour . . . but also . . . in natural manners and in the internal qualities of their minds.” Following Francis Bacon, he was developing a new discourse, an ideological racism different in tone and methods from the racial prejudice of the overseer with a whip or the bully on the deck. The biological excuse for white supremacy would be refined by the English philosophers Locke and Hume and by English biologists, but there was nothing inevitable about its development, for alternative approaches existed even in England. In 1680 Morgan Godwyn, for example, explained the doctrine of Negro inferiority by refusal of work: “Surely *Sloth and Avarice* have been no unhandy Instruments and Assistants to midwife it into the World, and to Foster and Nurse it up.” Earlier still, in April 1649, Winstanley wrote, “As divers members of our human bodies make but one body perfect; so every particular man is but a member or branch of mankind,” and noted again in August of the same year that the Earth was a common treasury “for whole mankind in all his branches, without respect of persons.”<sup>93</sup>

upon a time had described an impossible task by saying, "The Ethiopian might as soon change his skin." Word of what had happened to the bodies of Hughson and Gwin spread far and wide, "engaged the attention of many, and drew numbers of all ranks, who had curiosity, to the gibbets, for several days running, in order to be convinced by their own eyes, of the reality of things so confidently reported to be." Seeing was believing, and many accounted the transformations "wondrous phenomenons." Others spectators "were ready to resolve them into miracles." Rebels to the end, Gwin and Hughson thus took some last revenge against the white people in wigs and ruffles. Even their dead bodies were capable of subversion.<sup>73</sup>

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## A Motley Crew in the American Revolution



IN OCTOBER 1765 a mob of sailors wearing blackface and masks, armed with clubs and cutlasses, visited the home of a wealthy Charleston merchant named Henry Laurens. Eighty strong and warm with drink and anger, they had come to protest the Stamp Act, recently passed by Parliament to raise tax revenues in the American colonies. Responding to the rumor that Laurens had stored in his home the stamped paper everyone would be forced to buy in order to conduct the business of daily life, they chanted, "Liberty, Liberty, & Stamp'd Paper," and demanded that he turn it over so that they could destroy it in an act of defiance. Laurens was rattled, as he later explained: they "not only menaced very loudly but now & then handled me pretty uncouthly." Finally convinced that Laurens did not have the paper, the men dispersed across the waterfront, shedding their disguises and straggling into the smoky taverns and bare boardinghouses, onto the damp wharves and creaky ships.

Their protest had consequences. Parliament, taken aback by colonial resistance, would soon repeal the Stamp Act. And in Charleston, one thing would lead to another, as another mob would meet in January 1766 to cry again for liberty. This time the protesters were African slaves, whose action caused greater fear and "vast trouble throughout the province." Armed patrols stalked the city's streets for almost two weeks, but the tumult continued. Since Charleston's harbor was crowded with ships, the seafarers were soon "in motion and commotion again," styling themselves, said a cynical Laurens, the "Protectors of Liberty." South Carolina Governor William Bull would later look back over the events of late 1765 and early 1766 and blame Charleston's turmoil on "disorderly negroes, and more disorderly sailors."<sup>1</sup>

Laurens and Bull identified a revolutionary subject often described by contemporaries as a “motley crew,” which has rarely been discussed in histories of the American Revolution. It is a subject whose history we have traced from the hydrarchy of the 1710s and 1720s to the slave revolts and urban insurrections of the 1730s and 1740s. The defeat of these movements allowed slavery and maritime trade to expand, as gangs of slaves extended plantation acreage and gangs of sailors manned ever-growing fleets of naval and merchant vessels. Britain confirmed its primacy as the world’s greatest capitalist power by defeating France in the Seven Years’ War in 1763, protecting and enlarging its lucrative colonial empire and opening vast new territories in North America and the Caribbean for the hewing of wood and the drawing of water. And yet at the very moment of imperial triumph, slaves and sailors began a new cycle of rebellion.

Operations on sea and land, from mutiny to insurrection, made the motley crew the driving force of a revolutionary crisis in the 1760s and 1770s. Such actions helped to destabilize imperial civil society and pushed America toward the world’s first modern colonial war for liberation. By energizing and leading the movement from below, the motley crew shaped the social, organizational, and intellectual histories of the era and demonstrated that the American Revolution was neither an elite nor a national event, since its genesis, process, outcome, and influence all depended on the circulation of proletarian experience around the Atlantic. That circulation would continue into the 1780s, as the veterans of the revolutionary movement in America carried their knowledge and experience to the eastern Atlantic, initiating pan-Africanism, advancing abolitionism, and assisting in the revival of dormant traditions of revolutionary thought and action in England and, more broadly, in Europe. The motley crew would help to break apart the first British empire and to inaugurate the Atlantic’s age of revolution.

For our purposes, two distinct meanings of “motley crew” must be defined. The first of these refers to an organized gang of workers, a squad of people performing either similar tasks or different ones contributing to a single goal. The gangs of the tobacco and sugar plantations were essential to the accumulation of wealth in early America. Equally essential were the crews assembled from the ship’s company, or ship’s people, for a par-

ticular, temporary purpose, such as sailing a ship, undertaking an amphibious assault, or collecting wood and water. These crews knew how to pull together, or to act in unison, not least because they labored beneath the whip. The first meaning, then, is technical and specific to the plantation and maritime labor processes. The economies of the eighteenth-century Atlantic depended on this unit of human cooperation.

The second meaning describes a sociopolitical formation of the eighteenth-century port or town. The “motley crew” in this sense was closely related to the urban mob and the revolutionary crowd, which, as we shall see, were usually armed agglomerations of various crews and gangs that possessed their own motility and were often independent of leadership from above. They provided the driving force from the Stamp Act crisis to the “Wilkes and Liberty” riots to the series of risings of the American Revolution. The revolts of the eighteenth-century Atlantic depended on this broader social form of cooperation.

When we say the crew was motley, we mean that it was multiethnic. This was, as we have noted, characteristic of the recruitment of ships’ crews during and after the expansion of the maritime state under Cromwell. Such diversity was an expression of defeat—consider the deliberate mixing of languages and ethnicities in the packing of slave ships—but that defeat was transformed into strength by agency, as when a pan-African, and then an African American, identity was formed from the various ethnicities and cultures. Original “ethnic” designations, such as the “free-born Englishman,” could thus become generalized, as shown by our study of the African sailor Olaudah Equiano, below.

Over time, the second (political) meaning emerged from the first (technical) one, broadening the cooperation, extending the range of activity, and transferring command from overseers or petty officers to the group itself. This transition was manifested in the actions of the motley crew in the streets of the port cities: as sailors moved from ship to shore, they joined waterfront communities of dockers, porters, and laborers, freedom-seeking slaves, footloose youth from the country, and fugitives of various kinds. At the peak of revolutionary possibility, the motley crew appeared as a synchronicity or an actual coordination among the “risings of the people” of the port cities, the resistance of African Ameri-

can slaves, and Indian struggles on the frontier. Tom Paine feared precisely this combination, but it never actually materialized. On the contrary, as we shall see, the reversal of revolutionary dynamics, toward thermidor, shifted the milieu of the motley crew, as refugees, boat people, evacuees, and prisoners gave human form to defeat.

### SAILORS

Sailors were prime movers in the cycle of rebellion, especially in North America, where they helped to secure numerous victories for the movement against Great Britain between 1765 and 1776. They led a series of riots against impressment beginning in the 1740s, moving Thomas Paine (in *Common Sense*) and Thomas Jefferson (in the Declaration of Independence) to list that practice as a major grievance. Their militancy in port grew out of their daily work experience at sea, which combined coordinated cooperation with daring initiative. Sailors engaged on board ship in collective struggles over food, pay, work, and discipline, and they brought to the ports a militant attitude toward arbitrary and excessive authority, an empathy for the troubles of others, and a willingness to cooperate for the sake of self-defense. As Henry Laurens discovered, they were not afraid to use direct action to accomplish their goals. Sailors thus entered the 1760s armed with the traditions of hydrarchy. They would learn new tactics in the age of revolution, but so, too, would they contribute the vast amount they already knew.<sup>2</sup>

Part of what sailors knew was how to resist impressment. This tradition had originated in thirteenth-century England and continued through the Putney Debates and the English Revolution, into the late seventeenth century with the expansion of the Royal Navy, and then on into the eighteenth with its ever-greater wartime mobilizations. When, after a quarter century's peace, England declared war against Spain in 1739, sailors battled and often defeated press-gangs in every English port. Fists and clubs flew in American ports as well, on Antigua, St. Kitts, Barbados, and Jamaica and in New York and New England.<sup>3</sup> Seamen rioted in Boston in 1741, beating a sheriff and a magistrate who had assisted the press-gang of H.M.S. *Portland*. The following year, three hundred seamen armed with clubs, cutlasses, and axes attacked the commanding

officer of the *Astrea* and destroyed a naval barge. They rose twice more in 1745, first roughing up another sheriff and the commander of H.M.S. *Shirley*, then, seven months later, confronting Captain Forest and his H.M.S. *Wager*, but losing two of their own to the flashing cutlasses of the press-gang. Admiral Peter Warren warned in 1745 that the sailors of New England were emboldened by a revolutionary heritage: they had, he wrote, "the highest notions of the rights and liberties of Englishmen, and indeed are almost Levellers."<sup>4</sup>

