



THE MANY-HEADED HYDRA

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



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"An effective mirror for our own time, as we reckon with the inequities and the violence that continue to shape the globalism of the 21st century."

—IRA BERTLIN, *The Washington Post*

Introduction

WITH RACHEL CARSON, let us first look from above: “The permanent currents of the ocean are, in a way, the most majestic of her phenomena. Reflecting upon them, our minds are at once taken out from the earth so that we can regard, as from another planet, the spinning of the globe, the winds that deeply trouble its surface or gently encompass it, and the influence of the sun and moon. For all these cosmic forces are closely linked with the great currents of the ocean, earning for them the adjective I like best of all those applied to them—the planetary currents.” The planetary currents of the North Atlantic are circular. Europeans pass by Africa to the Caribbean and then to North America. The Gulf Stream then at three knots moves north to the Labrador and Arctic currents, which move eastward, as the North Atlantic Drift, to temper the climates of northwestern Europe.

At Land’s End, the westward foot of England, break waves whose origins lie off the stormy coast of Newfoundland. Some of these breakers may even be traced to the coast of Florida and the West Indies. For centuries fishermen on the lonely shores of Ireland have been able to interpret these long Atlantic swells. The power of an ocean wave is directly related to the speed and duration of the wind that sets it in motion, and to the “length of its fetch,” or the distance from its point of origin. The longer the fetch, the greater the wave. Nothing can stop these long waves. They become visible only at the end, when they rise and break; for most of their fetch the surface of the ocean is undisturbed. In 1769, Postmaster General Benjamin Franklin noted that packets from Falmouth took about two weeks longer to reach New York than merchant ships took to sail from Rhode Island to London. In talking to Nantucket whalers, he learned about the Gulf Stream: the fishermen and the whales kept out of it, while the English captains stemmed the current, “too wise to be counselled by simple American fishermen.” He drew up some “Maritime Observations” in 1786, and with these the chart of the Gulf Stream was published in America.



The circular transmission of human experience from Europe to Africa to the Americas and back again corresponded to the same cosmic forces that set the Atlantic currents in motion, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the merchants, manufacturers, planters, and royal officials of northwestern Europe followed these currents, building trade routes, colonies, and a new transatlantic economy. They organized workers from Europe, Africa, and the Americas to produce and transport bullion, furs, fish, tobacco, sugar, and manufactures. It was a labor of Herculean proportions, as they themselves repeatedly explained.

The classically educated architects of the Atlantic economy found in Hercules—the mythical hero of the ancients who achieved immortality by performing twelve labors—a symbol of power and order. For inspiration they looked to the Greeks, for whom Hercules was a unifier of the centralized territorial state, and to the Romans, for whom he signified vast imperial ambition. The labors of Hercules symbolized economic development: the clearing of land, the draining of swamps, and the development of agriculture, as well as the domestication of livestock, the establishment of commerce, and the introduction of technology. Rulers placed the image of Hercules on money and seals, in pictures, sculptures, and palaces, and on arches of triumph. Among English royalty, William III, George I, and George II's brother, the "Butcher of Culloden," all fancied themselves Hercules.¹ John Adams, for his part, proposed in 1776 that "The Judgment of Hercules" be the seal for the new United States of America.² The hero represented progress: Giambattista Vico, the philosopher of Naples, used Hercules to develop the stadial theory of history, while Francis Bacon, philosopher and politician, cited him to advance modern science and to suggest that capitalism was very nearly divine.

These same rulers found in the many-headed hydra an antithetical symbol of disorder and resistance, a powerful threat to the building of state, empire, and capitalism. The second labor of Hercules was the destruction of the venomous hydra of Lerna. The creature, born of Typhon (a tempest or hurricane) and Echidna (half woman, half snake), was one in a brood of monsters that included Cerberus, the three-headed dog, Chimera, the lion-headed goat with a snake's tail, Geryon, the triple-bodied giant, and Sphinx, the woman with a lion's body. When Hercules



Hercules and Iolaus slaying the Lernean Hydra, Eritrian amphora, c. 525 B.C. Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.

lopped off one of the hydra's heads, two new ones grew in its place. With the help of his nephew Iolaus, he eventually killed the monster by cutting off a central head and cauterizing the stump with a flaming branch. He then dipped his arrows in the gall of the slain beast, which gave his projectiles fatal power and allowed him to complete his labors.

From the beginning of English colonial expansion in the early seventeenth century through the metropolitan industrialization of the early nineteenth, rulers referred to the Hercules-hydra myth to describe the difficulty of imposing order on increasingly global systems of labor. They

variously designated dispossessed commoners, transported felons, indentured servants, religious radicals, pirates, urban laborers, soldiers, sailors, and African slaves as the numerous, ever-changing heads of the monster. But the heads, though originally brought into productive combination by their Herculean rulers, soon developed among themselves new forms of cooperation against those rulers, from mutinies and strikes to riots and insurrections and revolution. Like the commodities they produced, their experience circulated with the planetary currents around the Atlantic, often eastward, from American plantations, Irish commons, and deep-sea vessels back to the metropolises of Europe.

In 1751 J. J. Mauricius, an ex-governor of Suriname, returned to Holland, where he would write poetic memoirs recollecting his defeat at the hands of the Saramaka, a group of former slaves who had escaped the plantations and built maroon communities deep in the interior jungle, and who now defended their freedom against endless military expeditions designed to return them to slavery:

*There you must fight blindly an invisible enemy
Who shoots you down like ducks in the swamps.
Even if an army of ten thousand men were gathered, with
The courage and strategy of Caesar and Eugene,
They'd find their work cut out for them, destroying a Hydra's growth
Which even Alcides [Hercules] would try to avoid.*

Writing to and for other Europeans assumed to be sympathetic with the project of conquest, Mauricius cast himself and other colonizers as Hercules, and the fugitive bondspeople who challenged slavery as the hydra.³

Andrew Ure, the Oxford philosopher of manufactures, found the myth to be useful as he surveyed the struggles of industrial England in 1835. After a strike among spinners in Stayleybridge, Lancashire, he employed Hercules and his rescue of Prometheus, with his delivery of fire and technology to mankind, to argue for the implementation of the self-acting mule, a new machine “with the thought, feeling, and tact of the experienced workman.” This new “Herculean prodigy” had “strangled the Hydra of misrule”; it was a “creation destined to restore order among the industrious classes, and to confirm to Great Britain the empire of art.” Here again, Ure saw himself and other manufacturers as Hercules, and the industrial workers who challenged their authority as the hydra.⁴



Dutch soldiers and guide in a Suriname swamp, c. 1775, by William Blake.
John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition
against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam (1796).

When the Puritan prelate Cotton Mather published his history of Christianity in America in 1702, he entitled his second chapter, on the antinomian controversy of 1638, “Hydra Decapita.” “The church of God had not long been in this wilderness, before the dragon cast forth

several floods to devour it,” he wrote. The theological struggle of “works” against “grace” subverted “all peaceable order.” The controversy raised suspicions against religious and political officials, prevented an expedition against the Pequot Indians, confused the drawing of town lots, and made particular appeals to women. For Mather, the Puritan elders were Hercules, while the hydra consisted of the antinomians who questioned the authority of minister and magistrate, the expansion of empire, the definition of private property, and the subordination of women.⁵

It would be a mistake to see the myth of Hercules and the hydra as merely an ornament of state, a classical trope in speeches, a decoration of ceremonial dress, or a mark of classical learning. Francis Bacon, for example, used it to lay the intellectual basis for the biological doctrine of monstrosity and for the justifications of murder, which themselves have a semantics of Latin euphemism—debellation, extirpation, trucidation, extermination, liquidation, annihilation, extinction. To cite the myth was not simply to employ a figure of speech or even a concept of analytic understanding; it was to impose a curse and a death sentence, as we will show.

If the hydra myth expressed the fear and justified the violence of the ruling classes, helping them to build a new order of conquest and expropriation, of gallows and executioners, of plantations, ships, and factories, it suggested something quite different to us as historians—namely, a hypothesis. The hydra became a means of exploring multiplicity, movement, and connection, the long waves and planetary currents of humanity. The multiplicity was indicated, as it were, in silhouette in the multitudes who gathered at the market, in the fields, on the piers and the ships, on the plantations, upon the battlefields. The power of numbers was expanded by movement, as the hydra journeyed and voyaged or was banished or dispersed in diaspora, carried by the winds and the waves beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Sailors, pilots, felons, lovers, translators, musicians, mobile workers of all kinds made new and unexpected connections, which variously appeared to be accidental, contingent, transient, even miraculous.

Our book looks from below. We have attempted to recover some of the lost history of the multiethnic class that was essential to the rise of capi-

talism and the modern, global economy. The historic invisibility of many of the book's subjects owes much to the repression originally visited upon them: the violence of the stake, the chopping block, the gallows, and the shackles of a ship's dark hold. It also owes much to the violence of abstraction in the writing of history, the severity of history that has long been the captive of the nation-state, which remains in most studies the largely unquestioned framework of analysis. This is a book about connections that have, over the centuries, usually been denied, ignored, or simply not seen, but that nonetheless profoundly shaped the history of the world in which we all of us live and die.

CHAPTER ONE

The Wreck of the *Sea-Venture*



ON JULY 25, 1609, the sailors of the *Sea-Venture* scanned the horizon and spotted danger. Separated from their convoy of eight other vessels sailing from Plymouth westward to Virginia, England's first New World colony, they spied a tempest—or what the Carib Indians called a hurricane—scudding swiftly toward them. With “the clouds gathering thick upon us and the winds singing and whistling most unusually,” wrote passenger William Strachey,

a dreadful storm and hideous began to blow from the northeast, which, swelling and roaring as it were by fits, some hours with more violence than others, at length did beat all light from Heaven; which like an hell of darkness, turned black upon us, so much the fuller of horror and fear use to overrun the troubled and overmastered senses of all, which taken up with amazement, the ears lay so sensible to the terrible cries and murmurs of the winds and distraction of our company as who was most armed and best prepared was not a little shaken.

The approaching fury “startled and turned the blood and took down the braves of the most hardy mariner of them all.” The less hardy passengers aboard the ninety-eight-foot, three-hundred-ton vessel cried out in fear, but their words were “drowned in the winds and the winds in the thunder.” The shaken seamen recovered and went to work as the ship's timbers began to groan. Six to eight men together struggled to steer the vessel. Others cut down the rigging and sails to lessen resistance to the wind; they threw luggage and ordnance overboard to lighten the load and reduce the risk of capsizing. They crept, candles in hand, along the ribs of the ship, searching and listening for weeping leaks, stoppering as many as they could, using beef when they ran out of oakum. Water nonetheless

gushed into the ship, rising several feet, above two tiers of hogsheads, in the hold. The crew and passengers pumped continuously during “an Egyptian night of three daies perpetuall horror,” with the common sort “stripped naked as men in Galleys.” Even gentlemen who had never worked took turns pumping, while those who could not pump bailed with kettles and buckets. They had no food and no rest as they pumped an estimated two thousand tons of water out of the leaky vessel.¹

It was not enough. The waterline did not recede, and the people at the pumps had reached the limits of their strength, endurance, and hope. Now that the exhausted sailors had done all that was humanly possible to resist the apocalyptic force of the hurricane, they took comfort in a ritual of the sea, turning the maritime world upside down as they faced certain death. Defying the strictures of private property and the authority of Captain Christopher Newport, as well as the Virginia Company gentlemen such as Sir George Somers and Sir Thomas Gates, they broke open the ship’s liquors and in one last expression of solidarity “drunk one to the other, taking their last leave one of the other until their more joyful and happy meeting in a more blessed world.”²

The *Sea-Venture* was wrecked—miraculously, without loss of life—between two great rocks in the islands of Bermuda on July 28. The 150 wet and terrified crew and passengers, men and women originally intended by the Virginia Company of London as reinforcements for the company’s new plantation, straggled onto a strange shore, a place long considered by sailors to be an enchanted “Isle of Devils” infested with demons and monsters, and a ghoulish graveyard for European ships. Charted in 1511 but shunned by seafarers for a century afterward, Bermuda was known mostly through the accounts of a few mariners, renegades, and castaways, such as Job Hortop, who had escaped galley slavery in the Spanish West Indies, passed by the island, and made it to London to tell his tale. Silvester Jourdain, a passenger on the *Sea-Venture*, would later write that Bermuda afforded “nothing but gusts, storms, and foul weather, which made every navigator and mariner to avoid them as Scylla and Charybdis, or as they would shun the Devil himself.” The eeriness of the place owed much to the harsh, hollow howling of nocturnal birds called cahows, whose shrieks haunted the crews of passing ships.³

The reality of Bermuda, as the shipwrecked soon discovered, was en-

tirely different from its reputation. The island, in their view, turned out to be an Edenic land of perpetual spring and abundant food, “the richest, healthfullest and pleasantest [place] they ever saw.” The would-be colonists feasted on black hogs that had swum ashore and multiplied after a Spanish shipwreck years earlier, on fish (grouper, parrot fish, red snapper) that could be caught by hand or with a stick with a bent nail, on fowl that would land on a man’s or woman’s arms or shoulders, on massive tortoises that would feed fifty, and on an array of delicious fruit. Much to the chagrin of the officers of the Virginia Company, Bermuda “caused many of them vtterly to forget or desire euer to returne from thence, they liued in such plenty, peace and ease.” Once the common people found the land of plenty, they began “to settle a foundation of ever inhabiting there.” Theirs was “a more joyful and happy meeting in a more blessed world” after all.⁴

It is not surprising that the shipwrecked commoners responded as they did, for they had been told to expect paradise at the end of their journey. In his “Ode to the Virginian Voyage” (1606), Michael Drayton had insisted that Virginia was

*Earth’s only Paradise
Where nature bath in store
Fowle, venison, and Fish;
And the fruitfull’st Soyle,
Without your toyle,
Three harvests more,
All greater than you wish.*⁵

In 1610 Robert Rich would conveniently confuse the Bermuda and Virginia experiences in his poetic propaganda for the Virginia Company:

*There is no feare of hunger here,
for Corne much store here growes,
Much fish the Gallant Rivers yeild [sic]
'tis truth, without suppose.*

He concluded that in Virginia, “there is indeed no want at all.” Another Virginia Company advocate knew that such reports were false, that some in England had dismissed them as utopian, but he nevertheless main-



The New World as paradise, by Theodore de Bry, 1588. Thomas Hariot, A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia (1590).

tained the lie, promising prospective laborers a six-hour workday in which the “sappe of their bodies” would not “be spent for other mens profite.”⁶ Many colonists had headed toward Virginia, on the *Sea-Venture* and other vessels, with the “heate and zeale” of a “romain year of Iubile.” The biblical jubilee (Leviticus) authorized the call for an end to

bondage and for the return of the commons to the dispossessed. Bermuda seemed the perfect place to enact this biblical prophecy.⁷

Strachey, a shareholder in and secretary of the Virginia Company, noted that among the shipwrecked there quickly arose “dangerous and secret discontents” that began among the sailors and spread to others. A “disunion of hearts and hands” soon followed: those who wanted to go on with the money-making adventure in Virginia were at odds with those whose hands were supposed to get them there. The chief complaint of the seamen and the other “hands” was that “in Virginia nothing but wretchedness and labor must be expected, with many wants and a churlish entreaty [i.e., poor provision], there being neither that fish, flesh, nor fowl which here . . . at ease and pleasure might be enjoyed.” They somehow knew whereof they spoke, for colonists in Virginia were at that moment eating leather boots and serpents, looking “lyke Anotamies [skeletons] Cryinge owtt we are starved We are starved.” One man killed his wife, chopped her up, and salted her for food; others dug up corpses from graves and ate them. The Bermuda castaways wanted, meanwhile, “to repose and seat where they should have the least outward wants the while.” The comparative demographic facts support their claim. The other eight ships and 350 people originally in convoy with the *Sea-Venture* arrived in Virginia only to encounter a catastrophic mortality rate that over two years reduced 535 settlers to about sixty. The Bermuda settlers, by contrast, experienced over ten months a net loss of three people out of 150: five died—only one of these apparently of natural causes; two others were murdered and two more executed—while two were born. Strachey wondered, “What hath a more adamantine power to draw unto it the consent and attraction of the idle, untoward, and wretched number of the many than liberty and fullness of sensuality?”⁸

To defend their liberty, some of shipwrecked “promised each unto the other not to set their hands to any travail or endeavor” that would take them off the island, and with this vow they withdrew into the woods to form their own settlement. They later planned to settle another island by themselves. A strike and marronage thus stood at the beginning of English colonization. Among the leaders of these actions were sailors and religious radicals, probably antinomians who believed that God’s grace had placed them above the law. The effort to establish an autonomous

community failed, but the struggle between heart and hand continued. Stephan Hopkins was a learned Puritan and follower of Robert Browne, who advocated the creation of separate, congregational churches in which governance was based on mutual consent rather than on deference to elder, king, or nation. Hopkins extended the logic of the sailors' ritual in the storm as he argued that the magistrate's authority had ended the moment the *Sea-Venture* was wrecked. He affirmed the importance of "abundance by God's providence of all manner of good food" on the island, and he resisted proceeding to Virginia, where the common people would only slave for the adventurers. Hopkins's mutiny, too, was defeated, but he himself was not, as he survived to make another mutinous speech aboard the *Mayflower* as it approached America in 1620.⁹ Other conspirators on Bermuda were likewise unvanquished, for no sooner had the manacles been slapped on Hopkins's wrists than a third plot was afoot, as another band of mutineers plotted to seize the supplies saved from the shipwreck and to attack the governor, Thomas Gates. Although their plan was disclosed to the authorities, resistance continued. Another rebel was soon executed for verbal mutiny against the governor and his authority, in response to which several others took again to the woods as maroons, where they lived, grumbled Gates, like savages.

Eventually the authorities prevailed. They built two vessels, pinnaces named the *Deliverance* and the *Patience*, to continue the voyage to Virginia, and launched them on May 10, 1610. Yet during their forty-two weeks on the island, sailors and others among the "idle, untoward, and wretched" had organized five different conspiracies against the Virginia Company and their leaders, who had responded with two of the earliest capital punishments in English America, hanging one man and executing another by firing squad to quell the resistance and carry on with the task of colonization. As the others sailed off to Virginia, two men, one a seaman, decided to stay and "end their daies" in Bermuda. Joined by another man, they "began to erect their little common wealth . . . with brotherly regency."¹⁰ One sure sign of the wisdom of those who stayed behind came less than a month after the ships' arrival in Virginia, when Sir George Somers was dispatched by Sir Thomas Gates to Bermuda to get food, a six-month provision of meat and fish, for the struggling mainland colony. Sir George himself, however, never made it back to Virginia:

having rediscovered the joys of Bermuda, he expired from “a surfeit in eating a pig.” Although we do not know what individual fates befell the sailors and passengers who sailed from Bermuda to Virginia, it is likely that many of them shared in the frightful mortality of the mainland settlement and died soon after they arrived. Collectively, however, they made up what Virginia’s swashbuckling leader, John Smith, called the third supply, an infusion of humanity that helped the young plantation to survive.¹¹

The wreck of the *Sea-Venture* and the dramas of rebellion that played out among the shipwrecked suggest the major themes of early Atlantic history. These events do not make for a story of English maritime greatness and glory, nor for a tale of the heroic struggle for religious freedom, though sailors and religious radicals both had essential roles. This is, rather, a story about the origins of capitalism and colonization, about world trade and the building of empires. It is also, necessarily, a story about the uprooting and movement of peoples, the making and the transatlantic deployment of “hands.” It is a story about exploitation and resistance to exploitation, about how the “sappe of bodies” would be spent. It is a story about cooperation among different kinds of people for contrasting purposes of profit and survival. And it is a story about alternative ways of living, and about the official use of violence and terror to deter or destroy them, to overcome popular attachments to “liberty and the fullness of sensuality.”

We are by no means the first to find historic significance in the story of the *Sea-Venture*. One of the first—and certainly the most influential—was William Shakespeare, who drew upon firsthand accounts of the wreck in 1610–11 as he wrote his play *The Tempest*. Shakespeare had long studied the accounts of explorers, traders, and colonizers who were aggressively linking the continents of Europe, Africa, and the Americas through world trade. Moreover, he knew such men personally, and even depended on them for his livelihood. Like many of his patrons and benefactors, such as the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare himself invested in the Virginia Company, the spearhead of English colonization.¹² His play both described and promoted the rising interest of England’s ruling class in the settlement and exploitation of the New World. In the pages that follow we will use the wreck of the *Sea-Venture* to set out four major

themes in the origins and development of English Atlantic capitalism in the early seventeenth century: expropriation, the struggle for alternative ways of life, patterns of cooperation and resistance, and the imposition of class discipline. Within the story of the *Sea-Venture* and its people lies a larger story about the rise of capitalism and the beginning of a new epoch in human history.¹³

EXPROPRIATION

The wreck of the *Sea-Venture* occurred at a crucial moment of imperial rivalry and capitalist development. Indeed, the formation of the Virginia Company reflected—and accelerated—a fundamental shift of power taking place in the early seventeenth century, as the Atlantic maritime states of northwest Europe (France, the Netherlands, and England) challenged and overtook the Mediterranean kingdoms and city-states of Spain, Portugal, Algiers, Naples, and Venice as the dominant forces in Europe and, increasingly, the world. The faster, better-fortified, less-labor-intensive northern European ship, the most sophisticated engineering feat of the time, eclipsed the Mediterranean galley. The ruling class of England was especially eager to challenge the Iberian countries' grip on the New World and to enrich itself while doing so. A group of English investors thus in 1606 formed the Virginia Company, which according to its leading chronicler, Wesley Frank Craven, was “primarily a business organization with large sums of capital invested by adventurers whose chief interest lay in the returns expected from their investment.” Here, in the pooling of capital for a new world-trade organization, lay the origins of the voyage of the *Sea-Venture*.¹⁴

The advocates of the Virginia Company engaged in a broad public campaign throughout England to rally support for colonization, explaining again and again why their private capitalist initiative was good for the nation. They advanced multiple arguments: All good Protestants in England had an obligation to help convert the savages in America to Christianity and to battle their Catholic enemies abroad; all had a duty to extend English dominion and to embrace beckoning national glory. But the most insistent, and most resonant, argument they made presented colonization as a solution to domestic social problems in England.

The company, its propagandists never tired of repeating, would provide a necessary public service by removing the “swarmes of idle persons” in England and setting them to work in Virginia, as Richard Hakluyt, the main propagandist for English colonization, had been suggesting for twenty years. The New World was the place for “irregular youths of no religion,” for persons dispossessed by “ract rents,” for anyone suffering “extream poverty”—in short, for all those “who cannot live at home.” Although we do not know the names or the individual backgrounds of most of the people aboard the *Sea-Venture*, we know that a number of dispossessed were among them. In 1609 the Virginia Company applied to the mayor, aldermen, and companies of London “to ease the city and suburbs of a swarme of unnecessary inmates, as a contynual cause of death and famine, and the very originall cause of all the plagues that happen in this kingdome.” Robert Rich, a gentleman shipwrecked on Bermuda, would write of “those men that *Vagrants* liv’d with us,” while an anonymous author close to Sir Thomas Gates (perhaps even Gates himself) would complain of “those wicked Impes that put themselves a ship-board, not knowing otherwise how to live in England.”¹⁵

The Virginia Company, like capitalism more broadly, originated in a series of interrelated social and economic changes in late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England, changes that propelled the *Sea-Venture* toward Virginia in 1609 and informed the writing of *The Tempest* soon after. We can list these changes as the shift in agriculture from arable subsistence to commercial pasturage; the increase of wage labor; the growth of urban populations; the expansion of the domestic system of handicraft or putting-out; the growth of world trade; the institutionalization of markets; and the establishment of a colonial system. These developments were made possible by a profound and far-reaching cause: the enclosure of land and the removal of thousands of people from the commons, who were then redeployed to the country, town, and sea. Expropriation was the source of the original accumulation of capital, and the force that transformed land and labor into commodities. This is how some of the workers aboard the *Sea-Venture* had become “hands.”

Shakespeare recognized the truth of expropriation in *The Tempest* when he had the “savage and deformed slave” Caliban assert his own claim to the land against his aristocratic master, Prospero:

*This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me.*

This was the crux of the epoch. As landlords dispossessed European workers and as European merchants dispossessed native peoples in the Americas, the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius asked, "Can any nation . . . discover what belonged to someone else?" Whose was Bermuda? Whose was America? Whose was Africa? Whose island was England? Since the peoples of the world have, throughout history, clung stubbornly to the economic independence that comes from possessing their own means of subsistence, whether land or other property, European capitalists had to forcibly expropriate masses of them from their ancestral homelands so that their labor-power could be redeployed in new economic projects in new geographic settings. The dispossession and relocation of peoples have been a worldwide process spanning five hundred years. The Virginia Company in general and the *Sea-Venture* in particular helped to organize the middle passage between Old World expropriation and New World exploitation.

How did expropriation happen in England? It was a long, slow, violent operation. Beginning in the Middle Ages, lords privately abolished their armies and dissolved their feudal retinues, while in the early sixteenth century the rulers of England publicly closed the monasteries, rooted out the itinerant friars, pardoners, and beggars, and destroyed the medieval system of charity. Perhaps most important of all were the actions taken by big landowners in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as they responded to new national and international market opportunities. They radically changed agricultural practices by enclosing arable lands, evicting smallholders, and displacing rural tenants, thus throwing thousands of men and women off the land and denying them access to commons. By the end of the sixteenth century there were twelve times as many propertyless people as there had been a hundred years earlier. In the seventeenth century almost a quarter of the land in England was enclosed. Aerial photography and excavations have located more than a thousand deserted villages and hamlets, confirming the colossal dimensions of the expropriation of the peasantry. Thomas More had satirized the process in *Utopia* (1516), but he himself had enclosed land and had to

be restrained. Shakespeare, too, participated in enclosure. He owned a half share in a lease of tithes at Welcombe, whose open fields William Combe proposed to enclose in 1614. Shakespeare did not object since his income would be undiminished, but the would-be dispossessed objected, filling in the ditches newly dug for enclosing hedges. Combe, mounted on horseback, opposed the diggers, calling them “puritan knaves & underlings in their colour,” but Thomas Green, the leader of the diggers, returned the next day with women and children to continue the resistance. Green petitioned the lord chief justice and the Privy Council and eventually obtained a warrant to remove the enclosure.¹⁶

Most agricultural laborers were less fortunate. Unable to find profitable employment, without land, credit, or occupation, these new proletarians were thrust upon the roads and ways, where they were subject to the merciless cruelty of a labor and criminal code as severe and terrifying as any that had yet appeared in modern history. The major statutes against robbery, burglary, and stealing were written during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as crime became a permanent part of urban life. Laws against vagabondage meanwhile promised physical violence against the dispossessed. Under Henry VIII (1509–1547), vagabonds were whipped, had their ears cut off, or were hanged (one chronicler of the age put their number at seventy-five thousand).¹⁷ Under Edward VI (1547–1553) they had their chests branded with the letter *V* and were enslaved for two years; under Elizabeth I (1558–1603) they were whipped and banished to galley service or the house of correction. The criminal code elaborated under Edward VI was scarcely less vicious toward the propertyless. The Statute of Artificers and the Poor Law likewise sought to legislate taking hire, or wage labor.¹⁸

Masterless men and women were the defining feature of late Tudor and early Stuart England, producing the characteristic turmoil of the era. Vagabonds were, A. L. Beier has written, “a hydra-headed monster poised to destroy the state and social order.” This description echoes the argument of philosopher and Solicitor General Francis Bacon, who from personal experience considered such people the “seed of peril and tumult in a state.” The combination of expropriation, industrial exploitation (through mining and the putting-out system), and unprecedented military mobilization resulted in the huge Tudor regional rebellions—the