During the 1740s sailors began to burn the boats in which the press-gangs came ashore to snatch bodies, cutting their contact with the men-of-war and making "recruitment" harder, if not impossible. Commander Charles Knowles wrote in 1743 that naval vessels pressing in the Caribbean "have had their Boats haul'd up in the Streets and going to be Burned, & their Captains insulted by 50 Arm'd Men at a time, and obliged to take shelter in some Friends House." After Captain Abel Smith of the *Pembroke Prize* pressed some men near St. Kitts, a mob of seamen "came off in the road and seized the Kings boat, hawled her up . . . and threatened to burn her, if the Captain would not return the Prest Men, which he was obliged to do to save the Boat, & peoples Lives, to the great Dishonour of Kings Authority (especially in Foreign Parts)." These attacks on the property and power of the British state were intimidating: by 1746 the captain of H.M.S. *Shirley* "dared not set foot on shore for four months for fear of being prosecuted . . . or murdered by the mob for pressing."<sup>5</sup>

The struggle against impressment took another creative turn in 1747, when, according to Thomas Hutchinson, there occurred "a tumult in the Town of Boston equal to any which had preceded it." The commotion began when fifty sailors, some of them New Englanders, deserted Commander Knowles and H.M.S. *Lark*. In response, Knowles sent a press-gang to sweep the Boston wharves. A mob of three hundred seamen swelled to "several thousand people" and seized officers of the *Lark* as hostages, beat a deputy sheriff and slapped him into the town's stocks, surrounded and attacked the Provincial Council Chamber, and posted squads at all piers to keep naval officers from escaping back to their ship. The mob soon faced down Massachusetts Governor William Shirley, reminding him of the murderous violence visited upon sailors by the press-

gang in 1745 and threatening him with the example of Captain John Porteous, the despised leader of Edinburgh's City Guard, who after murdering a member of the crowd in 1736 had been captured and "hanged upon a sign post." Governor Shirley beat a hasty retreat to Castle William, where he remained until the riot ran its course. Meanwhile, armed sailors and laborers considered burning a twenty-gun ship being built for His Majesty in a local shipyard, then picked up what they thought was a naval barge, carried it through town, and set it aflame on Boston Common. Commodore Knowles explained their grievance: "The Act [of 1746] against pressing in the Sugar Islands, filled the Minds of the Common People ashore as well as Sailors in all the Northern Colonies (but more especially in New England) with not only a hatred for the King's Service but [also] a Spirit of Rebellion each *Claiming a Right* to the same Indulgence as the Sugar Colonies and declaring they will maintain themselves in it."

As sailors defended liberty in the name of right, they captured the attention of a young man named Samuel Adams, Jr. Employing what his enemies called "serpentine cunning," and understanding "Human Nature, in low life" very well, Adams watched the motley crew defend itself and then translated its "Spirit of Rebellion" into political discourse. He used the Knowles Riot to formulate a new "ideology of resistance, in which the natural rights of man were used for the first time in the province to justify mob activity." Adams saw that the mob "embodied the fundamental rights of man against which government itself could be judged," and he justified the taking of violent, direct action against oppression. The motley crew's resistance to slavery thereby produced a breakthrough in revolutionary thought.<sup>6</sup>

Adams thus moved from the "rights of Englishmen" to the broader, more universal idiom of natural rights and the rights of man in 1747, and one likely reason for this shift may be found in the composition of the crowd that instructed him. Adams faced a dilemma: how could he watch a crowd of Africans, Scotsmen, Dutchmen, Irishmen, and Englishmen battle the press-gang and then describe them as being engaged simply in a struggle for the "rights of Englishmen"? How could he square the apparently traditional Lockean ideas set forth in his Harvard master's thesis of 1743 with the activities of the "Foreign Seamen, Servants, Negroes,

and other Persons of mean and vile Condition" who led the riot of 1747?<sup>7</sup> The diversity of the rebellious subject forced his thought toward a broader justification. Adams would have understood that the riot was, literally, a case of the people's fighting for its liberty, for throughout the eighteenth century the crew of a ship was known as "the people," who once ashore were on their "liberty."<sup>8</sup>

The mass actions of 1747 moved Adams to found a weekly publication called the *Independent Advertiser*, which expressed a remarkable, even prophetic variety of radical ideas during its brief but vibrant life of less than two years. The paper reported on mutiny and resistance to the press-gang. It supported the natural right to self-defense and vigorously defended the ideas and practices of equality, calling, for example, for popular vigilance over the accumulation of wealth and an "Agrarian Law or something like it" (a Diggerlike redistribution of land) to support the poor workers of New England. It announced that "the reason of a People's Slavery, is . . . *Ignorance of their own Power.*" Perhaps the single most important idea to be found in the *Independent Advertiser* appeared in January 1748: "All Men are by Nature on a Level; born with an equal Share of Freedom, and endow'd with Capacities nearly alike." These words reached back exactly a century, to the English Revolution and the Levellers' *Agreement of the People*, and simultaneously looked forward to the opening words of the Declaration of Independence of 1776.<sup>9</sup>

Another connection between 1747 and 1776 may be detected in Jonathan Mayhew's sermon "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers," delivered and published in Boston in early 1750. The eminent clergyman preached his sermon at a time when the riot and its consequences were still on the minds of townspeople, especially the traders and seafarers who made up his own West Church. By 1748 Mayhew's preachings were considered heretical enough to get one listener, a young Paul Revere, a whipping from his father for his waywardness. By early 1749 Mayhew was tending toward what some saw as sedition, asserting that it was not a sin to transgress an iniquitous law such as the one that legalized impressment. Mayhew defended regicide in his sermon of January 30, the anniversary of the execution of Charles I, which was to him no day of mourning but rather a day for remembering that Britons will not be slaves. Like Adams before him, he argued pas-

sionately for both civil disobedience and a right to resistance that utilized force; indeed, passive nonresistance, Mayhew claimed, was slavery. Mayhew's influential defense of the right to revolution could not have been made without the action of the riot and its examination by Sam Adams and the readers of the *Independent Advertiser*.<sup>10</sup>

The ideas and practices of 1747 were refined and expanded during the 1760s and 1770s, when Jack Tar took part in almost every port-city riot, especially after the end of the Seven Years' War (1763), when the demobilization of the navy threw thousands out of work. For those who remained at sea, the material conditions (food, wages, discipline) of naval life deteriorated, causing many to desert. The Admiralty responded with terror: in 1764 deserters John Evans, Nicholas Morris, and John Tuffin received seven hundred lashes on the back; Bryant Diggers and William Morris were hanged. Admiral Alexander Colvill admitted that these were the "most severe punishments I ever knew to have been inflicted" for desertion. Such deadly discipline at sea imparted a desperate intensity to shoreside resistance once the press-gang resumed its work.<sup>11</sup>

Sailors now revived their attack on the king's naval property. When a press-gang from H.M.S. *St. John* tried in June 1764 to capture a deserter on a Newport wharf, a mob of sailors and dockworkers counterattacked, recaptured the man, roughed up the lieutenant who led the press-gang, and "threatened to haul [the king's] schooner on shore, and burn her." The crowd later went by boat to Goat Island, where it fired cannon at the *St. John*. A month later, a New York mob attacked a press-gang of the *Chaleur* and "drew its boat before the City Hall and there burnt her." The pressed men were let go, the naval captain was forced to offer a public apology, and all efforts made in court to convict members of the mob of wrongdoing failed. Soon after, another mob of maritime workers in Casco Bay, Maine, seized a press boat, "dragged her into the middle of Town" and threatened to burn her unless a group of pressed men were freed.<sup>12</sup> In Newport in 1765 a mob made up of sailors, youths, and African Americans took over the press tender of H.M.S. *Maidstone*, carried it to a central location in town, and set it ablaze. As popular antagonism toward the customs service grew in the late 1760s, sailors began to attack *its* vessels as well. Thomas Hutchinson wrote that in Boston in 1768, "a boat, belonging to the custom-house, was dragged in triumph through the streets of the town, and burnt on the Common." Seamen either

threatened to or actually did torch other vessels belonging to the king in Wilmington, North Carolina, and in Nevis in 1765, in Newport again in 1769 and 1772, and twice in New York in 1775. Sailors thus warned local leaders not to sign press warrants, as they twisted the longest and strongest arm of state power.<sup>13</sup>

In the late 1760s, sailors linked movements in England and America by engaging in revolts that combined workers' riots over wages and hours with protests related to electoral politics ("Wilkes and Liberty," in which the London mob supported John Wilkes, the journalist and ruling-class renegade, in his battles with the king and Parliament). The sailors of London, the world's largest port, played leading roles in both movements and in 1768 struck (i.e., took down) the sails of their vessels, crippling the commerce of the empire's leading city and adding the strike to the armory of resistance. Seamen's strikes would subsequently take place on both sides of the Atlantic with increasing frequency, as would struggles over maritime wages, especially after the reorganization of British customs in 1764, when officials began to seize the nonmonetary wages of seamen—that is, the "venture" or goods they shipped on their own account, freight-free, in the hold of their ship.<sup>14</sup> In leading the general strike of 1768, sailors drew upon traditions of hydrarchy to advance a proletarian idea of liberty. One writer, looking back on the uprising, explained, "Their ideas of liberty are the entering into [of] illegal combinations." Such combinations were "a many headed monster which every one should oppose, because every one's property is endangered by it; nay, the riches, strength, and glory of this kingdom must ever be insecure whilst this evil remains unchecked."<sup>15</sup>