Cornish Rising (1497), the Lavenham Rising (1525), and the Lincolnshire Rebellion (1536)—as well as the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536), the Prayer Book Rebellion (1549), and Kett's Rebellion (1549), all of which took place in the countryside. Urban insurrections for their part intensified toward the end of the sixteenth century with the Ludgate Prison Riot (1581), the Beggars' Christmas Riot (1582), the Whitsuntide Riots (1584), the Plaisterers' Insurrection (1586), the Felt-Makers' Riot (1591), the Southwark Candle-Makers' Riot (1592), and the Southwark Butter Riot (1595), whose very names evoke the struggle of handicraft workers to preserve their freedoms and customs. When Oxford commoners sought alliance with London 'prentices in the Enslow Hill Rebellion (1596), Bacon and Attorney General Edward Coke tortured one of the movement's leaders and argued that any attack on enclosure was tantamount to high treason. The largest rebellion of the age was the Midlands Revolt of 1607, which transpired partly in Shakespeare's home county and influenced his writing of *Coriolanus*. Those who took direct action to remove enclosures were now for the first time called Levellers. The exuberant resistance to expropriation slowed the pace of enclosure, delayed the undercutting of wages, and laid the basis for the concession and compromise that we misleadingly term "Tudor paternalism," as if they had been a pure gift of parental goodness.¹⁹

When it came time to sort out and analyze the dispossessed, Sir John Popham, chief justice of the King's Bench from 1592 to 1607 and a leading organizer of the Virginia Company, listed thirty different types of rogues and beggars and classed them into five main groups. First there were the chapmen, the tinkers and peddlers, the men and women whose little transactions constituted the commerce of the proletarian micro-economy. Second were the discharged or wounded, or the pretended discharged and wounded, soldiers and sailors, whose labors provided the basis of the expansionist macroeconomy. Third were the remnants of the surviving substructure of feudal benevolence: the procurers, the proctors, the pardoners. The entertainers of the day—the jugglers, fencers, minstrels, keepers of dancing bears, athletes, and players of interludes—made up the fourth group. Next, in mentioning those feigning knowledge of a "crafty Scyence" such as palmistry or physiognomy, as well as fortune-tellers and "persons calling themselves Schollers," Popham des-

ignated a fifth group that supplied the intellectual and philosophical wants of the people. Finally, his preamble named “all wandering persons and common Labourers being persons able in bodye using loytering and refusing to worke for such reasonable wages as is taxed or comonly given in such Parts where such persons do or shall happen to dwell or abide, not having lyving otherwyse to maynteyne themselves.” Thus falling within the statutory meaning of “sturdy rogue and beggar” were all those outside of organized wage labor, as well as those whose activities comprised the culture, tradition, and autonomous self-understanding of this volatile, questioning, and unsteady proletariat. Marx and Engels called the expropriated a motley crowd.²⁰

Expropriation and resistance fueled the process of colonization, peopling the *Sea-Venture* and many other transatlantic vessels during the first half of the seventeenth century. While some went willingly, as the loss of lands made them desperate for a new beginning, many more went *unwillingly*, for reasons explained by Bacon in the aftermath of Midlands Revolt: “For the surest way to prevent *Seditious*” was “to take away the *Matter* of them. For if there be Fuell prepared, it is hard to tell, whence the Spark shall come, that shall set it on Fire.” Arguments in favor of colonizing Ireland in 1594 or Virginia in 1612 held that the “rank multitude” might thus be exported and the “matter of sedition . . . removed out of the City.” An entire policy originated from the Beggars Act of 1597 (39 Eliz. c. 4), whereby vagrants and rogues convicted of crimes (mostly against property) in England would be transported to the colonies and sentenced to work on plantations, within what Hakluyt saw as a “prison without walls.” Here was the place for the inmates of London and indeed the whole realm. The first known English felon transported to the Americas was a dyer’s apprentice who took his master’s goods and absconded from a workhouse before being sent to Virginia in 1607. Thousands more would follow.²¹

ALTERNATIVES

The partisans of the Virginia Company knew that expropriation created “swarmes of idle persons” who had once been sustained by the commons. The merchant, investor, and publicist Robert Gray recalled a time when the

commons of our Country lay free and open for the poore Common[er]s to injoy, for there was roome enough in the land for every man, so that no man needed to encroach [on] or inclose from another, whereby it is manifest, that in those dayes we had no great need to follow strange reports, or to seeke wild adventures, for seeing we had not onely sufficiencie, but an overflowing measure proportioned to everie man.

His tendentious view that encroachment and enclosure had been caused solely by population growth and overcrowding notwithstanding, Gray understood that many people in England had once lived differently—more freely, sufficiently, even abundantly. When the commoners of the *Sea-Venture* decided that they wished to settle in Bermuda rather than go on to Virginia, they explained to the Virginia Company officials that they wanted the ease, pleasure, and freedom of the commons rather than the wretchedness, labor, and slavery awaiting them in Virginia.²²

Inspired by the actions of the shipwrecked commoners, Shakespeare made alternative ways of life a major theme in *The Tempest*. Gonzalo, a wise old counselor in the play who is cast away with the king and other aristocrats on Bermuda, muses about the ideal “commonwealth” he would establish “had I plantation of this isle”:

*I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation: all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure:
No sovereignty—*

He continues,

*All things in common Nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,*

*Would I not have; but Nature should bring forth,
Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.*

His commonwealth, he concludes, would “excel the Golden Age.”²³

The people of the *Sea-Venture* shared with Shakespeare numerous sources of knowledge about alternative ways of life, including the classical Golden Age, the Christian Garden of Eden (Gonzalo’s “innocent people”), and a broad array of popular traditions: antinomian (no law, or felony, or magistracy); anarchist (no sovereignty or treason); pacifist (no sword, pike, knife, or gun); egalitarian (no riches or poverty); and hunting and gathering (no mining or agriculture). A society without succession was one without aristocracy of birth, while a society without use of service was one without wage labor. These traditions were enacted in pageants of the “world turned upside down,” featuring motley-clad jesters such as Shakespeare’s Trinculo amid the banners, horses, artwork, and extravagance of courtly carnival, incorporating pagan rites, peasant traditions, and otherworldly utopian settings (*alterae terrae*, like Bermuda) into new, inclusive, spectacular entertainments. George Ferrers, lord of misrule at Edward VI’s celebrations of 1552, entered the festivity “vppon one straunge beast,” as “the serpente with sevin heddes cauled hidra is the chief beast of myne armes.” Comic fables such as the “Land of Cockaigne” deriving from medieval satire kept a type of utopia alive, painting a picture of indolent pleasure and absolute satiation.²⁴

The most immediate alternative, of course, was the experience of the commons, with its absence of the private property suggested by words such as *tilth* and *boorn*. *Tilth* was an ancient Frisian word referring to a plowing or a harrowing—that is, to specific labors, and by implication to the condition of cultivation that stood in contrast to pasture, forest, and waste. It evoked, by association, a return to woodland conditions, which still existed in England and especially in Ireland, where English conquerors had already begun to defoliate the woods to defeat a kin-based society that shared its principal resources. *Boorn* was a more recent term signifying the boundary between fields, much used in the sixteenth century in the south of England and hence associated with enclosure. Those who had been expropriated had not only a grievance but a living memory and lore of open-field agriculture and commoning. Thus for many people the



Open-field farming in Laxton, England, 1632.
 Booke of Survaye of the Manor of Laxton (1635).

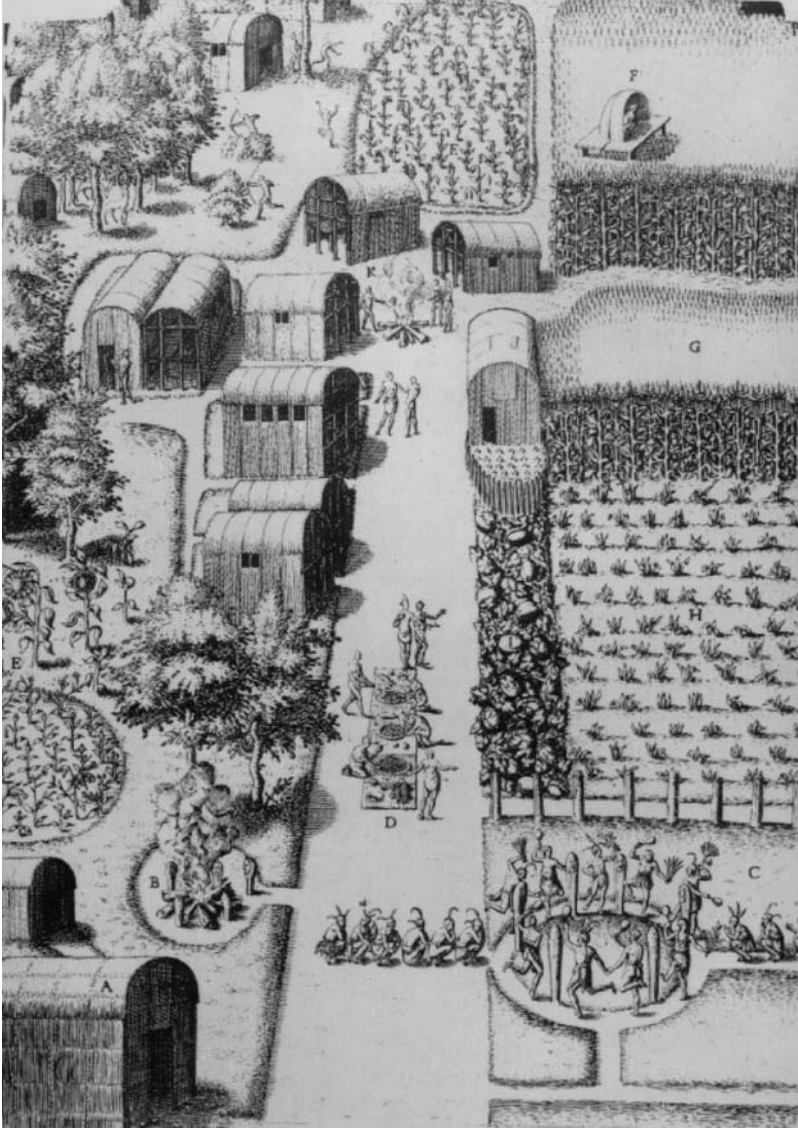
absence of “bourn, bound of land, tilth” was not an ideal dream but a recent, and lost, reality, an actual commons.

When Governor Thomas Gates complained that the mutineers of the *Sea-Venture* retired to the woods and lived like savages, what precisely did he mean? How did savages live? For Gates and his entire generation of

Europeans, the classless, stateless, egalitarian societies of America were powerful examples of alternative ways of life. Virginia Company spokesman Robert Gray sounded an often-repeated note about Native Americans: “There is not *meum* and *tuum* amongst them.” They had no conception of private property and precious little notion of work itself, as William Strachey discovered: Virginia’s Indians were, he noted, “now for the most parte of the year idle.” Idle, perhaps, but not starving; Sir Henry Colt wrote in 1631 that he saw in St. Christopher, in the West Indies, “many naked Indians, & although their bellyes be to great for their proportions, yett itt shewes ye plentye of ye Iland in ye nourishinge of them.” Such discoveries inflamed the collective imagination of Europe, inspiring endless discussion—among statesmen, philosophers, and writers, as well as the dispossessed—of peoples who lived without property, work, masters, or kings.²⁵

Tales of these alternative societies in America were carried back to Europe by sailors—the hundreds, and soon thousands, of real-life equivalents of Thomas More’s Raphael Hythloday, the seafarer who returned from the New World to tell the story of *Utopia*. Members of cultures high and low depended on sailors and their “strange reports” for news of *alterae terrae*. Michel de Montaigne’s personal servant was a former seaman who had lived twelve years among the Indians of Brazil; this “plain ignorant fellow” was undoubtedly a “true witness” whose stories influenced his master’s conception of human possibility.²⁶ Through these and other tales that circulated through port cities such as London, Shakespeare had read and heard of the “golden world without toyle,” of the places “without lawes, without bookes, and without judges,” to be found in America. Centuries later, Rudyard Kipling would visit Bermuda and assert that Shakespeare had gotten many of his ideas for *The Tempest* from “a drunken seaman.”²⁷ Sailors in this way brought together the primitive communism of the New World and the plebeian commonism of the Old, suggesting—at least in part—why they played such a leading and subversive role in the events surrounding the shipwreck of the *Sea-Venture* on Bermuda in 1609.

Commoning was not a single agrarian practice, nor were the commons a uniform ecological place with a fixed human tenure. Both varied from time to time and from place to place, as William Strachey and



A southern Algonquian village, 1588. Hariot,
A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia.

many others well knew. Strachey explained that “whatsoever God by the ministration of nature hath created on earth, was at the begynning common among men,” and that the Native Americans he encountered—whom he called “the naturalls”—were much like his own ancestors, the ancient Picts and Britons who had been subdued by the Romans. There existed a particular English open-field system of agriculture, including provision for common fields, which seems to have been replicated successfully in Sudbury, Massachusetts, until it, too, was overcome by the onslaught of private accumulation.²⁸ Yet the commons were more than a specific English agrarian practice or its American variants; the same concept underlay the clachan, the sept, the rundale, the West African village, and the indigenous tradition of long-fallow agriculture of Native Americans—in other words, it encompassed all those parts of the Earth that remained unprivatized, unenclosed, a noncommodity, a support for the manifold human values of mutuality. Shakespeare knew the truth of the struggle for an alternative way of life on Bermuda, but he chose to turn a real place into a dreamy, literary “no-place,” a utopia. His fellow investors in the Virginia Company did something similar: against those who tried to seize a life of “plenty, peace, and ease,” they brutally pursued a utopia of their own.

COOPERATION AND RESISTANCE

The history of the *Sea-Venture* can be recounted as a microcosm of various forms of human cooperation. The first of these was the cooperation among the sailors, and eventually among everyone on the ship, during the hurricane, as they steered the vessel, struck sails, cleared the decks, and pumped out the water that was seeping into the hull. After the shipwreck, cooperative labor was extended and reorganized among the “hands” ashore, in part by the leaders of the Virginia Company, in part in opposition to them. This work consisted of building huts out of palmetto fronds for shelter and commoning for subsistence—hunting and gathering, fishing and scavenging. Beginning with the challenge to authority aboard ship, the commoners, led by the sailors, cooperated on the island in the planning of five distinct conspiracies, including a strike and marronage. Alongside and against that oppositional cooperation, the

Virginia Company officials organized their own project of cooperative labor: the hewing of cedar trees and the building of vessels to carry the shipwrecked on to Virginia. The tensions between the subversive and official forms of cooperation constituted the drama of William Strachey's account of life on Bermuda in 1609–1610.

Cooperation bound together many different kinds of people, with many different kinds of work experience: sailors, laborers, craftsmen, and commoners of several sorts, including two Native Americans, Namuntack and Matchumps, who were returning to the Powhatans in the Chesapeake after a voyage to England.²⁹ Such cooperative resistance shaped Shakespeare's conception of the conspiracy waged in *The Tempest* by Caliban the slave, Trinculo the jester, and Stephano the sailor, who combine in a plan to kill Prospero and seize control of the island (Bermuda). Caliban himself embodies African, Native American, Irish, and English cultural elements, while Trinculo and Stephano represent two of the main types of the dispossessed in Judge Popham's England. "Misery acquaints a man with strange bed-fellows," muses Trinculo as he joins Caliban beneath a gaberdine mantle, seeking shelter from a thunderstorm—but not before asking himself, "What have we here? a man or a fish?" When Stephano arrives on the scene, he surveys what he thinks is a many-legged creature and wonders if a new kind of being has been created: "This is some monster of the isle with four legs." It is not a fish, of course, nor is it a monster, nor a hybrid (a word originally used to describe the breeding of pigs and first applied to humans in 1620, when Ben Jonson referred to young Irishwomen); it is, rather, the beginning of cooperation among a motley crew of workers. Caliban promises to use his commoning skills (i.e., hunting and gathering) to show Trinculo and Stephano how to survive in a strange land, how and where to find food, fresh water, salt, and wood. Their cooperation eventually evolves into conspiracy and rebellion of the kind promoted on the island of Bermuda by the commoners of the *Sea-Venture* before they, too, were defeated.³⁰

We have said that the meeting of Caliban and Trinculo under the gaberdine is the beginning of the *motley* crew. We should explain the significance of the term. In the habits of royal authority in Renaissance England, the "motley" was a multicolored garment, often a cap, worn by a jester who was permitted by the king to make jokes, even to tell the truth,

to power. As an insignium, the motley brought carnivalesque expectations of disorder and subversion, a little letting-off of steam. By extension, *motley* could also refer to a colorful assemblage, such as a crowd of people whose tattered dress made it interesting. A motley crowd might very likely be one in rags, or a “*lumpen*”-proletariat (from the German word for “rags”). Although we write about and emphasize the interracial character of the motley crew, we wish that readers would keep these other meanings—the subversion of power and the poverty in appearance—in mind.

Expropriation occurred not only in England but also in Ireland, Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. The proletarians thus created worked as skilled navigators and sailors on early transatlantic ships, as slaves on American plantations, and as entertainers, sex workers, and servants in London. English participation in the slave trade, essential to the rise of capitalism, began in 1563, the year before Shakespeare was born. In 1555 John Lok brought the first Ghanaian slaves to England, where they learned English in order to return to Ghana and act as interpreters for slave traders. John Hawkyns made huge profits selling three hundred slaves in Haiti to the Spanish in 1562–1563. Queen Elizabeth loaned him a ship and crew for his second slave expedition. In Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Blacknesse* (1605), Oceanus could innocently ask of the African Niger, “But, what’s the end of thy *Herculean* labors,/ Extended to these calme, and blessed shores[?]” Shakespeare, who himself admired Hercules, among other mythic figures, would help to answer that question: in 1607, the crews of the slave ships the *Dragon* and the *Hector* performed *Hamlet* and *Richard II* while anchored off Sierra Leone. Lucas Fernandez, “a converted negro, brother-in-law of the local King Borea,” translated the plays for the visiting African merchants.³¹ In 1618, soon after the first performance of *The Tempest*, English slave traders, chartered as the Company of Adventurers of London Trading to Gynney and Bynney by James I, built the first permanent English factory in West Africa.³²

Shakespeare presented the conspiracy of Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano as a comedy of low characters, but their alliance was far from laughable: Drake had depended on the superior knowledge of the cimarrons, escaped Afro-Indian slaves, in his raids on the Spanish Main.³³ And

as we have seen, the actual mutinies on Bermuda, which threw up democratic, antinomian, and communist ideas from below, were more varied, complex, sustained, intelligent, and dangerous than Shakespeare allowed. Perhaps he had no choice. A recent law prohibited any mention of divinity on stage and therefore made it difficult to consider the arguments of dissenters such as Stephan Hopkins, who derived their notion of freedom from precisely such a source. The canons of 1604 also required that every English church acknowledge that each of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England was agreeable to the Word of God. The thirty-seventh article stated that “the Laws of the Realm may punish Christian men with death,” while the thirty-eighth asserted that “the Riches and Goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast.”

Like the rebels of the *Sea-Venture*, the cooperation and combination of “strange bed-fellows” who rose up in insurrection in *The Tempest* were represented as monstrous. Here Shakespeare contributed to an evolving ruling-class view of popular rebellion that would be summarized by the anonymous author of *The Rebel's Doom*, a later-seventeenth-century history of uprisings in England. Early tumults in the realm, the writer claimed, had resulted almost entirely from the “*Disloyalty and Disobedience* of the most *Eminent Personages* of the Nation,” but after the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, “the rabble”—as Prospero called Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo—“like a *Monstrous Hydra*, erecting their shapeless heads, began to hiss against their Sovereigns *Regal Power* and *Authority*.” The strikes, mutinies, separations, and defiances against the power and authority of the sovereign Virginia Company after the shipwreck on Bermuda would play a major, even determining part in the course of colonization, as the subsequent histories of Bermuda and Virginia would show.

CLASS DISCIPLINE

Even though the *Sea-Venture* “caried in one bottome all the principall Commissioners who should successiuelie have gouerned the Colonie” of Virginia, all of whom were wrecked on Bermuda, and even though Sir Thomas Gates was invested by the Virginia Company with the power to



The Hydra, supposed to be killed by Hercules.
Edward Topsell, Historie of Serpents (1608).

declare martial law at his discretion, the gentlemen had a terrible time establishing their authority, for the hurricane and the shipwreck had leveled class distinctions. Confronted with resistance that proposed an alternative way of life, the officials of the Virginia Company responded by destroying the commoning option and by reasserting class discipline through labor and terror, new ways of life and death. They reorganized work and inflicted capital punishment.³⁴

Ever sensitive to the problems faced by his fellow investors in the Virginia Company, Shakespeare considered the issues of authority and class discipline in *The Tempest*. Aboard the ship, Gonzalo faces an uppity sailor who dares to order the aristocrats around during the leveling storm. He observes of the plain-spoken tar:

I have great comfort from this fellow: methinks he hath no drowning mark upon him; his complexion is perfect gallows. Stand fast, good Fate, to his hanging: make the rope of his destiny our cable, for our own doth little advantage. If he be not born to be hanged, our case is miserable.

Gonzalo, of course, can do nothing about the verbal mutiny as long as the ship remains in danger, so he recalls the plebeian proverb “He that’s born to be hanged need fear no drowning” and takes comfort in the prospect of a hanging. Shakespeare thus suggests the importance of deep-sea sailing ships (“the Jewels of our land,” as they were called by a Virginia Company official) and sailors. Both, he advises, have to be firmly controlled by the rulers overseeing the process of colonization. The ship and the sailor were necessary to the international accumulation of capital through the transport of commodities, which included, as we have seen, the expropriated workers who would create that new capital. One critical instrument of control was the public hanging.

When Gonzalo prays to fate that the rope of the boatswain’s destiny may become the cable of life for the ruling class, he is making explicit a real relationship. Sir Walter Raleigh had a similar experience when exploring the waters of Venezuela: “At the last we determined to hang the Pilot, and if we had well known the way back again by night, he had surely gone, but our own necessities pleaded sufficiently for his safety.” Hanging was destiny for part of the proletariat because it was necessary to the organization and functioning of transatlantic labor markets, maritime and otherwise, and to the suppression of radical ideas, as on Bermuda. In 1611, the year *The Tempest* was first performed, in Middlesex alone (which county already contained the most populous parishes of London) roughly 130 people were sentenced to the gallows and ninety-eight were actually hanged, considerably more than the annual average of about seventy. The following year Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wrightman, both followers of the Puritan separatist Robert Browne and brethren of Stephan Hopkins, were burned at the stake for heresy. Even grislier punishments were enacted at sea, where any sailor caught sleeping on watch a third time would be bound to the mainmast with a basket of bullets tied to his arms; after a fourth offense he would be hanged with a biscuit and knife from the bowsprit, forced eventually to decide

whether to starve or to cut himself down to drown. A man designing to steal a ship would be hanged by his heels overboard until his brains were beaten out against the ship's sides. Shakespeare evaded such realities in his play, but he and his friends in the Virginia Company knew well that capitalist colonization depended on them.³⁵

Gruesome kinds of capital punishment were not the only notions of class discipline aboard the *Sea-Venture*, and one of these would have long-term implications for the colony of Virginia and indeed for all of England's Atlantic empire. The source of it lay in the Netherlands in the late sixteenth century, in the new forms of military discipline developed by Maurice of Orange for Dutch soldiers. In what would prove to be a centerpiece of the "military revolution," Maurice redesigned military work processes, breaking soldiers' movements into component parts and recombining them to create new cooperation, efficiency, and collective power.³⁶ These ideas and practices were carried by Sir Thomas Gates and Sir Thomas Dale to Virginia in 1610 and 1611, and from there by future Governor Daniel Tucker to Bermuda. This new way of organizing military cooperation relied ultimately on the terror of the gallows and the whipping post (on one occasion Tucker personally whipped forty men before breakfast). Its reality and its necessity can be seen in the social and political dynamics of early Virginia, almost all of whose early leaders—Gates, De La Warr, Dale, Yeardley, and others—were officers "truly bred in that university of warre, the Lowe Countries."³⁷

The resistance that first appeared on Bermuda persisted in Virginia as colonists refused to work, mutinied, and often deserted to the Powhatan Indians. Here continued the "tempest of dissention: euery man ouervalueing his own worth, would be a Commander; euery man vnderprising an others value, denied to be commanded." Here were the "license, sedition, and furie [which] are the fruits of a headie, daring, and vnruely multitude." Soldiers, sailors, and Indians conspired to smuggle guns and tools from the Virginia Company's stores and held "night marts" to sell the appropriated goods. Many of Virginia's leaders had faced the same problems in Ireland, where English soldiers and settlers had deserted the plantations to join the Irish. As an anonymous observer wrote of the year 1609 in Virginia, "To eate many our men this starveing Tyme did Runn Away unto the Salvages [*sic*] whom we never heard of after." Some deser-

tions thus began with an urgent question in the native tongue: “*Mowchick woyawgh tawgh noeragh kaquere mecher?*” (“I am very hungry, what shall I eat?”). One in every seven settlers at Jamestown deserted during the winter of 1609–10. Henry Spelman, a youth who had lived among the Powhatans in order to learn their language, returned to the tribe in 1609 “by Reason that vitals [i.e., victuals] were scarce with us.” Yet hunger was not the only issue, for English colonists regularly fled to the Native Americans, “from the moment of settlement in 1607 until the all but total breakdown in relations between English and natives following the 1622 massacre.” Captain John Smith knew that the principal attraction for the deserters was the opportunity “to live idle among the savages.” Some of those who had lived like savages on Bermuda apparently would not be denied.³⁸

This situation helped to call forth the *Laws Divine, Moral, and Martial*, sanctioned by the Second Charter of the Virginia Company (1609) with the advice of Francis Bacon, who was, according to Strachey, a “most noble fautor [favorer] of the Virginian Plantation, being from the beginning (with other lords and earles) of the principall counsell applied to propagate and guide yt.” The charter, as suggested above, empowered Sir Thomas Gates to declare martial law in order to bring the colony to discipline and thereby to make money for the new stockholders. The first nineteen articles of the new law, imposed by Gates the day after he arrived in Virginia, had likely been drawn up amid the conspiracies that challenged his rule on Bermuda and against that island’s backdrop of liberty, plenty, and ease. These mostly martial laws established military discipline for labor and dispensed harsh punishments, including execution, for resistance. In all, the laws contained thirty-seven articles, promising whippings, galley service, and death galore: twenty-five of them prescribed capital punishment. Thomas Dale adapted the latter sections of the *Laws Divine, Moral, and Martial* “from a Dutch army book of ordinances which he had brought with him.” One of the main purposes of the laws was to keep English settlers and Native Americans apart.³⁹

The people to whom the colonists deserted in defiance of Dale’s laws were a *Tsenacommacah*, or loose alliance, of thirty-odd smallish groups of Algonquians. Their paramount chief, Wahunsonacock, a Pamunkey Indian whom the English called Powhatan, was a “tall well proportioned

man, with a sower look," sixty years old and possessed of "a very able and hardy body to endure any labour." The fourteen thousand allied Algonquians inhabited a rich ecological zone made up of mixed forest and Chesapeake waterways, on which they exercised an economy of collecting and horticulture. They hunted (Virginia white-tailed deer, bear, wild turkey, goose, quail, duck); they fished (herring, shad, sturgeon); they captured eels and shellfish (crabs, clams, oysters, mussels); they gathered (fruits, berries, nuts); and they practiced tillage (maize, beans, squash). They were nourished upon a better all-around diet than the Europeans. The confederation consisted of small-scale societies without ownership of land, without classes, without a state, but with all paying tribute to Wahunsonacock, "the subtell owlde foxe." They pursued little economic specialization and attempted little trade; they were self-sufficient. Their society was organized around matrilineal descent, and both men and women enjoyed sexual freedom outside marriage. There existed no political/military bureaucracy for their roughly fifteen hundred warriors. Even Wahunsonacock performed the tasks of an ordinary man and was addressed by all not by his title but by his personal name. All the items Gonzalo "would not have" in his utopia were likewise missing in Powhatan society, except one: corn, or Indian maize. In search of food and a way of life that many apparently found congenial, a steady stream of English settlers opted to become "white Indians," "red Englishmen," or—since racial categories were as yet unformed—Anglo-Powhatans.⁴⁰ One such was Robert Markham, a sailor who came to the region with Captain Christopher Newport on the first Virginia voyage (May–June, 1607) and ended up a renegade: he converted to Algonquian culture and took the name Moutapass.⁴¹

The defections continued, especially among soldiers and laborers compelled by harsh discipline to build fortifications to the west, at Henrico, out of which would grow Richmond. In 1611, a few of those who "did Runne Away unto the Indyans" were retaken by a military expedition. Sir Thomas Dale "in A moste severe mannor caused [them] to be executed." Of these, "Some he apointed to be hanged Some burned Some to be broken upon wheles, others to be staked and some to be shott to death." These "extreme and crewell tortures he used and inflicted upon them" in order "to terrefy the rest for Attemptinge the Lyke."