Sailors also continued the struggle against impressment, battling the press-gangs in the streets of London in 1770 (during the war against Spain) and 1776 (during the war against the American colonies, hardly a popular cause among sailors). "Nauticus" observed the clashes between seamen and the navy in London in the early 1770s and wrote *The Rights of the Sailors Vindicated*, in which he compared the sailor's life to slavery and defended the right to self-defense. He echoed the Putney Debates more than a century earlier when he imagined a sailor's asking a magistrate, "I, who am as *free-born* as yourself, should devote my life and liberty for so trifling a consideration, purely that such wretches as you may enjoy your possessions in safety?" Like Sam Adams, Nauticus went be-



yond the rights of Englishmen, pitting the rights of private property against common rights and the “natural rights of an innocent subject.” John Wilkes also began to argue for the right to resist impressment in 1772.<sup>16</sup>

The motley crew also helped to create an abolitionist movement in London in the mid-1760s by setting in motion the eccentric but zealous Granville Sharp, who became one of slavery’s most implacable foes. The key moment was a meeting in 1765 in a queue at a London medical clinic between the obscure, flinty clerk and musician Sharp and a teenager named Jonathan Strong, formerly a slave in Barbados, who had been pummeled by his master into a crippled, swollen, nearly blind indigent. Sharp and his brother, a surgeon, nursed Strong back to health, but two years later his former master imprisoned and then sold him. To prevent further such inhumanity, the African sailor Olaudah Equiano pushed Sharp to study the law and the writ of habeas corpus, the most powerful legacy of the “free-born Englishman,” because it prohibited imprisonment or confinement without due process of law and trial by jury, and thus might be employed against impressment and slavery alike. Sharp believed that the law should be no respecter of persons and concluded in 1769 that the “common law and custom of England . . . is always favourable to liberty and freedom of man.” Especially moved by the struggles of black sailors on the waterfront, he used habeas to defend several who struggled to resist reenslavement, often by the press-gang. Sharp won a lasting victory in his legal defense of James Somerset in 1772, when the court limited the ability of slaveowners to possess and exploit their human property in England. Habeas corpus, however, was suspended in 1777, though not without opposition. The Robin Hood Club of London debated the question, “Would not suspending the Habeas Corpus Act be a proper measure at this juncture?” The negative carried the debate by a great majority. Meanwhile, a police magistrate named John Fielding founded the “Bow Street Runners,” an urban metropolitan parallel to the notorious slave patrollers of the southern plantations. He paid close attention to the motley crew in London and monitored its westward circulation back to Caribbean insurrections.<sup>17</sup>

Sailors and the dockside proletariat attacked slavery from another angle in 1775, when they went on strike in Liverpool, as three thousand men, women, and children assembled to protest a reduction in wages.

When the authorities fired upon the crowd, killing several, the strike exploded into open insurrection. Sailors “hoisted the red flag,” dragged ships’ guns to the center of the city, and bombarded the Mercantile Exchange, leaving “scarce a whole pane of glass in the neighborhood.” They also trashed the property of several rich slave-trading merchants. One witness to the strife in Liverpool wrote, “I could not help thinking we had Boston here, and I fear this is only the beginning of our sorrows.”<sup>18</sup>

There was a literal truth to the observation that Boston, the “Metropolis of Sedition,” was casting its long shadow on English ports on the eve of the American Revolution. An anonymous eyewitness noted that multiethnic American sailors “were among the most active in the late tumults” of London in 1768. They were “wretches of a mongrel descent,” the “immediate sons of Jamaica, or African Blacks by Asiatic Mulattoes.” When such seamen chanted “No Wilkes, No King!” during the river strike of 1768, they displayed the independent revolutionary spirit that informed their actions ocean-wide. An escaped indentured servant named James Aitken, better known as Jack the Painter, took part in the Boston Tea Party, then returned to England to wage revolutionary arson in 1775 against the king’s ships and shipyards, for which crime he was captured and hanged. The mobility of sailors and other maritime veterans ensured that both the experience and the ideas of opposition carried fast. If the artisans and gentlemen of the American Sons of Liberty saw their rebellion as but “one episode in a worldwide struggle between liberty and despotism,” sailors, who had a much broader experience of both despotism and the world, saw their own struggle as part of a long Atlantic contest between slavery and freedom.<sup>19</sup>

#### SLAVES

A new wave of opposition to slavery was inaugurated in Jamaica in 1760 by Tacky’s Revolt, which was, according to sugar planter and historian Edward Long, “more formidable than any [uprising] hitherto known in the West Indies.” The revolt began, significantly, on Easter, in Saint Mary’s Parish, and spread like cane-fire to involve thousands island-wide. The rebels were motivated not by Christianity (Jamaican Baptism and Methodism lay in the future, and the Moravian mission, established in 1754, was tiny) but rather by the mysterious Akan religion, which,

continuing despite its prohibition since 1696, stressed spirit possession, access to supernatural powers, and a lively presence of the dead. Practitioners, or obeah men, conferred immortal powers upon the freedom fighters, who shaved their heads to signify their solidarity.<sup>20</sup> Their idea was to seize the forts and arms and destroy the mills. One of the leaders, Aponga (aka Wager), had been a sailor aboard H.M.S. *Wager* and may have witnessed the battles between the press-gang and the mob of sailors in Boston in 1745. In Kingston, a female slave, Cubah, was dubbed “the Queen.” The main leader, Tacky (whose name meant “chief” in Akan), was said to catch bullets in his hand and hurl them back at the slavemasters. The rebellion raged for several months, until a military force, which included the Scott’s Hall Maroons, was organized by land and sea against the rebels. Tacky was captured and decapitated, his head exhibited on a pole in Spanish Town. After his head was recaptured by night, Edward Long admitted that “such exercises in frightfulness proved of doubtful value.” Guerrilla fighting continued for a year. The carnage was among the greatest yet witnessed in a slave revolt: sixty whites killed; three to four hundred slaves killed in military action or dead of suicide once their cause became hopeless; and a hundred slaves executed. Accompanying the terror was legislation and policing, tighter control over meetings, registration of free blacks, permanent fortification in each parish, and the death penalty for those who practiced obeah.<sup>21</sup>

Order was reestablished on Jamaica, but apparently with little help from the merchant seamen who found themselves there when the revolt broke out and were quickly herded into the local militias to help put down the uprising. Thomas Thistlewood explained that as the sailors wandered from one plantation to another, the grog and silver spoons of the terrified sugar planters seemed to disappear. Edward Long claimed that in the middle of the revolt, a captured leader of the slave rebels told a Jewish militia guard, “As for the sailors, you see they do not oppose us, they care not who is in possession of the country, Black or White, it is the same to them.” The rebel was convinced that after the revolution, the sailors would “bring us things from t’other side the sea, and be glad to take our goods in payment.”<sup>22</sup>

Like the Knowles Riot in Boston in 1747, Tacky’s Revolt revived and contributed to a tradition of revolutionary thought that stretched back

to Winstanley and the English Revolution. In 1760, after the rebellion had broken out but before it was suppressed, a writer known to us only as J. Philmore wrote a pamphlet entitled *Two Dialogues on the Man-Trade*. Considering himself more a “citizen in the world” than a citizen of England, Philmore insisted that “all of the human race, are, by nature, upon an equality,” and that one person simply could not be the property of another. He denied the worldly superiority of Christianity and judged the slave trade to be organized murder. Philmore had probably learned of Tacky’s Revolt by way of merchant seamen, for he made it his business to frequent the docks. Much of the great deal he knew of the slave trade came “from the mouths of some sailors.”<sup>23</sup>