When he caught a few others pilfering goods from the Virginia Company's supplies, Dale "cawshed them to be bownd faste unto Trees and so sterved them to deathe." Terror created boundaries.⁴²

Thus did popular anticapitalist traditions—a world without work, private property, law, felony, treason, or magistrate—find their perfect antithesis in Thomas Dale's Virginia, where drumbeats called settlers to labor and the *Laws Divine, Moral, and Martial* promised terror and death to any who dared to resist. Military men transformed Bermuda and Virginia from places of "liberty and the fullness of sensuality" to places of bondage, war, scarcity, and famine. By 1613 colonists on Bermuda were starving to death as their bodies, bent and blue, spent their vital forces laboring on fortifications that would make of the island a strategic military outpost in the early phase of English colonization. One unnamed man refused to give in to the new reality, preserving the older vision of Bermuda as he "hid himself in the Woods, and lived only on Wilkes [whelks] and land Crabs, fat and lusty many moneths." The destruction of the Bermudian paradise was signaled by a massive rat infestation and an ominous visitation by "a company of Ravens, which continued amongst them all the time of the mortality and then departed."⁴³

CHAPTER TWO

Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water



*All I have to do in this world is to be merry,
which I shall if the ground be not taken from me.*

—Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607)

*Youth, youth it is better to be starved by thy nurse
Than live to be hanged for cutting a purse.*

—Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* (1614)

THE ENEMIES AT COURT OF Sir Walter Raleigh, the archetypal imperialist adventurer, imprisoned him in the Tower after the accession of James I in 1603 on insubstantial evidence that he had intrigued with Spain to kill the king. In prison Raleigh wrote his *History of the World* and in it mentioned Hercules and “the serpent Hydra, which had nine heads, whereof one being cut off, two grew in the place.” Raleigh, of course, identified with Hercules, and he used the hydra to symbolize the growing disorders of capitalism. “The amorphous laboring class, set loose from the traditional moorings of the peasantry, presented a new phenomenon to contemporaries,” historian Joyce Appleby has noted.¹ Combining Greek myth with the Old Testament, Raleigh developed a historical interpretation of Hercules: “That he slew many thieves and tyrants I take to be truly written, without addition of poetical vanity,” he wrote, and “Sure it is that many cities in Greece were greatly bound to him; for that he (bending all his endeavours to the common good) delivered the land from much oppression.” Hercules helped to establish kingship, or political sovereignty, and commerce, under the dominance of a particular ethnic group, the Greeks. He served as a model for the exploration, trade, conquest, and plantation of English mercantilism; indeed, a cult of Hercules suffused English ruling-class culture in the seventeenth

century.² Raleigh noted, “Some by Hercules understand fortitude, prudence, and constancy, interpreting the monsters [as] vices. Others make Hercules the sun, and his travels to be the twelve signs of the zodiac. There are others who apply his works historically to their own conceits.”

Francis Bacon, who as lord chancellor tried Raleigh in 1618 and was the first to inform him of his death sentence, turned the myth of Hercules and the hydra into a powerful conceit indeed. Born to a leading Elizabethan courtier and educated at Cambridge, Bacon was a philosopher who advocated inductive reasoning and scientific experimentation, and a politician who lost favor with the queen but regained it under James by betraying his erstwhile friends. He connected utopian thought with practical projects, writing *New Atlantis*, “Of Empire,” and “Of Plantations” while investing in the Virginia Company. He drafted his essay “Of Seditions and Troubles” after the Enslow Hill Rebellion (1596), in which food and antienclosure rioters in Oxfordshire planned to march to London to join rebellious apprentices. Bartholomew Steere, a carpenter and one of the rioters, predicted, “We shall have a merrier world shortly. . . . I will work one day and play the other.” Steere suffered two months of examination and torture in London’s Bridewell Prison at the hands of Bacon and other officials. While Bacon claimed that he sought to enlarge the “bounds of Human Empire to make all things possible,” his will to power violently crushed alternatives such as the one hoped for by Steere.

Bacon wrote about Hercules in his interpretation of Prometheus, who signified mind and intellect and thereby proved that man might be regarded “as the centre of the world.” The winds sailed the ships and ran the engines just for man; plants and animals furnished food and shelter just for him; even the stars worked for him. The quest for knowledge was always a struggle for power. The voyage of Hercules to set Prometheus free seemed to Bacon to be an image of God’s redeeming the human race.³ The story of Hercules was on Bacon’s mind when he came to write *An Advertisement Touching an Holy War*, published in 1622, a famine year and shortly after Bacon’s downfall and conviction on charges of bribery. He wrote it to pay his debts and to find his way back into the corridors of power. The treatise addressed the conflict between the king and the members of Parliament over who was to hold the purse strings of govern-



*Frontispiece of Francis Bacon's The Great Instauration (1620):
a ship of discovery returns through the Pillars of Hercules.
By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.*

ment: Bacon advised that the only “chance of healing the growing breach was to engage the country in some popular quarrel abroad.” The recent national quarrel with Catholic Spain would not qualify, since James I favored a Spanish alliance. Hence Bacon looked elsewhere for enemies adequate to his proposed jihad.

He began by comparing war to capital punishment. The justification for both must be “full and clear,” in accord with the law of nations, the law of nature, and divine law, lest “our blessed Saviour” become a Moloch (i.e., an idol to whom sacrifices were made). A death sentence was justified against those unavowed by God, those who had defaced natural reason and were neither nations in right nor nations in name, “but multitudes only, and swarms of people.” Elsewhere in the same essay Bacon referred to “shoals” and “routs” of people. By taking his terms from natural history—a “swarm” of bees, a “shoal” of seals or whales, a “rout” of wolves—and applying them to people, Bacon drew on his theory of monstrosity. These people had degenerated from the laws of nature and taken “in their body and frame of estate a monstrosity.” In 1620 Bacon had called for the rigorous study of monsters, “of every thing . . . which is new, rare, and unusual in nature.” To him, monsters were more than a portent, a curiosity, or an exoticism; rather, they comprised one of the major divisions of nature, which were: 1) nature in course; 2) nature wrought; and 3) nature erring. These three realms constituted what was normal, what was artificial, and what was monstrous. The last category bridged the boundaries of the natural and the artificial and was thus essential to the process of experiment and control.⁴ These divisions are well-known features of Bacon’s thought. His *An Advertisement Touching an Holy War*, by contrast, is not well known, yet it reveals the form and temper of its age.

Bacon drew upon classical antiquity, the Bible, and recent history to provide seven examples of such “multitudes” that deserved destruction: West Indians; Canaanites; pirates; land rovers; assassins; Amazons; and Anabaptists. Having listed these, he wrote,

Of examples enough; except we should add the labours of Hercules; an example which, though it be flourished with much fabulous matter, yet so much it hath, that it doth notably set forth the

consent of all nations and ages in the approbation of the extirpating and debellating of giants, monsters, and foreign tyrants, not only as lawful, but as meritorious, even divine honour: and this although the deliverer came from the one end of the world unto the other.

This is the crux, or crucial thought, where genocide and divinity cross. Bacon's advertisement for a holy war was thus a call for several types of genocide, which found its sanction in biblical and classical antiquity. Bacon thereby gave form to the formless, as the groups he named embodied a monstrous, many-headed hydra. But who were these groups? And why did he recommend holy war against them?

THE CURSE OF LABOR

The answers to these questions may be found by continuing the analysis, begun in the previous chapter, of the processes of expropriation, exploitation, and colonization in the era of Raleigh and Bacon. We argue that the many expropriations of the day—of the commons by enclosure and conquest, of time by the puritanical abolition of holidays, of the body by child stealing and the burning of women, and of knowledge by the destruction of guilds and assaults on paganism—gave rise to new kinds of workers in a new kind of slavery, enforced directly by terror.⁵ We also suggest that the emergence of cooperation among workers, in new ways and on a new scale, facilitated new forms of self-organization among them, which was alarming to the ruling class of the day. Bacon saw the new combinations of workers as monstrous and used the myth of the many-headed hydra to develop his theory of monstrosity, a subtle, thinly veiled policy of terror and genocide. The idiom of monstrosity would gain special relevance with the emergence of a revolutionary movement in England in the 1640s, in which the proletarian forces opposed by Bacon would play a critical part.

We will concentrate in this chapter on the making of “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” a phrase adopted in the authorized version of the Bible published in the year *The Tempest* was written (1611), and one that has flourished in modern social description. The alliteration (*wood,*

water) and the assonance (*hewer, drawer*) have provided some of the attraction, but since the actual work that the phrase describes is menial, onerous, and dirty, the essential uses have revolved around dissonance and irony. Seventeenth-century London artisans used the phrase in their protests against deskilling, mechanization, cheap labor, and the loss of independence. Swift employed it in 1729 to describe the position of the Irish beneath their English lords, as did Wolfe Tone in 1790 and James Connolly almost two centuries later. In 1736 Bolingbroke, the aristocratic high Tory, added a racial spin: “The herd of mankind” constituted “another species,” “scarce members of the community, though born in the country,” “marked out like the Jews, a distinct race, hewers of wood and drawers of water.”⁶ In the nineteenth century the British Chartists gave the phrase animal connotations: “The labouring classes—the real ‘people’—[have] been roused in the attempt of making the working classes beasts of burden—hewers of wood and drawers of water.”⁷ In *Emmanuel Appadocca* (1854), the first anglophone novel published in the British Caribbean, Maxwell Philip wrote of the Africans, who “gave philosophy, religion, and government to the world, but who must now stoop to cut wood, and to carry water.” Osborne Ward noted in *The Ancient Lowly* (1888), “They were not only slaves but they formed, as it were, another race. They were the plebeians, the proletariat; ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water.’”⁸ The use of the phrase was extended into the twentieth century when Samuel Haynes, a follower of Marcus Garvey and president of the Newark branch of the NAACP, wrote the national anthem of Belize, which culminates, “By the might of truth and the grace of God, / No longer shall we be hewers of wood.” W. E. B. Du Bois explained that the aim of the black artisan was “to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers and drawers of water.” One of the exegetical tasks of pan-Africanism was to show that these biblical terms also applied to white people. The words were crucial to the formation of the African National Congress in South Africa in 1912 and figured again in Nelson Mandela’s speech about the dismantling of apartheid in 1991. George Jackson, the black revolutionary, emphasized the concomitant state of propertylessness: “Has any people ever been independent that owned neither land or tool? . . . more of the same, the hewing of wood and the carrying of water.”⁹

While hewing and drawing suggest timeless travails, the phrase in fact originated in the early era of capitalism. William Tyndale coined “hewers of wood and drawers of water” in his translation of the Old Testament in 1530. It appears in two contrasting biblical contexts. The first is in Deuteronomy 29, where Moses makes a covenant at Jahweh’s command. He reminds the people of their deliverance from Egypt, the forty years in the wilderness, the battles of conquest. He calls together the captains of the tribes, the elders, and the officers and commands: “Your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is in thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water” must enter into a covenant. Jahweh then curses for a dozen or more verses. The covenant is inclusive, constituting a people or nation, under threats and in dread. The second context is in Joshua 9:21: “And the princes said unto them [the Gibeonites], Let them live; but let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water unto all the congregation.” Two verses later, the punitive nature of the phrase is explained: “Now therefore are ye cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.” The Gibeonites have been punished with enslavement, yet they remain within the covenant.