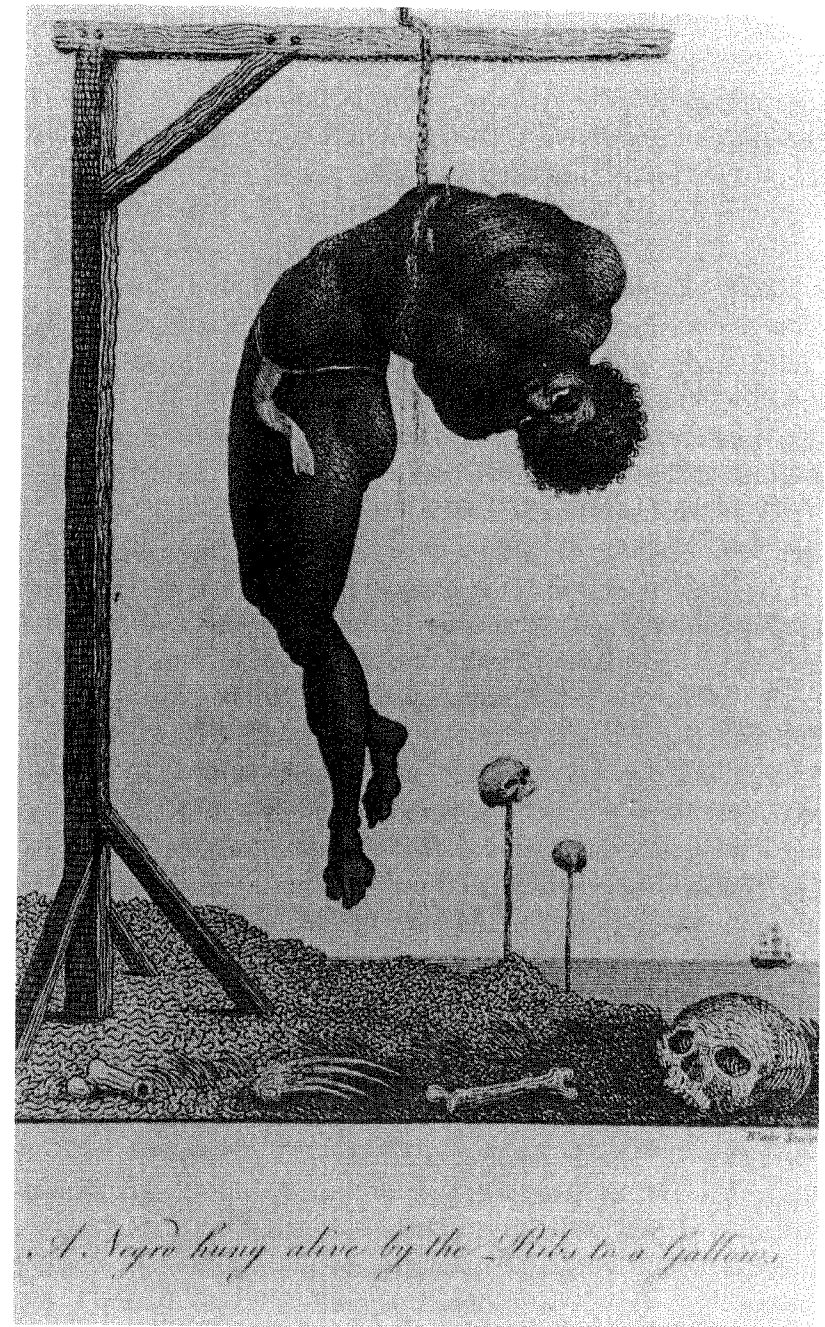
Philmore supported the efforts of Tacky and his fellow rebels “to deliver themselves out of the miserable slavery they are in.” His principal conclusion was clear, straightforward, and revolutionary: “So all the black men now in our plantations, who are by unjust force deprived of their liberty, and held in slavery, as they have none upon earth to appeal to, may lawfully repel that force with force, and to recover their liberty, destroy their oppressors: and not only so, but it is the duty of others, white as well as black, to assist those miserable creatures, if they can, in their attempts to deliver themselves out of slavery, and to rescue them out of the hands of their cruel tyrants.” Philmore thus supported these free-born people engaged in revolutionary self-defense, calling for immediate emancipation, by force if necessary, and asking all good men and women to do the same. Even though Philmore’s ideas must have caused pacifist Quakers to shudder (Anthony Benezet drew on his writing but carefully deleted his argument about repelling force with force), they nonetheless had broad influence. He wrote that “no legislature on earth, which is the supreme power in every civil society, can alter the nature of things, or make that to be lawful, which is contrary to the law of God, the supreme legislator and governour of the world.” His “higher law” doctrine would over the next century become central to the transatlantic struggle against slavery. His inclusive, egalitarian conception of “the human race” was inspired by the mass actions of rebellious slaves.<sup>24</sup>

Tacky’s Revolt may also have helped to generate another breakthrough in abolitionist thought, in the same seaport where Sam Adams had earlier learned to oppose impressment. When, in 1761, James Otis, Jr., made

his oration against the writs of assistance that allowed British authorities to attack the trade carried on between New England and the French West Indies, he went beyond his formal subject to “assert the rights of the Negroes.” Otis delivered his electrifying speech immediately after Tacky’s Revolt, which had been covered in a series of articles in Boston newspapers. John Adams would later recall that Otis was, that day, “a flame of fire,” a prophet with the combined powers of Isaiah and Ezekiel. He gave a “dissertation on the rights of man in a state of nature,” an antinomian account of man as “an independent sovereign, subject to no law, but the law written on his heart” or lodged in his conscience. No Quaker in Philadelphia ever “asserted the rights of negroes in stronger terms.” Otis called for immediate emancipation and advocated the use of force to accomplish it, causing the cautious Adams to tremble. When Otis published *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (1764), he claimed that all men, “white or black,” were “by the law of nature free-born,” thereby broadening and deracializing the idiom of the “free-born Englishman.”<sup>25</sup> Whether Otis had actually read Philmore’s pamphlet or simply drawn similar conclusions from Tacky’s Revolt, abolitionist thought would never be the same. Otis, whose echoes of the 1640s caused some to compare him to Masaniello, “was the first who broke down the Barriers of Government to let in the *Hydra* of Rebellion.”<sup>26</sup>

Tacky’s Revolt initiated a new phase of slave resistance. Major plots and revolts subsequently erupted in Bermuda and Nevis (1761), Suriname (1762, 1763, 1768–72), Jamaica (1765, 1766, 1776), British Honduras (1765, 1768, 1773), Grenada (1765), Montserrat (1768), St. Vincent (1769–73), Tobago (1770, 1771, 1774), St. Croix and St. Thomas (1770 and after), and St. Kitts (1778). Veterans of Tacky’s Revolt took part in a rising in British Honduras (to which five hundred rebels had been banished) as well as three other revolts on Jamaica in 1765 and 1766.<sup>27</sup>

On the North American continent, the reverberations of rebellion intensified after 1765, as slaves seized the new opportunities offered by splits between the imperial and colonial ruling classes. Runaways increased at a rate that alarmed slaveholders everywhere, and by the mid-1770s a rash of slave plots and revolts had sent white fears soaring. Slaves organized uprisings in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1767; Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in 1772; Saint Andrew’s Parish, South Carolina, and, in a joint



*A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows, c. 1773, by William Blake.*  
Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition.*

African-Irish effort, Boston in 1774; and Ulster County, New York, Dorchester County, Maryland, Norfolk, Virginia, Charleston, South Carolina, and the Tar River region of North Carolina in 1775. In the last of these, a slave named Merrick plotted with a white seafarer to make arms available and the intended revolt possible.<sup>28</sup>

Slave resistance was closely related to the development of Afro-Christianity. In Saint Bartholomew Parish, South Carolina, an insurrectionary plot terrified the white population in the spring of 1776. Its leaders were black preachers, including two female prophets. A minister named George claimed that England's "Young King . . . was about to alter the world, & set the Negroes Free." Further south, in Savannah, Georgia, Preacher David was almost hanged after he expounded upon Exodus: "God would send Deliverance to the Negroes, from the Power of their Masters, as he freed the Children of Israel from Egyptian Bondage." Meanwhile, a new generation of evangelical leaders emerged in the 1760s and 1770s, including George Liele and David George (Baptists) and Moses Wilkinson and Boston King (Methodists). Liele, a slave from Virginia who founded the first Baptist church in Georgia, was evacuated by the British to Kingston, Jamaica, where he established another church.<sup>29</sup>

As we have noted, revolutionary ideas circulated rapidly in the port cities. Runaway slaves and free people of color flocked to the ports in search of sanctuary and a money wage and took work as laborers and seamen. Slaves also toiled in the maritime sector, some with ships' masters as owners, others hired out by the voyage. By the middle of the eighteenth century, slaves dominated Charleston's maritime and riverine traffic, in which some 20 percent of the city's adult male slaves labored. The independence of these "Boat negroes" had long worried the city's rulers, especially when subversive activities were involved, as was alleged against Thomas Jeremiah, a river pilot, in 1775. Jeremiah was arrested for stockpiling guns as he waited for the imperial war that would "help the poor Negroes." "Two or three White people," probably sailors, were also held, then released for lack of evidence, and finally driven from the province. Black pilots were a "rebellious lot, particularly resistant to white control."<sup>30</sup>

The political effects of slave resistance were contradictory, fueling fear and repression (police and patrols) on one side and new opposition to

slavery on the other. This was especially true in the years leading up to the American Revolution, which marked a new stage in the development of an abolitionist movement. Benezet, America's leading Quaker abolitionist, chronicled slave uprisings around the world and tirelessly disseminated news of them through correspondence, pamphlets, and books. His work, in tandem with resistance from below, led to new attacks on the slave trade in Massachusetts in 1767 and in Rhode Island, Delaware, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and the Continental Congress by 1774. The first formal antislavery organization in America was established in Philadelphia in 1775.<sup>31</sup>

Two of the revolution's most popular pamphleteers were moved by the militancy of slaves in the 1770s to attack slavery as they expanded the arguments for human freedom. John Allen, a Baptist minister who had witnessed the riots, trials, hangings, and diaspora of London's Spitalfields silk weavers through the 1760s, delivered (and then published) "An Oration on the Beauties of Liberty" after the burning of the revenue cutter *Gaspee* by sailors in 1773. In the fourth edition of his pamphlet, which was read to "large Circles of the Common People," Allen denounced slavery, not least for having caused the frequent and recent revolts of slaves, which "so often occasion streams of blood to be shed." Thomas Paine, another man fair of pen and smitten with liberty, wrote against slavery immediately upon his arrival in America in 1774. He repeated in diluted form Philmore's argument for self-liberation: "As the true owner has a right to reclaim his goods that were stolen, and sold; so the slave, who is proper owner of his freedom, has a right to reclaim it, however often sold." Paine signaled his awareness of the upswing in African American resistance by referring to slaves as "dangerous, as they are now." The struggles of African American slaves between 1765 and 1776 increased the commotion and the sense of crisis felt in every British colony in the years leading up to the revolution. Within the Baptist Allen and the half-Quaker Paine, they awakened an antinomian abolitionism from a previous revolutionary age.<sup>32</sup>

## MOBS

The trajectories of rebellion among sailors and slaves intersected in seaport mobs, those rowdy gatherings of thousands of men and women that

created the crisis in the North American colonies. Like the New York conspirators of 1741, sailors and slaves fraternized in grogshops, dancing cellars, and “disorderly houses,” in Philadelphia’s Hell Town and elsewhere, despite efforts by authorities to criminalize and prevent such meetings.<sup>33</sup> They had been gathering together in Boston’s northside and southside mobs since the 1740s. Indeed, perhaps the single most common description of the mob in revolutionary America was as a “Rabble of boys, sailors, and negroes.” Moreover, on almost every occasion when a crowd went beyond the planned objectives of the moderate leaders of the patriot movement, sailors and often slaves led the way. Motley mobs were central to protests against the Stamp Act (1765), the Quartering Acts (1765, 1774), the Townshend Revenue Act (1767), the increased power of the British customs service (1764–74), the Tea Act (1773), and the Intolerable Acts (1774). As multiethnic mobs helped to revive old ideas and to generate new ones, they were denounced as a many-headed hydra.<sup>34</sup>

Multiracial mobs helped to win numerous victories for the revolutionary movement, especially, as we have seen, against impressment. The heterogeneous rioters of Boston, as we have also seen, inspired new ideas in 1747. In 1765, “Sailors, boys, and Negroes to the number of above Five Hundred” rioted against impressment in Newport, Rhode Island, and in 1767 a mob of “Whites & Blacks all arm’d” attacked Captain Jeremiah Morgan in a press riot in Norfolk. A mob of sailors, “sturdy boys & negroes” rose in the *Liberty* Riot in Boston in 1768. Jesse Lemisch has noted that after 1763, “armed mobs of whites and Negroes repeatedly manhandled captains, officers, and crews, threatened their lives, and held them hostage for the men they pressed.” Authorities such as Cadwallader Colden of New York knew that royal fortifications had to be “sufficient to secure against the Negroes or a mob.”<sup>35</sup>

Why did African Americans fight the press-gang? Some probably considered impressment a death sentence and sought to avoid the pestilence and punishment that ravaged the men of the Royal Navy. Others joined anti-impressment mobs to preserve bonds of family or some degree of freedom that they had won for themselves. And many may have been drawn to the fight by the language and principles of the struggle against impressment, for on every dock, in every port, everywhere around the

Atlantic, sailors denounced the practice as slavery plain and simple. Michael Corbett and several of his brother tars fought against being forced on board a man-of-war in the port of Boston in 1769, claiming that “they preferred death to such a life as they deemed slavery.” The Baptist minister John Allen reiterated what countless sailors had expressed in action and what Sam Adams had written years before: The people “have a right, by the law of God, of nature, and nations, to reluct at, and even to resist any military or marine force.” Allen then compared one form of enslavement to another. The press-gang, he insisted, “ought ever to be held in the most hateful contempt, the same as you would *a banditti of slave-makers on the coast of Africa*.” Salt was the seasoning of the antislavery movement.<sup>36</sup>

The motley crew led a broad array of people into resistance against the Stamp Act, which taxed the colonists by requiring stamps for the sale and use of various commodities. Since the act affected all classes of people, all were involved in the protests, though sailors were singled out by many observers for their oppositional leadership and spirit. The refusal to use stamped paper (and to pay the tax) slowed commerce, which meant that idle sailors, turned ashore without wages, became a volatile force in every port. Royal officials everywhere would have agreed with the customs agent in New York who saw the power of the “Mob . . . daily increasing and gathering Strength, from the arrival of seaman, and none going out, and who are the people that are most dangerous on these occasions, as their whole dependence for subsistence is upon trade.” Peter Oliver noted that after the Stamp Act riots, “The *Hydra* was roused. Every factious Mouth vomited out curses against *Great Britain*, & the Press rung its changes against Slavery.”<sup>37</sup>

Boston’s mob took angry action against the property of stamp distributor Andrew Oliver on August 14, 1765, then twelve days later turned an even fiercer wrath against the house and refined belongings of Thomas Hutchinson, who cried out at the crowd, “You are so many Masaniellos!” Others who detested the mob later singled out its leader, Ebenezer MacIntosh, as the incarnation of the shoeless fisherman of Naples. Sailors soon carried the news and experience of the tumults in Boston to Newport, where loyalists Thomas Moffat and Martin Howard, Jr., suffered the same fate as Hutchinson on August 28. In Newport, where the mer-





*Stamp Act riots in Boston, 1765. Matthias Christian Sprengel, Allgemeines historisches Taschenbuch . . . enthaltend für 1784 die Geschichte der Revolution von Nord-America (1783).*

cantile economy depended upon the labor of sailors and dockworkers, the resistance to the Stamp Act was spearheaded by John Webber, probably a sailor and according to one report a “deserted convict.” A band of sailors known as the Sons of Neptune then led three thousand rioters in an attack on New York’s Fort George, the fortress of royal authority. They followed the example of the insurrection of 1741 when they tried to burn it to the ground. In Wilmington, North Carolina, a “furious Mobb of Sailors &c.” forced the stamp distributor to resign. Sailors also led mass actions against the Stamp Act in Antigua, St. Kitts, and Nevis, where they “behaved like young Lions.” Mob action continued in resistance to the Townshend Revenue Act and the renewed power of the British customs service in the late 1760s and early 1770s. Seamen drew on maritime custom to add a weapon to the arsenal of justice, using tar and feathers to intimidate British officials. The clunk of the brush in the tar bucket echoed behind Thomas Gage’s observation in 1769 that “the Officers of the Crown grow more timid, and more fearfull of doing their Duty every Day.”<sup>38</sup>

The burning of the customs schooner *Gaspee* in Newport in 1772 proved to be another decisive moment for the revolutionary movement. “Lawless seamen” had often taken direct action against customs men, in Newport and elsewhere. After the *Gaspee* ran aground, sixty to seventy men swarmed out of three longboats to board the ship, capture the despised Lieutenant William Dudingston, take him and his crew ashore, and set the vessel afire. The troublemakers were subsequently charged with “high treason, viz.: levying war against the King,” which sailors’ burning of the king’s vessels had long signified. Merchants, farmers, and artisans may have been involved in the *Gaspee* affair, but sailors were clearly the leaders, as concluded by Daniel Horsmanden, who brought his experience in presiding over the trials of the New York conspirators of 1741 to bear as head of the king’s commission to investigate this new incident. The act of burning the vessel, he wrote, had been “committed by a number of bold, daring, rash enterprising sailors.” Horsmanden did not know if someone else had organized these men of the sea or if they had simply “banded themselves together.”<sup>39</sup>

Seamen also led both the Golden Hill and Nassau Street Riots in New York City and the King Street Riot in Boston, better remembered as the



Boston Massacre. In both ports, sailors and other maritime workers resented the British soldiers who labored for lower-than-customary wages along the waterfront; in New York they also objected to the soldiers' attacks on their fifty-eight-foot liberty pole (a ship's mast). Rioting and street fighting ensued. Thomas Hutchinson and John Adams believed that the events in New York and Boston were related, perhaps through common participants. Adams, who defended the British soldiers at trial, called the mob that assembled on King Street on "the Fatal Fifth of March" nothing but a "motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes and molattoes, Irish teagues, and out landish Jack Tarrs." Their leader was Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave of African American and Native American descent whose home was the small free black community of Providence in the Bahama Islands. Seamen also took part in the direct actions of the several Tea Parties, after which Thomas Lamb exclaimed in New York, "We are in a perfect Jubilee!"<sup>40</sup>

By the summer of 1775, seamen and slaves had helped to generate an enthusiasm described by Peter Timothy: "In regard to War & Peace, I can only tell you that the Plebeians are still for War—but the noblesse [are] perfectly pacific." Ten years of insurrectionary direct action had brought the colonies to the brink of revolution. As early as during the Stamp Act protests of 1765, General Thomas Gage had recognized the menace of the mob: "This Insurrection is composed of great numbers of Sailors headed by Captains of Privateers," as well as many people from the surrounding area, the whole amounting to "some thousands." Late in 1776, Lord Barrington of the British Army claimed that colonial governments in North America had been "overturned by insurrections last summer, because there was not a sufficient force to defend them." Sailors, laborers, slaves, and other poor workingmen provided much of the spark, volatility, momentum, and sustained militancy for the attack on British policy after 1765. During the Revolutionary War, they took part in mob actions that harassed Tories and diminished their political effectiveness.<sup>41</sup>