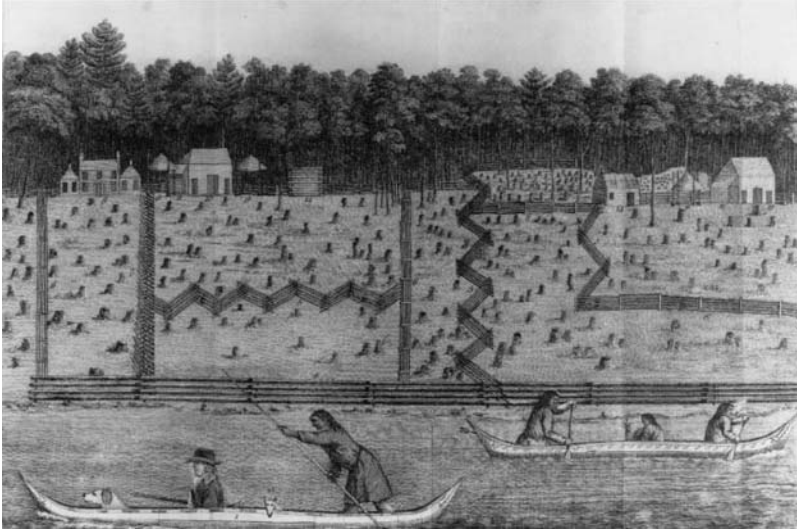
For the African, European, and American hewers of wood and drawers of water in the early seventeenth century, work was both a curse and a punishment. These workers were necessary to the growth of capitalism, as they did the work that could not or would not be done by artisans in workshops, manufactories, or guilds. Hewers and drawers performed the fundamental labors of expropriation that have usually been taken for granted by historians. Expropriation itself, for example, is treated as a given: the field is *there* before the plowing starts; the city is *there* before the laborer begins the working day. Likewise for long-distance trade: the port is *there* before the ship sets sail from it; the plantation is *there* before the slave cultivates its land. The commodities of commerce seem to transport themselves. Finally, reproduction is assumed to be the transhistorical function of the family. The result is that the hewers of wood and drawers of water have been invisible, anonymous, and forgotten, even though they transformed the face of the Earth by building the infrastructure of “civilization.”

THE LABORS OF THE HEWER AND DRAWER

The hewers of wood and drawers of water had three main functions: they undertook the labors of expropriation; they built the ports and the ships and provided the seafarers for Atlantic commerce; and they daily maintained the households.

Labors of expropriation included the clear-cutting of woods, the draining of marshes, the reclamation of fens, and the hedging of the arable field—in sum, the obliteration of the commoning *habitus*. Woodlands contained flourishing economies of forest people in England, Ireland, Jamaica, Virginia, and New England; their destruction was the first step toward agrarian “civilization,” as summarized by Hercules when he gave land to the cultivators in neolithic times. This was and is the language of cultivators and “improvers,” of settlers and imperialists, and even of a money-hungry government, as when the early Stuarts disafforested crown lands in a reckless search for revenues. The felled trees fueled the growing iron, glass, brewing, and shipbuilding industries, resulting in a threefold increase in the price of firewood between 1570 and 1640. In the latter year the “Act for the Limitation of Forests . . . was the signal for the beginning of widespread destruction of forests.”¹⁰ In 1649 the Parliamentary Committee for the Preservation of Timber was formed to check the depredations of the “looser and disordered sort of people” who continued to insist upon their common rights in the forests. In the year 1636 it took twenty-four oxen to drag the giant oak that would serve as mainmast to the *Sovereign of the Seas*; scores of people labored simultaneously, in precise alignment, to lift it onto wheels or wain. By the end of the seventeenth century only an eighth of England remained wooded.

Similarly, in America, settlers claimed and cleared the ground for agricultural colonies. In Virginia, “the spade men fell to digging, the brick men burnt their bricks, the company cut down wood, the Carpenters fell to squaring out, the Sawyers to sawing, the Soldier to fortifying,” as cooperative labor built the first settlements. The colonists were at first unfamiliar with the broadax and the felling ax, but after the Pequot War, which opened the way westward, they soon learned to saw, fell, cleave, split, and rive, making timber and its products the basis of an export economy to Barbados and other parts of the West Indies. Servants and



An American landscape hewn and enclosed, with Native Americans canoeing by. Patrick Campbell, Travels in the Interior Inhabited Parts of North America in the Years 1791 and 1792 (1793).

slaves hacked away at the rain forest of Barbados, slowly clearing the lands for plantations and sending home to England the new settlements' first cash crop: timber. When the English took possession of lands overseas, they did so by building fences and hedges, the markers of enclosure and private property.¹¹

Another major work of expropriation was the draining of the fens. An Act of Parliament of 1600 made it possible for big shareholders in the fens to suppress the common rights that stood in the way of their drainage schemes. New plans and works, requiring unprecedented concentrations of labor, proliferated. King James organized hundreds in the draining and enclosure of parts of Somerset in the early seventeenth century, turning a commoning economy of fishing, fowling, reed cutting, and peat digging into a capitalist economy of sheep raising. Coastal lands were reclaimed and inland peat moors drained in the Somerset "warths." Some eleven thousand workers were required to drain the fens around Ely during the 1650s, when drainage engineers from Holland, "equipped with a literally world-changing technology," diverted rivers to create artificial

watercourses as large as any since Roman times, leaving in their wake an entirely new landscape of straight ditches and square fields. A poet of the area, Michael Drayton, described the land as “plump-thigh’d moor and full flank’t marsh.”¹²

The “battle of the fens” began in 1605 between capital owners such as Lord Chief Justice Popham (“covetous and bloodie Popham”) and the fowlers, fenmen, and commoners. The terms of battle ranged from murder, sabotage, and village burning on the one hand to protracted litigation, pamphleteering, and the advanced science of hydraulics on the other. Sporadic outbursts of opposition to the drainage grew into a sustained campaign of action as commoners, often led by women, attacked workmen, ditches, dikes, and tools in Hatfield, on the Isle of Axholme, and elsewhere in the late 1620s and 1630s. Oliver Cromwell, who became a commissioner for draining the Great Level, sent a major of his own regiment to suppress the rioting commoners and received in return two hundred acres of drained land. A poet who equated common rights with theft celebrated the victory in verse:

*New hands shall learn to work, forget to steal
New legs shall go to church, new knees shall kneel.*

In 1663 Samuel Pepys passed through the “most sad fennes, all the way observing the sad life of the breedlings,” as he called their inhabitants. The sadness was the consequence of a specific defeat. Thomas Fuller wrote in 1655, “Grant them drained, and so continuing; as now the great fishes therein prey on the less, so the wealthy men would devour the poorer sort of people . . . and rich men, to make room for themselves, would jostle the poor people out of their commons.”¹³ Another result of the contradictory process whereby dispossessed commoners labored to dispossess others was the creation of the idyllic “English countryside,” in which, again, the toil of those who made it possible was rendered invisible.¹⁴

The second labor of the hewer of wood and the drawer of water was building the ports for long-distance trade, a task that, like the clearing of the land for commercial agriculture, was essential to the new capitalist order. John Merrington has drawn attention to the first political economists, who emphasized the rigid division of land into town and country-

side in the transition to capitalism.¹⁵ Of special significance within this larger division was one particular kind of city and one particular kind of countryside: the port and the plantation. The early seventeenth century was the critical formative moment for each.

In 1611 John Speed published his atlas in four volumes, *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain*, in which he depicted the bridges, palisades, towers, bastions, gates, walls, and outworks of the harbors and ports of England, Ireland, the Mediterranean, West Africa, the West Indies, and North America. “The pestilent marsh is drained with great labour, and the sea is fenced off with mighty barriers,” wrote Adam Ferguson in explaining the progress from rude nations to the establishment of property. “Harbours are opened, and crowded with shipping, where vessels of burden, if they are not constructed with a view to the situation, have not water to float. Elegant and magnificent edifices are raised on foundations of slime.”¹⁶ London and Bristol had long been port cities, but both expanded as the hewers and drawers laid the stone and built the wharves to accommodate their new bulk trades. Liverpool, incorporated in 1626, grew quickly after the midcentury. In Ireland, Belfast (1614) was built on reclaimed land, using the giant oaks felled by Carrickfergus hewers; Dublin became a “Bristol beyond the seas” as its workers exported grain and built ships; and Cork and Waterford grew behind their channels, islands, and winding rivers, while Wexford prospered with the fishing trade. Derry, both port and plantation, was rebuilt in the early seventeenth century, after British conquest, by the labors of the conquered natives. In Scotland, Glasgow’s merchants were slowly making their first connections with the tobacco fields of Virginia. Mediterranean ports also played a role in commerce, from the shallow crescent bay within the walls of Tripoli to the port of Algiers and the Sallé in Morocco, all built in part by European slaves captured upon the high seas. In West Africa, Cape Coast Castle was erected in 1610 by the Portuguese, operated by the Dutch, and finally taken by the English in 1664; the Dutch were also busy off Dakar, establishing, with the labor power of African and European workers, the slave-trading port of Goree Island in 1617. The earliest European trading factory on the West African coast, Elmina, was rebuilt in 1621. West Indian ports—Bridgetown in Barbados and Port Royal and Kingston in Jamaica—were constructed to handle the tobacco and even-

tually the sugar produced on the plantations. On the North American mainland, Boston flourished behind its numerous harbor islands; New York and Philadelphia evolved from Dutch and Swedish origins to become major anglophone ports; and Charlestown, founded in Carolina in 1670, became the largest port in the South.

These nodes of the Atlantic nautical networks were built by workers who hauled the rubble to create a breakwater—a mole, or jetty, or pier—to protect the anchorage; hewed the stone, transported it, and arranged it on the seabed; and piled rocks to form retaining walls, or seawalls, with drainage and weepholes. They hewed the wood, carried it, and secured it upon the stone foundations in cribworks of timber. They dug and hauled the dirt for the aprons, quays, and basins. As John Ruskin observed in *The Stones of Venice*, “There is no saying how much wit, how much depth of thought, how much fancy, presence of mind, courage, and fixed resolution there may have gone to the placing of a single stone. . . . This is what we have to admire,—this grand power and heart of man in the thing; not his technical or empirical way of holding the trowel and laying mortar.”

The “grand power” thus displayed was the power of cooperation among numerous carters and diggers, spalpeens and barrowers, who used rudimentary tools such as shovels, picks, axes, spades, pots, jugs, pails, and buckets to lay the foundations of the port cities.

The third labor of the hewer of wood and drawer of water was maintaining the life supports for communities on land and at sea, from chopping and gathering to pumping and toting. On ships as on plantations, in families as in entire cities, wood and water were the basis of life. Early Jamestown, Virginia, was known for its “fresh and plentie of water springs” and its “wood enough at hand.” Dixcove, an English fort in Ghana, was called in 1692 “a good place for corn and at wooding and watering.”¹⁷ Fort slaves brought these life supports to ships, which were often “in distress for wood and water.” A boat a day, for example, carried water to the Dutch slavers anchored at Shama, west of Elmina; indeed, even at Elmina rainwater cisterns were not built until 1695.¹⁸

If the hewers of wood were male, the drawers of water were almost inevitably female. Adam Clark’s biblical commentary about drawers of water (1846) drove home the point: “The disgrace of this state lay not in

the *labouriousness* of it, but in its being the common employment of the *females*.” In his novel *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens in the 1840s looked back upon the Gordon Riots, with their insurrectionary and democratic danger, and introduced a servant woman with the pronouncement that “if she were in a more elevated station of society, she would be gouty. Being but a hewer of wood and drawer of water, she is rheumatic. My dear Haredale, there are natural class distinctions, depend upon it.” John Taylor wrote as truthfully in 1639, “Women are nothing but your drudges and your slaves. . . . A woman’s work is never at an end.” Pepys collected testimony of revolt: “Other women’s husbands can rise in the morning and make their wives a fire, fetch them in water, wash shitten clouts, sweep the house, scour the Andirons, make the Bed, scrape Trenchers, make clean chooves, rub Stockings, air Apparel, and empty the Pot.”¹⁹ Bridget Hill has emphasized the drawing of water as the foundation of housework.²⁰ A drudge or “slavey” fetched the water and carried out the slops in the Victorian household, while “endless trips by the mother and older children with jugs, basins or buckets” provided water for daily reproduction.²¹

The drawing of water was part of state-sponsored science in the seventeenth century, not least because agriculture and mining depended on hydraulics, whether to drain the fens or to pump water from flooded mines. The latter need stimulated Thomas Savery, John Calley, and Thomas Newcomen to develop the steam engine. An eighteenth-century theorist wrote:

Men have already invented mills for grinding of corn, by the wind or water, the sawing of boards and the making of paper; the fire engine for the raising of water, the draining of mines, etc. and thus relieving mankind from drudgery: and many more engines, of this general kind, may doubtless be constructed, and should employ the thoughts of inventive and mechanical philosophers, in order still farther to ease mankind from too severe bodily labor, and the exertion of mere brutal strength: for even hewers of wood, and drawers of water, are men in a lower degree.²²

In actuality, mechanization increased the number of hewers and drawers of water, as did technological changes in water-delivery systems. At the

end of the fifteenth century, when water was drawn to London through wooden pipes from Islington or Tyburn, the Fellowship of the Brotherhood of Saint Christopher of the Waterbearers of London did most of the hauling from the conduits. Water was free. In 1581 this changed as the first privately owned, pumped water supply was constructed at the London Bridge. “We have water companies now instead of water carriers,” wrote Jonson in 1598. Indeed, in 1600 “the whole company of the poor Water Tankard Bearers of the Cittie of London and the suburbs thereof, they and their families being 4000 in number,” petitioned Parliament against the private quills, as water pipes were known. Privatization nonetheless continued with the New River Company, chartered in 1619, which brought water from Hertfordshire to Clerkenwell reservoirs, through wood pipes and then from lead pipes to private subscribers. By the 1660s the era of free water by right had ended—another commons expropriated. The poor were thrown back on the wells and gravity-fed conduits to obtain water for themselves.

In summary, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water built the infrastructure of merchant capitalism. They clear-cut the forests, drained the fens, and created the fields for capitalist agriculture. They built the ports for capitalist trade. They reproduced the households, families, and laborers for capitalist work. The labors of hewing and drawing were usually carried out by the weakest members of the demographic structure: the dispossessed, the strangers, the women, the children, the people in England, Ireland, West Africa, or North America mostly likely to be kidnapped, spirited, trepanned, or “barbadosed.” Terror was inherent, for such work was a curse, a punishment. The formless, disorderly laboring class had been given a new form, and a productive one: whether waged or unwaged, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water were slaves, though the difference was not yet racialized.

TERROR

In England the expropriation of the peasantry was accompanied by systematic violence and terror, organized through the criminal sanction, public searches, the prisons, martial law, capital punishment, banishment, forced labor, and colonization. Magistrates used cruel and pitiless

legislation to whip, dismember, brand, hang, and burn thousands; privy searches rounded up thousands more masterless men and women. The judicial decision known as *Gateward's Case* (1607) denied common rights to villagers and propertyless commoners.²³ Despite these cruel expropriations, a residue of paternalism remained: it was still expected that, to quote from Ben Jonson's play *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), Justice Overdo would "give puddings to the poor, . . . the bread to the hungry, and custards to his children."

The real-life equivalents of Justice Overdo routinely sent the poor, the hungry, and the young to prison, an institution that was central to the regime of terror in England. Thomas Dekker listed thirteen "strong houses of sorrow" in London alone. Bridewell became a prison in 1553 for orphans, vagrants, petty offenders, and disorderly women. Houses of correction were erected across England—in Essex, for example, in 1587, 1607, and 1609. The prisons and bridewells forced labor upon thousands of the men, women, and children who passed through them. The combination of pain and work entailed was described by one inmate in 1596: "Every dayes taske is to bunch five and twenty pounds of hemepe or els to have no meat. And then I was chayned nyne weekes to a blocke and a month besides with it and five monthes without it in Little Ease and one of the turrets which is as bad, and fyve weekes I went in the myll and ten dayes I stood with bothe my handes stretched above my heade againste the wall in the standinge stocks." The prison thus joined punishment to production to create work-discipline.²⁴

Capital punishment embodied the ultimate, spectacular power of the regime of terror, whether expressed by the provost martial who executed summary death upon the vagabond or by the slower-moving criminal justice system. Edmund Spenser remembered the execution of Murrough O'Brien in Limerick: "I saw an old woman which was his foster mother took up his head whilst he was quartered and sucked up all the blood running there out, saying that the earth was not worthy to drink it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast, and tore her hair, crying and shrieking out most terribly." For Spenser, the woman's behavior, far from being justified, furnished proof of Irish barbarity.

London, whose suburbs housed the unprotected, rebellious workers of the putting-out system, was itself ringed by reminders of the death

penalty. To the south, the heads of malefactors were stuck on pikes and lodged for display at the southern end of London Bridge. To the east, pirates were hanged at a gallows erected at Execution Stairs, or drowned in Wapping by the rising tides of the Thames. To the north, at Smithfield, the “fires” martyred many Protestants during Queen Mary’s reign, though after 1638, when the market was established, it was principally cattle that were consigned to slaughter there. Finally, to the west, standing near what is now Speaker’s Corner, was the Tyburn gallows, which remained active until 1783. To “go west” became proverbial for death.

Hangings were staged throughout the realm: seventy-four persons were hanged in Exeter and another seventy-four (coincidentally) in Devonshire in 1598. In all the forty English counties, some eight hundred went to the gallows in each year of the seventeenth century, according to James Fitzjames Stephen, the Victorian historian of criminal law. Of the 436 people hanged in Essex between 1620 and 1680, 166 were burglars, 38 were highway robbers, and 110 were thieves. In the 1630s thieves were hanged for stealing goods valued at as little as eighteen pence. Edward Coke concluded in the *Third Institute*, “What a lamentable case it is to see so many Christian men and women strangled on that cursed tree of the gallows, insomuch as if in a large field a man might see together all the Christians that, but in one year throughout England[,] come to that untimely and ignominious death, if there were any spark of grace or charity in him, it would make his heart to bleed for pity and compassion.” If Coke felt pity, the “water poet” John Taylor believed in “the necessitie of hanging,” and wrote more than a thousand lines of verse in praise of it:

*Of Hangings there’s diversity of fashions
Almost as many as are sundry Nations:
For in the world all things so hanged are
Than any thing unhang’d is strange and rare.*

When Taylor visited Hamburg in 1616, he was fascinated by the execution of a poor carpenter who was smashed to pieces on the wheel by an executioner. Compared to “our Tyburn Tatterdemalion or our Wapping winde-pipe stretcher,” the poet exclaimed, the Hamburg executioner seemed like one of the pillars of Hercules!²⁵ Taylor made explicit the rela-



Many poor women imprisoned, and hanged for Witches. Ralph Gardiner, England's Grievance Discovered (1655). Rare Books Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

tionship between hanging and capitalism when he compared the hanged to “dead commodities.”

Women were a specific target of terror, as four thousand witches were burned and hundreds more hanged after 1604, when the punishment for “bewitchment” was made more severe. The terror had three peaks, in 1590–97, 1640–44, and 1660–63. Between 1558 and 1680, 5 percent of all English indictments, and fully 13 percent in the Home Circuit, contained charges of witchcraft. James I had himself interrogated women accused of witchcraft and had written a treatise of erudite misogyny, *Dæmonologie*, to assert against skeptics the reality of witchcraft and the need for capital punishment. Silvia Federici has shown that the European witch-hunt reached its most intense ferocity between 1550 and 1650, “simultaneously with the Enclosures, the beginning of the slave trade and the enactment of laws against the vagabonds, in countries where a reorganization of work along capitalist lines was under way.” The ducking stool, the cart’s tail, branding, the pillory, the cage, the thew, and the branks were all used for the torture of women.²⁶

In all its forms, terror was designed to shatter the human spirit. Whether in London at the birth of capitalism or in Haiti today, terror infects the collective imagination, generating an assortment of demons and monsters. If Francis Bacon conceptualized the science of terror from above, Luke Hutton's *Black Dog of Newgate*, written in 1596, expressed the folklore of terror from below. Hutton had been indicted for theft in 1589 (specifically, for stealing surgical instruments) and served a short bid in Newgate; though he composed a great ballad of banditry and remorse ("Be warned, young wantons, hemp passeth green holly"), his life would end at the gallows in York in 1598. He dedicated *The Black Dog* to Chief Justice Popham, who had probably pardoned him for an earlier conviction and for whom the poem was an ambiguous kind of payback.²⁷ It tells the story of Hutton's arrest, detention, and first days in Newgate. In the poem the black dog is a diabolical fury that first appears as a broom man quietly cleaning the streets, reminding us that terror often masks itself as cleanliness: the Privy Council "swept" the street of vagabonds. The sweeper is then transmogrified into a beast, like Cerberus (Hydra's sibling), a dog whose ears are snakes, whose belly is a furnace, whose heart is steel, whose thighs are wheels, and who seizes Hutton and tosses him into Newgate. The burden of the poem is to name the dog, a burden that is never lifted; the inability to name the oppressor thus becomes a first disability of terror.

The myth of the black dog originated in the Middle Ages, at a time of famine. A scholar jailed in Newgate—for conjuring which "by charms and devilish witchcraft had done much hurt"—was deemed by the other prisoners to be "passing good meat." His fellow inmates watched in horror as the scholar turned into a dog, "ready with his ravening jaws to tear out their bowels"; driven to a fearful, insane frenzy, they then killed the prison-keeper and escaped, "but yet whithersoever they came or went they imagined the black dog to follow." Some said that the black dog was a standing stone in the part of the dungeon called Limbo, "the place where the condemned Prisoners be put after their Judgement, upon which they set a burning candle in the night, against which, I have heard that a desperate condemned Prisoner dashed out his braines."²⁸ In certain respects the black dog of Newgate parallels the voodoo *backa*, or dog of repression, who also feeds on human beings. The *backa* is a form taken

by the living dead, or zombie: “It was a walking spirit in the likeness of a black dog gliding up and down the streets a little before the time of execution.” In Ireland Edmund Spenser observed zombies among the defeated Irish, who “looked like anatomies of death; they spoke like ghosts crying out of their graves.”²⁹

Newgate’s black dog led Hutton and many others to that acme of the regime of terror, the hanging:

*Yon men which thou beholds so pale and wan,
Who whiles look up, and whiles look down again,
Are all condemned, and they must die each man.
Judgment is given that cord shall stop their breath
For heinous facts—as murder, theft and treason.
Unworthy life! To die law thought it reason.*

*The sermon ended, the men condemned to die,
Taking their leaves of their acquainted friends,
With sorry looks, pacing their steps, they ply
Down to a hall where for them there attends
A man of office who, to daunt life’s hopes,
Doth cord their hands and scarf their necks with ropes.*

*Thus roped and corded, they descend the stairs:
Newgate’s black dog bestirs to play his part,
And does not cease for to augment their cares,
Willing the carman to set near his cart.
Which done, these men, with fear of death o’erhanging,
Bound to the cart are carried to be hanged.*

*This rueful sight, yet end to their doomed sorrows,
Makes me aghast and forces me bethink.
Woe unto woe! And so from woeful’st borrows
A swame of grief. And then I sounding sink.
But by Time’s aid I did revive again.
Might I have died it would be lesser pain!*

Overwhelming horror thus conducted to a desire for death, a second disability of terror. The black dog did the work of reason and law, using

The Blacke Dogge of Newgate :
both pithie and profitable
for all Readers.

Vide, Lege, Cave.

Time shall trie the truth.
by Luke Hutton



Imprinted at London by *G. Simson and W. White.*

The Black Dogge of Newgate. Luke Hutton, The Discovery of a London Monster called, the black dog of Newgate (1638).

death to elaborate a culture of fear that was indispensable to the creation of labor-power as a commodity.³⁰

If the prison, house of correction, and gallows expressed one aspect of capitalism in England, military adventure, colonization, and plantation expressed another around the Atlantic. When Sir Humphrey Gilbert established the first English colony in the New World, in Newfoundland in 1583, the chronicler of the settlement compared it to the military adventures of Joshua, who conquered “strange nations,” took their lands and divided them among God’s people, and kept the vanquished at hand “to hewe wood and to carie water.” Gilbert’s hewers and drawers included not only “savages” but his own countrymen—those men, women, and children who had “live[d] idly at home” and might now “be set on worke” in America, mining, manufacturing, farming, fishing, and especially “felling . . . trees, hewing and sawing . . . them, and such like worke, meete for those persons that are no men of Art or science.” Both Gilbert and Richard Hakluyt, the main propagandists for English exploration and settlement, saw an advantage in England’s late entry into the European scramble for New World colonies: the expropriations that coincided with colonization meant that England, unlike Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, or France, had a huge and desperate population that could be redeployed overseas.³¹

Authorities emptied the jails for the Cadiz expedition of 1596 and again for Mansfield’s army in 1624. According to the Beggar Act of 1598, the first-time offender for begging was to be stripped and whipped until his back was bloody; second-time offenders were banished from England, beginning the policy of transportation. Several thousand soldiers were recruited from London’s Bridewell between 1597 and 1601, and in 1601 and 1602 four galleys were built and then manned by felons. After 1617 transportation was extended as a statutorily permitted punishment for felons; at each assize thereafter, half a dozen men were reprieved for galley service and ten conscripted for the army. Sir William Monson expressed the relationship among expropriation, theft, terror, and slavery when he wrote:

The terror of galleys will make men avoid sloth and pilfering and apply themselves to labour and pains; it will keep servants and ap-

prentices in awe; . . . it will save much blood that is lamentably spilt by execution of thieves and offenders, and more of this kingdom than any other. . . . And that they may be known from others, they must be shaved both head and face, and marked in the cheek with a hot iron, for men to take notice of them to be the king's labourers, for so they should be termed and not slaves.³²

Banishment legislation was aimed at the Irish, the Gypsies, and Africans after the 1590s. The English conquest of Ireland in 1596 laid the material foundation and established the model for all conquests to follow. Land confiscation, deforestation, legal fiat, cultural repression, and chronic crises of subsistence caused the Irish diaspora, sending men and women in waves to England and America. In 1594 all native Irish were commanded to leave England. Ulstermen found in Dublin were shipped to Virginia as slaves, as were Wexford rebels in 1620. The Gypsies, a nomadic people who had brought Morris dancing to England, offered an example of life lived without either landownership or master. By an Act of Mary, any Gypsy who remained in England longer than one month could be hanged; an Act of Elizabeth expanded the capital laws to include those who "in a certain counterfeit speech or behavior" disguised themselves as Gypsies. In 1628 eight men were hanged for transgressing these laws, and their female companions transported to Virginia. In 1636 another band of Gypsies was rounded up; the men were hanged and the women drowned at Haddington. Africans, too, commanded the attention of Queen Elizabeth I, who in 1596 sent an open letter to the lord mayor of London and to the mayors and sheriffs of other towns: "Her Majesty understanding that several blackamoors have lately been brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already too many here . . . her Majesty's pleasure therefore is that those kind of people should be expelled from the land." In the same year, she engaged a German slave dealer to confiscate black people in England in return for English prisoners of war. In 1601 she proclaimed herself "highly discontented to understand the great numbers of negars and Blackamoors which . . . are crept into this realm."