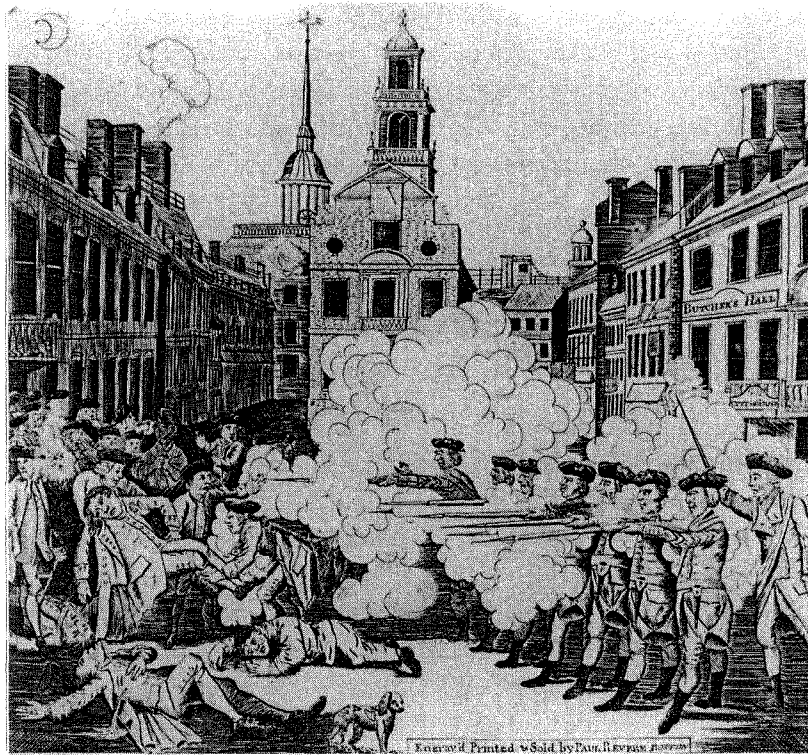
"I found myself surrounded by a motley crew of wretches, with tethered garments and pallid visages," wrote Thomas Dring as he began his imprisonment in 1782 aboard the notorious hulk *Jersey*, a British man-of-war serving as a prison ship in the East River of New York.<sup>42</sup> Many thou-

sands, especially sailors, were charged with being "pirates" and "traitors" and herded into British prisons and prison ships after 1776. Philip Freneau, who spent two months in the *Scorpion* hulk, "doom'd to famine, shackles and despair," composed "The British Prison Ship," one of the era's greatest poems, in 1780:

*Hunger and thirst to work our woe combine,  
And mouldy bread, and flesh of rotten swine,  
The mangled carcase, and the batter'd brain,  
The doctor's poison, and the captain's cane,  
The soldier's musquet, and the steward's debt,  
The evening shackle, and the noon-day threat.*

Amid the hunger, thirst, rot, gore, terror, and violence, and the deaths of seven or eight thousand of their fellow inmates during the war, the prisoners organized themselves according to egalitarian, collectivist, revolutionary principles. What had once functioned as "articles" among seamen and pirates now became "a Code of By-Laws . . . for their own regulation and government." Equal before the rats, the smallpox, and the guard's cutlass, they practiced democracy, working to distribute food and clothing fairly, to provide medical care, to bury their dead. On one ship a common sailor spoke between decks on Sundays to honor those who died "in vindication of the rights of Man." A captain who looked back with surprise on the self-organization of the prisoners remarked that the seamen were "of that class . . . who are not easily controlled, and usually not the most ardent supporters of good order." But the sailors drew on the tradition of hydrarchy as they implemented the order of the day: they governed themselves.<sup>43</sup>

The motley crew thus provided an image of revolution from below that proved terrifying to Tories and moderate patriots alike. In his famous but falsified engraving of the Boston Massacre, Paul Revere tried to render the "motley rabble" respectable by leaving black faces out of the crowd and putting in entirely too many gentlemen. The South Carolina Council of Safety complained bitterly of the attacks of sailors—both "white and black armed men"—in December 1775.<sup>44</sup> Elite colonists reached readily for images of monstrosity, calling the mob a "Hydra," a "many-headed monster," a "reptile," and a "many-headed power."



*The Fatal Fifth of March, by Paul Revere. The Bloody Massacre; perpetrated in King-Street, Boston, on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1770, by a party of the 29th Regiment (1770).*

Many-headedness implied democracy run wild, as Joseph Chalmers explained: A government that is too democratic “becomes a many-headed monster, a tyranny of many.” Against the revolutionary soldiers and sailors who fought beneath the banner of the serpent and the motto “Don’t Tread on Me,” John Adams proposed Hercules as the symbol for the new nation.<sup>45</sup>

Multiracial mobs under the leadership of maritime workers thus helped simultaneously to create the imperial crisis of the 1770s and to propose a revolutionary solution to it. The militancy of multiracial workers in Boston, Newport, New York, and Charleston led to the formation of the Sons of Liberty, the earliest intercolonial organization to coordinate anti-imperial resistance. Richard B. Morris wrote that New

York’s sailors “were organized as the Sons of Neptune, apparently antedating the Sons of Liberty, for whom they may well have provided the pattern of organization.” The commotion around the *Gaspee* incident of 1772 set in motion a new round of organization, for in the aftermath of this bold action, another revolutionary institution, the committee of correspondence, was established throughout the colonies. To loyalist Daniel Leonard, such committees were the “foulest, subtlest, and most venomous serpent ever issued from the egg of sedition.”<sup>46</sup> But if the motley crew shaped the organizational history of the American Revolution, it had, as we have seen, an even greater impact upon its intellectual history, influencing the ideas of Samuel Adams, J. Philmore, James Otis, Jr., Anthony Benezet, Thomas Paine, and John Allen. Action from below taken in Boston, in Saint Mary’s Parish, Jamaica, and in London perpetuated old ideas and generated new ones that would circulate around the Atlantic for decades to come.

One of the main ideas kept alive by multiracial seaport crowds was the antinomian notion that moral conscience stood above the civil law of the state and therefore legitimized resistance to oppression, whether against a corrupt minister of empire, a tyrannical slaveowner, or a violent ship’s captain. David S. Lovejoy has convincingly shown that a levelling spirit and an antinomian disdain of laws and government lay within the rising “political enthusiasm” of the revolutionary era. Explosive mobs consistently expressed such enthusiasm, moving Benjamin Rush to name a new type of insanity: *anarchia*, the “excessive love of liberty.” The higher-law doctrine historically associated with antinomianism would appear in secular form in the Declaration of Independence, denounced in its own day as an instance of “civil antinomianism.”<sup>47</sup>

In its struggle against impressment in the 1760s and 1770s, the motley crew drew on ideas dating from the English Revolution, when Thomas Rainborough and the revolutionary movement of the 1640s had denounced slavery. In the second *Agreement of the Free People of England* (May 1649), the Levellers had explained the antinomian basis of their opposition to impressment: “We the free People of England” declared to the world that Parliament had no power to press any man into war, for each person must have the right to satisfy his own conscience as to the justice of such war. The Levellers thus made man and his conscience (not the citizen) the subject of declaration, and life (not the nation) its object.

Peter Warren was correct when he claimed that the sailors of New England were “almost Levellers”; as such, they expressed their opposition to impressment and to slavery more broadly, influenced Jefferson, Paine, and a whole generation of thinkers, and showed that revolutionary confrontation between upper and lower classes in the 1640s—and not the compromises of 1688 within the ruling orders—was the true precedent to the events of 1776.<sup>48</sup>

When the Tory Peter Oliver complained that the press rang the changes against slavery, he was referring to bell-ringing, and to all the permutations in which a peal of bells might be rung. He suggested a dreary drone, but we can posit a campanology of freedom. When a single bell among a tuned set is struck, its reverberations cause its neighbors to emit harmonious overtones, and when several are struck rapidly, the result is a rhythm of cascading excitement. What were the “changes against slavery” in the age of the American Revolution? There were patriot bells, clamoring with mounting insistence, and there were the loud, long reverberations struck by the distinctive notes—Tacky’s Revolt, the Stamp Act crisis—of the motley crew. The patriots struck against several meanings of slavery: taxation without representation, denial of free trade, limitations on the press, ecclesiastical intolerance, and the expense and intrusions of a standing army. Sailors and slaves, meanwhile, opposed other meanings: impressment, terror, working to death, kidnapping, and forcible confinement. Both groups objected to arbitrary arrest and judgment without peers or juries. These tolling bells revived distant, deeper memories from the English Revolution. Hence the importance of habeas corpus, or freedom from imprisonment without due process of law, the deepest tone in freedom’s peal and fundamental to sailor, slave, and citizen. In the cycle of the American Revolution, Tacky struck the tocsin of freedom’s uprising, and the Philadelphia Convention sounded the knell of its death, though the murmuring undertones would continue, in diminuendo, and in San Domingue.

#### COUNTERREVOLUTION

If the motley crew’s audacious actions gave motion to the multiclass movement toward independence, they also generated commotion

*within* it—fear, ambivalence, and opposition. In New York, for example, the Sons of Liberty came into being as a reaction against the “threatened anarchy” of autonomous risings against the press and the Stamp Act in 1764 and 1765. Everywhere the Sons began to advertise themselves as the guarantors of good order, as the necessary counterpoint to the upheaval within which they themselves had been born. By 1766 the propertied opponents of British policy had declared themselves for “ordered resistance.” In the aftermath of the Boston Massacre in 1770, John Adams defended the redcoats and made an explicitly racist appeal in court, claiming that the looks of the Afro-Indian sailor Crispus Attucks “would be enough to terrify any person.” But in 1773 he wrote a letter about liberty, addressed it to Thomas Hutchinson, and signed it, “Crispus Attucks.” Adams dreaded the motley crew, but he knew that it had made the revolutionary movement.<sup>49</sup>

Similar contradictions haunted Thomas Jefferson, who acknowledged the motley crew but feared its challenge to his own vision of America’s future. Jefferson included in the Declaration of Independence the complaint that King George III had “constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.” He (and Congress) included sailors in the revolutionary coalition but tendentiously simplified their history and role within the movement, leaving out the war of classes and emphasizing only the war of nations. The passage also lacks the graceful wording and lofty tone of the rest of the Declaration: it seems awkward, confused, especially in its indecision about how to classify the sailor (citizen, friend, brother?). Jefferson employed the “most tremendous words,” as Carl Becker said of the draft prose concerning African slavery, but “the passage somehow leaves us cold.” There is in it a “sense of labored effort, of deliberate striving for an effect that does not come.” As it happened, Jefferson added the words about impressment as an afterthought, squeezing them into his rough draft of the Declaration. He knew that the labor market was a serious problem in that mercantile age and that commerce would depend on sailors, whether America remained within the British Empire or not.<sup>50</sup>

Thomas Paine knew it, too. He also denounced impressment, but he was more concerned in *Common Sense* to reassure American merchants

about the maritime labor supply after the revolution: "In point of manning a fleet, people in general run into great errors; it is not necessary that one fourth part should be sailors. . . . A few able and social sailors will soon instruct a sufficient number of active landmen in the common work of a ship." This had been his own experience aboard the *Terrible*, a privateer, during the Seven Years' War, which led him to argue that sailors, shipbuilders, and the maritime sector as a whole constituted a viable economic basis for a new American nation. (He failed to mention that the crew of the vessel had been motley and mutinous.) The only question remaining was how to obtain independence: should it be done from above, by the legal voice of Congress, or should it be done from below, by the mob? Here Paine shared the attitudes of others of his station: he feared the motley mob (though he would think differently in the 1790s). The multitude, he explained, was reasonable in 1776, but "virtue" was not perpetual. Safeguards were necessary lest "some Massanello may hereafter arise, who laying hold of popular disquietudes, may collect together the desperate and the discontented, and by assuming to themselves the powers of government, may sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge." His greatest fear lay in a concurrence of the struggles of urban workers, African slaves, and Native Americans.<sup>51</sup>

The motley crew had helped to make the revolution, but the vanguard struck back in the 1770s and 1780s, against mobs, slaves, and sailors, in what must be considered an American Thermidor. The effort to reform the mob by removing its more militant elements began in 1766 and continued, not always successfully, through the revolution and beyond. Patriot landowners, merchants, and artisans increasingly condemned revolutionary crowds, seeking to move politics from "out of doors" into legislative chambers, in which the propertyless would have no vote and no voice. Paine, for his part, would turn against the crowd after Philadelphia's Fort Wilson Riot of 1779. When Samuel Adams helped to draw up Massachusetts's Riot Act of 1786, designed to be used to disperse and control the insurgents of Shays' Rebellion, he ceased to believe that the mob "embodied the fundamental rights of man against which government itself could be judged," and detached himself from the creative democratic force that years before had given him the best idea of his life.<sup>52</sup>

The moderate patriots had, since the beginning of the movement, in 1765, sought to limit the struggle for liberty by keeping slaves out of the revolutionary coalition. The place of slaves in the movement remained ambiguous until 1775, when Lord Dunmore, governor of Virginia, attacked the patriot tobacco planters by offering freedom to servants and slaves willing to join His Majesty's army to reestablish order in the colony. The news of the offered liberation ran like wildfire through slave communities, and thousands deserted the plantations, inaugurating a new, mobile slave revolt of huge proportions. Some of these slaves would be organized as Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment; those who were not permitted to bear arms would seek the protection of the British army. American leaders, infuriated by the move, tried to preserve slavery, announcing in 1775 that recruiters should take no deserter, "stroller, negro, or vagabond," and reaffirming over the next year that neither free blacks nor slaves would be eligible for military service. Scarcity of labor would force reconsideration of this edict, however, especially later in the war. While five thousand African Americans fought for liberty, the American political and military leadership battled the British and some of its own soldiers to protect the institution of slavery.<sup>53</sup>

The sailor would be encouraged to serve in the Continental Navy, but he was not, according to James Madison, a good citizen for a republic. What little virtue he may have had was deadened by his life as a dumb drudge at sea: "Though traversing and circumnavigating the globe, he sees nothing but the same vague objects of nature, the same monotonous occurrences in ports and docks; and at home in his vessel, what new ideas can shoot from the unvaried use of the ropes and the rudder, or from the society of comrades as ignorant as himself." Madison's own ignorance, arrogance, or denial caused him to invert the truth, but he was right about something else: the greater the number of sailors in a republic, as he suggested, the less secure its government. Madison was joined in these attitudes by many, including the "Connecticut Wits" (David Humphreys, Joel Barlow, John Trumbull, and Dr. Lemuel Hopkins) who in 1787 wrote a poem entitled "The Anarchiad," in response to Shays' Rebellion and in memory of the cycle of revolt in the 1760s and 1770s. The poets expressed their hatred for mobs and their ideas. They sneered at "democratic dreams," "the rights of man," and the reduction of all "to

just one level." One of their darkest nightmares was what they called a "young DEMOCRACY from *hell*." They had not forgotten the role of sailors in the revolution: in their imagined state of anarchy, the "mighty Jacktar guides the helm." He had been "Nurs'd on the waves, in blust'ring tempests bred,/ His heart of marble, and his brain of lead." Having sailed "in the whirlwind" as a part of his work, this hard-hearted, thick-headed man naturally "enjoys the storm" of revolution. The poets alluded to the revolutionary acts of sailors when they referred to "seas of boiling tar."<sup>54</sup>

During the 1780s, such thinking came to prevail among those who made up the emerging political nation—merchants, professionals, shopkeepers, artisans, slaveowners, and yeoman farmers. Sailors and slaves, once necessary parts of the revolutionary coalition, were thus read out of the settlement at revolution's end. Of the five workingmen killed in the Boston Massacre in 1770, John Adams had written, "The blood of the martyrs, right or wrong, proved to be the seed of the congregation." Yet had Crispus Attucks—slave, sailor, and mob leader—survived the fire of British muskets, he would not have been allowed to join the congregation, or new nation, he had helped to create. The exclusion of people like Attucks epitomized the sudden, reactionary retreat from the universalistic revolutionary language that had been forged in the heat of the 1760s and 1770s and permanently emblazoned in the Declaration of Independence. The reaction was canonized in the U.S. Constitution, which gave the new federal government the power to suppress domestic insurrections. James Madison worried in 1787 about a "levelling spirit" and an "agrarian law."<sup>55</sup> The Constitution also strengthened the institution of slavery by extending the slave trade, providing for the return of fugitive slaves, and giving national political power to the plantation master class.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, an intensive debate about the nature and capacity of "the negro" raged between 1787 and 1790. Many Baptists and Methodists backed away from antislavery positions and sought instead a "gospel made safe for the plantation."<sup>57</sup> The new American ruling class redefined "race" and "citizenship" to divide and marginalize the motley crew, legislating in the 1780s and early 1790s a unified law of slavery based on white supremacy. The actions of the motley crew, and the reactions against it, help to illuminate the clashing, ambiguous nature of the American Revolution—its militant origins, radical momentum, and conservative political conclusion.<sup>58</sup>

## VECTORS OF REVOLUTION

And yet the implications of the struggles of the 1760s and 1770s could not easily be contained, by the Sons of Liberty, Jefferson, Paine, Adams, or the new American government. Soldiers who fought in the war circulated the news, experience, and ideas of the revolution. Several veterans of the French regiments deployed in North America, including Henri Christophe and André Rigaud, would later lead the next major revolution of the western Atlantic, in Haiti, beginning in 1791. Other veterans returned to France and may have led a series of revolts against feudal land tenure that accelerated revolution in Europe during the 1790s. The news carried by Hessian soldiers back to their homeland eventually propelled a new generation of settlers toward America. But it was the motley crew, the sailors and slaves who were defeated in America and subsequently dispersed, that did the most to create new resistance and to inaugurate a broader age of revolution throughout the world.<sup>59</sup>

Sailors were a vector of revolution that traveled from North America out to sea and southward to the Caribbean. The sailors of the British navy grew mutinous after 1776, inspired in part by the battles waged against press-gangs and the king's authority in America; an estimated forty-two thousand of them deserted naval ships between 1776 and 1783. Many who went to sea in this era got a revolutionary education. Robert Wedderburn, born to a slave woman and a Scottish plantation owner in Jamaica, joined the mutinous navy in 1778 and thereafter worked as a sailor, a tailor, a writer, and a preacher of jubilee as he took part in maritime protests, slave revolts, and urban insurrections. Julius Scott has shown that sailors black, white, and brown had contact with slaves in the British, French, Spanish, and Dutch port cities of the Caribbean, exchanging information with them about slave revolts, abolition, and revolution and generating rumors that became material forces in their own right. It is not known for certain whether sailors carried the news of the American Revolution that helped to inspire slave rebels in Hanover Parish, Jamaica, in 1776, but there is no doubt that a motley crew of "fifty or sixty men of all colors," including an "Irishman of prodigious size," attacked British and American ships in the Caribbean in 1793, apparently in league with the new revolutionary government of Haiti.<sup>60</sup>

The slaves and free blacks who flocked to the British army during the

revolution and who were then dispersed around the Atlantic after 1783 constituted a second, multidirectional vector of revolution. Twelve thousand African Americans were carried out of Savannah, Charleston, and New York by the army in 1782 and 1783, while another eight to ten thousand departed with loyalist masters. They went to Sierra Leone, London, Dublin, Nova Scotia, Bermuda, eastern Florida, the Bahamas, Jamaica, the Mosquito Shore, and Belize. Free people of color from North America caused problems throughout the Caribbean in the later 1780s, especially on Jamaica and in the Windward Islands, where they created new political openings and alignments in slave societies and helped to prepare the way for the Haitian Revolution. By 1800 Lord Balcarras, governor of Jamaica, would write of the "Pandora's Box" that had been opened in the West Indies: "Turbulent people of all Nations engaged in illicit Trade; a most abandoned class of Negroes, up to every scene of mischief, and a general levelling spirit throughout, is the character of the lower orders in Kingston." Here, he explained, was a refuge for revolutionaries and a site for future insurrection, a place that might "in a moment . . . be laid in ashes."<sup>61</sup>

A third powerful vector of revolution hurtled eastward toward the abolitionist movement in England. Granville Sharp, whose work in the late 1760s and early 1770s included opposition to impressment in the American Revolution, went on to become one of the leading figures in the transatlantic antislavery movement. After Olaudah Equiano told him in 1783 about the slave ship *Zong*, whose captain threw 132 slaves overboard in order to save supplies and then tried to collect insurance money for the dead, Sharp publicized the mass murder effectively. He also worked to establish the free black state of Sierra Leone in 1786, and served on the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. F. O. Shyllon and Peter Fryer have conclusively demonstrated the independent existence of a black population in London whose self-organization sustained and encouraged the abolitionist Sharp and, also in the 1780s, a young scholar-activist named Thomas Clarkson.<sup>62</sup>

After the American war, Clarkson began to gather evidence about the slave trade. Especially interested in the effects of the trade on sailors, he wanted to talk to the men who had sailed on the slave ships and to inspect those ships' crew lists in order to gauge mortality. To accomplish this, the

young Cambridge scholar disguised himself as a sailor and walked the docks. But how would he get men who were terrified of the slave trade, and terrified to talk about it, to speak to a stranger? He found John Dean, a free black sailor and his first informant, in a boardinghouse kept by one Donovan, an Irishman. Dean, like thousands of others, had entered the slave trade through the rough netherworld of proletarian recruitment—the squalid sailor's tavern where, in Liverpool, Bristol, or London, slaving crews were often assembled between midnight and two in the morning. Dean had a personal tale to tell: "For a trifling circumstance for which he was in no-wise to blame, the captain fastened him with his belly to the deck, and that, in this situation, he had poured hot pitch upon his back, and made incisions in it with hot tongs." Dean and countless other sailors like him provided the personal knowledge and information that gave the middle-class antislavery movement its ballast.<sup>63</sup>

The relationship of sailors to the abolitionist movement, on the one hand, and to the ambiguities between the condition of slavery and sailing, on the other, are nowhere better personified than in the life of that éminence grise of the abolitionists, the Igbo slave and sailor Olaudah Equiano. Enslaved in West Africa, he was hardly aboard the slave ship before he saw a white sailor flogged to death. In later years he would see a sailor hanged from a yardarm, a soldier hung by his heels, a man on the gallows at Tyburn; he himself was twice suspended, though not by his neck. Terror, he understood immediately, was the fate of both sailors and slaves. Aboard the *Aetna* man-of-war, he learned to read and write, to shave, to dress hair. A messmate, the Irishman Daniel Quin, taught him to read the Bible and to think of nothing "but being free." At the conclusion of the Seven Years' War, when the *Aetna* was anchored in the river Thames, his master, worried that Equiano's recent promotion to able-bodied seaman would make it harder to maintain him in slavery, forced him into a barge at the point of his sword. The Igbo sailor plucked up his courage: "I told him I was free, and he could not by law serve me so." Sold to Captain Doran of the West Indiaman *Charming Sally*, Equiano explained, "I told him my master could not sell me to him, nor to anyone else. 'Why,' said he, 'did not your master buy you?' I confessed he did. But I have served him, said I, many years, and he has taken all my wages and prize money, for I only got one sixpence during the war; besides this





*Olaudah Equiano;*  
 or  
 GUSTAVUS VASSA,  
*the African!*

*Published March 1. 1789 by G. Vassa*

*Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1790). Rare Books Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.*

I have been baptized; and by the laws of the land no man has a right to sell me." Confronted with these economic, religious, and legal arguments, Doran told him, Equiano reported, that "I talked too much English." Meanwhile, Equiano's shipmates promised to do what they could, which, apart from getting him some oranges, was nothing.

Equiano now entered the sugar economy of the West Indies. "I now knew what it was to work hard; I was made to help to unload and load the ship." His own situation began to improve, but he witnessed the intense sufferings of others—the rapes, whippings, brandings, mutilations, cuts, burnings, chains, muzzles, and thumbscrews. He wondered of the rulers of England, "Are you not hourly in dread of an insurrection?" He then quoted the speech of Beelzebub in *Paradise Lost*, written by John Milton and published exactly one hundred years earlier. Much of Equiano's evolving conception of freedom, and hence part of his own self-definition, were derived from other sailors—from his keen sense of the rights of the accused to his belief in the jury system, from his reference to his "fellow creatures" to his study of the Bible, from his quotations from Milton to his detestation of those "infernal invaders of human rights," the slavers, impressers, and trepanners.

Equiano was in Charleston during the demonstrations of joy that followed the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766. It is easy to imagine his participating in them, and equally easy to understand why he might not want to admit it to his British readers. Many of the sailors in that demonstration went in blackface. Some years later Equiano himself had occasion to put on whiteface in an episode that was by his own account a turning point, the source of a suicidal and spiritual crisis. In 1774 he helped to recruit a black sea-cook, John Annis, onto a ship bound for Turkey. Annis, formerly a slave to one Kirkpatrick of St. Kitt's, was soon impressed by his former master and a gang of bullies on the Thames. Equiano rushed to obtain a habeas corpus but before handing it over, whitened his face to escape suspicion. He then contacted Granville Sharp, but his attorney ran off with the money, and Annis was carried to St. Kitt's, where he was staked to the ground, cut, and flogged to death. Equiano took Annis's death as a personal defeat; it plunged him into the depths of despair. Yet slowly he began to discover the rich spiritual resources of proletarian London in the 1770s—the love-feasts of a silk weaver, the evening singing

of hymns. A prison reformer, a Dissenter, pointed out to him that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” An antinomian (“an old sea-faring man”) referred him to the Isaiah of William Blake: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together.” He was guided to the Book of James and its “So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.” The Scripture of Isaiah, James, John, and Acts—the prophetic, the social gospel, and the persecuted—began to provide him with conviction. He went back to sea and continued to study. He identified with the condemned criminal, the needy, the poor; he moved from personal redemption to liberation theology. He wrote his own verses of despair, imprisonment, and enslavement, concluding with an allusion to the Gospel of Mark, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the main cornerstone.” He thus answered Jefferson and Paine and their fears of the motley crew. But whether the disenfranchised, the enslaved, the imprisoned, the sailor—in short, the many-headed hydra—could become a “cornerstone” would be a story for the 1790s.

The failure of the motley crew to find a place in the new American nation forced it into broader, more creative forms of identification. One of the phrases often used to capture the unity of the age of revolution was “citizen of the world.” J. Philmore described himself this way, as did others, including Thomas Paine. The real citizens of the world, of course, were the sailors and slaves who instructed Philmore, Paine, Jefferson, and the rest of the middle- and upper-class revolutionaries. This multiethnic proletariat was “cosmopolitan” in the original meaning of the word. Reminded that he had been sentenced to exile, Diogenes, the slave philosopher of antiquity, responded by saying that he sentenced his judges to stay at home. And “asked where he came from, he said, ‘I am a citizen of the world’”—a cosmopolitan. The Irishman Oliver Goldsmith published in 1762 a gentle critique of nationalism entitled *Citizen of the World*, featuring characters such as a sailor with a wooden leg and a ragged woman ballad singer. Goldsmith praised the “meanest English sailor or soldier,” who endured days of misery without murmur. He was “found guilty of being poor, and sent to Newgate, in order to be transported to the plantations,” where he would work among Africans. He returned to London, was press-ganged, sent to fight in Flanders and India,

beaten by the boatswain, imprisoned, taken by pirates. He was a soldier, a slave, a sailor, a prisoner, a cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world. James Howell, historian of the Masaniello Revolt, wrote in the seventeenth century that “every ground may be one’s country—for by birth each man is in this world a cosmopolitan.”<sup>64</sup>

A fourth and final vector pointed toward Africa. The African Americans in diaspora after 1783 would originate modern pan-Africanism by settling, with the help of Equiano and Sharp, in Sierra Leone. Their dispersal after the American Revolution, eastward across the Atlantic, was similar to that of radicals after the English Revolution, a century and a half earlier, westward across the Atlantic. Both movements had posed challenges to slavery and been defeated. The earlier defeat permitted the consolidation of the plantation and the slave trade, while the later defeat allowed the slave system to expand and gather new strength. Yet the long-term consequences of the second defeat would be a victory, the ultimate undoing of the slave trade and the plantation system. The theory and practice of antinomian democracy, which had been generalized around the Atlantic in the seventeenth-century diaspora, would be revived and deepened in the eighteenth. What went out in whiteface came back in blackface, to end the pause in the discussion of democratic ideas in England and to give new life to worldwide revolutionary movements. What goes around, comes around, by the circular winds and currents of the Atlantic.