Another part of the terror was forced labor overseas, a different kind of "going west." Through the transatlantic institution of indentured ser-

virtude, merchants and their “spirits” (i.e., abductors of children and adults) shipped some two hundred thousand workers (two thirds of all those who left England, Scotland, and Ireland) to American shores in the seventeenth century. Some had been convicted of crimes and sentenced to penal servitude, others were kidnapped or spirited, while yet others went by choice—often desperate choice—exchanging several years’ labor for the prospect of land and independence afterward. During the first half of the seventeenth century, labor-market entrepreneurs plucked up the poor and dispossessed in the port cities (London and Bristol especially, and to a lesser extent Liverpool, Dublin, and Cork) and sent them initially to Virginia, where the practices and customs of indentured servitude originated. In order to entice settlers to and secure labor for the infant colony, the investors of the Virginia Company of London fashioned a covenant between the company and the workers. Imperial and local rulers of other colonies, most notably Barbados, adapted the new institution to their own labor needs. Indentured servitude, Eric Williams has remarked, was the “historic base” upon which American slavery was founded.³³

Prisons of various kinds—including the ship’s hold, the tender boat, the hulk, the crimp house, the pressroom, the “cook-house” (London), the barracoon, the storehouse, the factory (Gold Coast), the trunk (Whydah), the cage (Barbados), or the city jail (almost anywhere)—were, as Scott Christianson has shown, indispensable to the various Atlantic slave trades, whether the prisoners were sailors, children, or felons, whether they were from Africa or from Europe.³⁴ Many indentured servants, Thomas Verney explained in 1642, came from the “bridewells, and the prisons.” Sir Josiah Child claimed that “the major part” of the women servants were “taken from Bridewell, Turnball Street, and such like places of Education.” It was a time when “jayls [were] emptied, youth seduced, infamous women drilled in.” According to a pamphlet of 1632, the plantations they were destined for “were no better than common ‘sinks,’ where the commonwealth dumped her most lawless inhabitants.” Virginia’s servants were said to “have no habitations, & can bring neither certificate of their conformity nor ability and are better out than within the kingdom,” while Maryland’s were “for the most part the scum of the people taken up promiscuously as vagrant and runaways from their English masters, debauched, idle, lazy, squanderers, jailbirds, and the

like.” John Donne promised in a sermon of 1622 that the Virginia Company “shall sweep your streets, and wash your dores, from idle persons, and the children of idle persons, and imploy them: and truely, if the whole Countrey were such a Bridewell, to force idle persons to work, it had a good use.” He wanted America to *function* as a prison, and for many it did.³⁵

Among those many were thousands of children, for the hewers and drawers were young. The Virginia Company made arrangements with the city of London for the transportation of several hundred poor children between the ages of eight and sixteen from the city’s Bridewell to Virginia. London’s Common Council approved the request, authorized constables to round up the children, and shipped off the first young laborers in the early spring of 1619. When a second request was made, the council was again accommodating, but the children themselves had other ideas, organizing a revolt in Bridewell and declaring “their unwillingness to go to Virginia.”³⁶ Their resistance apparently drew attention, and it was soon discovered that the city lacked the authority to transport the children against their will. The Privy Council, of which Francis Bacon was then a member, jumped into the fray, granting the proper authority and threatening to imprison any child who continued to resist. Of the several hundreds of children shipped to Virginia at this time, the names of 165 were recorded. By 1625 only twelve of those were still alive; the other 153, or 93 percent, had died. There is little reason to assume different outcomes for the fourteen to fifteen hundred children said to be on their way to Virginia in 1627, or for the four hundred Irish children stolen “out of theyre bedds” in 1653 and sent off to New England and Virginia.³⁷

The experience of seventeenth-century servitude has survived in two firsthand accounts, written by James Revel and an anonymous woman who called herself a “Trapann’d Maiden.” Convicted of theft and sentenced to hang, Revel entered the land of the living dead when his execution was transmuted to fourteen years’ labor in Virginia. When he arrived there after midcentury, he was purchased by a planter, given a “hop-sack frock in which I was to slave,” and set to work on a plantation alongside ten European and eighteen African slaves. Emphasizing the terror of his sentence, he said he “had much rather chuse to die than go” to America. For her part, the female servant was “cunningly trapann’d”

by a spirit and likewise sent to Virginia, where she suffered years of “Sorrow, Grief, and Woe.” She wore rags, slept on a bed of straw, drank only water, and ate poorly, being given no meat. She hewed wood (“The Axe and the Hoe/Have wrought my overthrow”) and drew water (“The water from the spring/Upon my head I bring”), all the while withstanding the abuse of “my Dame.” There was “No rest that I can have,/Whilst I am here a slave.”³⁸

In 1609 the author of *Nova Britannia*, who saw the project of colonization as “farre excelling” the heroic deeds of Hercules, explained the connections among the dispossessed, the new penal code, and the rise of a new mode of production: “Two things are especially required herein, people to make the plantation, and money. . . . For the first, wee need not doubt, our land abounding with swarmes of idle persons, which hauing no meanes of labour to relieue their misery, doe likewise swarme in lewd and naughtie practises, so that if we seeke not some waies for their forraigne employment, we must prouide shortly more prisons and corrections for their bad conditions.” By 1617 ruling-class policy was to ship the expropriated to far-flung labor markets, and various slave trades grew up to accommodate and extend the policy. Thus began what in a later day would be called the middle passage. Terror was instrumental; indeed, it was a mechanism of the labor market for the hewers and drawers. They had become deracinated. This was a third disability of terror.³⁹

THE SPECTER OF HERCULES

If some used the biblical concept of “hewers of wood and drawers of water” to give form to the formless, others saw the amorphous class as a many-headed hydra and conjured Hercules to terrorize and destroy the beast, especially during the revolutionary circumstances of the 1640s, when the incipient class began to find new means of self-organization. Paradoxically, the worst sites of oppression and terror offered opportunity for collaboration. For example, the prison, like the shipwreck, was something of a leveller, where the radical protestant, the sturdy rogue, the redundant craftsman, the Catholic recusant, the wild Irishman, the commonist, and the cutpurse met on roughly equal terms. Lovelace in the Westminster Gatehouse in 1642 penned the lines, “Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.” E. D. Pendry, a historian of Elizabeth-

than prisons, argues that the wave of prison riots that occurred during the second decade of the seventeenth century was due less to a deterioration of conditions than to the meeting of heretics and thieves, or political and common prisoners.⁴⁰ Martin Markall, the beadle of Bridewell, stressed the association of landed offenders, such as Irish rebels, Gypsies, and Roberdsmen, with those of the sea, such as mariners and pirates. English, Latin, and Dutch were the languages of communication in prison.⁴¹ The prison, like the ship and the factory, organized large numbers of people for purposes of exploitation, but it simultaneously was unable to prevent prisoners from organizing against *it*. Hewers and drawers helped to inaugurate the English Revolution. If we return now to Bacon's theory of monstrosity, we can see that his "holy war" was really a campaign of extirpation and genocide. To understand his murderous prescriptions of 1622, we must hold the seven heads of his hydra up to the "Satanic light" of history-from-below. The "wise man" of the scientific revolution gave original voice to Conrad's cry in the Congo in 1897: "Exterminate all the brutes."

The first target of the holy war was Caliban. Bacon called him the West Indian, an appellation that would have applied to any Native American, whether in the Caribbean or in North, South, or Central America, and especially to any group that dared, like the Caribs, to resist European encroachment. The native peoples of the Americas stood outside the law of God and nature, according to Bacon, because of their nakedness, their illiteracy and ignorance of horse riding ("thinking that horses did eat their bits and letters speak"), and their "eating of men." Imperialists had long used charges of cannibalism to justify expropriation (though of course they themselves were the cannibals: many upper-class people took medicinal "mummy," concocted from human cadavers and believed to be particularly potent when made from the hanged or from Libyans).⁴² Bacon explained that "wild and savage people are like beasts and birds, which are *fera nature*, the property of which passeth with the possession, and goeth to the occupant." He wrote this just after the Powhatan attack on the Virginia colony in 1622, in which 347 European settlers (nearly one quarter of the population) had been killed. In *An Advertisement Touching an Holy War*, Bacon gave the Virginia Company and other colonizers something more lasting than revenge: a theory of genocide.

A second category of person who might be exterminated was the Canaanite, he or she who had lost land to the Israelites—in short, a dispossessed commoner. This would have included the many thousands of dispossessed in England, the wild Irish beyond the pale, and Africans. Bacon wanted workers for the colonies—“work-folks of all sorts [who] will be the more continuously on work without loss of time”—and expected them to be made available by enclosure, by the wars of attrition in Ireland (where the plan was “to burn all the corn and kill all the cattle, and to bring famine,” as Spenser wanted), and by the slave trade.⁴³ Later William Petty would estimate that some 504,000 Irish perished between 1641 and 1652, “wasted by the sword, Plague, Famine, Hardship and Banishment.” Thomas Morton saw a *New English Canaan, or New Canaan*, in Massachusetts, to quote the title of his 1637 book, but he advocated acquiring the land through cooperative trade with the Native Americans. He praised their midwives, medicine men, and uses of the land. His followers, servants and fugitives of several languages and colors, hoisted the maypole and joined the round dance, earning the wrath of the Puritans, whose attitude toward the sensuality of popular culture was similar to Bacon’s. The architect of empire wanted Canaanites—borderless hewers and drawers—for the plantations; indeed, Africans were already at work in Virginia. But such people had no place in his ideal society, as he explained in *New Atlantis* (1627). Here Bacon imagined a future chaste nation, the “virgin of the world,” and contrasted this patriarchal dream with the “Spirit of Fornication” represented by a “little foul ugly Æthiop.”⁴⁴

A third “multitude” or “swarm” of people deserving extinction was pirates, “the common enemy of human society.” In selecting this enemy Bacon was acknowledging the corsairs of North Africa, who during the reign of James I and after attacked not only English shipping (taking almost five hundred ships between 1609 and 1616 alone) but the coasts of England and Ireland in slaving raids. The men they captured from ships, a figure put at twenty thousand during the 1620s, helped to quarry the rocks for the Barbary harbors. Some northern European seamen, English and Irish included, were not captured by but rather deserted to the Algerian pirates—or “turned Turk,” as they called it—bringing skill, technology (the “round ship,” for example), and experience to the polyglot com-

munity of Mediterranean pirates. These renegades included Henry Chandler (later Ramadan Raïs), a former Somerset farm laborer; Peter Easton, who commanded forty vessels in 1611; and John Ward, born “a poore fisher’s brat” in Faversham, Kent, who led a mutiny in 1603, stole a ship, renamed it *Little John*, and commenced pirating. The pirate port of Sallé, wrote Father Dan, the first European historian of the corsairs, was thus “made . . . into a republic,” a compound culture of heretics and religious radicals (Ranters and Sufis). Bacon wished to eradicate the “receptacle and mansion” of pirates in Algiers.⁴⁵

The fourth class Bacon marked for destruction consisted of land rovers, from highway robbers to petty thieves, the same people Hercules had slain in delivering his own land from oppression. Their existence is recorded in the coney-catching pamphlets of Thomas Dekker and Robert Greene. Dekker warned, “The abram cove is a lusty strong rogue . . . a face staring like a Saracen. . . . These walking up and down the country, are more terrible to women and children, than the name of Raw-head and Bloody-bones, Robin Goodfellow, or any other hobgoblin.” This is an early description of what has since been called the *lumpenproletariat*, *lazzaroni*, or underclass. In the glossaries of cant or thieves’ talk we are given a veritable dramatis personae of the land rovers, all those who rejected wage labor: the Abraham-men, palliards, clapperdudgeons, whip-jacks, dummerers, files, dunakers, cursitors, Roberds-men, swadlers, prigs, anglers, fraters, rufflers, bawdy-baskets, autem-morts, walking morts, doxies, and dells. At the head of them all was the uprightman, of whose kind Thomas Harman, the Kentish squire, wrote, “Of these ranging rabblement of rascals, some be serving-men, artificers, and labouring men traded up in husbandry. These, not minding to get their living with the sweat of their face, but casting off all pain, will wander, after their wicked manner, through most shires of this realm.”⁴⁶

The fifth group was assassins. Stuart kings lived in deathly fear of assassination. As attorney general, Francis Bacon interrogated Edmund Peacham, an old clergyman, because a sermon had been found in his house foretelling a rebellion by the people and the death of the king. No plot was discovered, though he was “examined before torture, in torture, between tortures, and after torture.”⁴⁷ John Webster wrote a play about a Roman general who did not pay his troops, an obvious reference to the

King's favorite, Buckingham, who was killed by an angry, unpaid sailor in 1625.⁴⁸ One day the general, Appius, is held in awe by the people; the next he is in prison and fettered:

*The world is chang'd now. All damnations
Seize on the Hydra-headed multitude,
That only gape for innovation!
O who would trust a people?*

The tyrannicides of the early Stuarts (Buckingham in 1625 and Charles Stuart in 1649) point to the insurrectionary danger caused by courtiers' and republicans' contending for state power—a sordid situation that Bacon himself knew well.⁴⁹

The sixth group suggested for extirpation was another collective enemy of Hercules, the Amazons, whose “whole government public and private, yea the militia itself, was in the hands of women.” Armed women frequently led popular disturbances in Bacon's era. The Irish pirate queen Grace O'Malley, the “nurse to all rebellions for forty years,” commanded heterogeneous followers of different clans and terrorized merchants far and wide until her death, in 1603. In 1607 “Captain Dorothy” led thirty-seven women wielding knives and throwing stones against the enclosures of Kirkby Malzeard in the North Riding of Yorkshire. Bacon knew of this struggle, for as Lord Chancellor ten years later he would observe that “Clubb Lawe” had prevailed. Armed women also spearheaded food riots, in 1595 seizing food corn at Wye, in 1605 marching on the Medway ports to prevent the export of grain, and in 1608 going so far as to board grain ships in Southampton to keep their cargo from being shipped away. During the Western Rising (1629–31), women again led food riots, thus time in Berkshire and Essex. In 1626 the Star Chamber proceeded against women who had threatened to destroy Gillingham (Wiltshire) forest enclosures. “A certain number of ignorant women” pulled down enclosures in 1628. In Braydon Forest, meanwhile, “Lady Skimington” was the alias of male rioters who disguised themselves as women.⁵⁰

The final and perhaps most dangerous group against which holy war might be waged was the Anabaptists, who in sixteenth-century Münster had held “all things to be lawful, not according to any certain laws or rules, but according to the secret and variable motions and instincts of

the spirit; this is indeed no nation, no people, no signory, that God doth know.”⁵¹ Here was the specter of communism! And Bacon wanted to “cut them off from the face of the earth.” As attorney general in 1615, Bacon had sentenced to death John Owen, whose writings he deemed Anabaptist, inclined to “the pulling down of magistrates” and the binding of “Kings in chains and their nobles in fetters of iron.” One of Bacon’s enemies was Robert Browne, the advocate of congregational churches governed from below, by mutual consent, rather than from above, by elder, king, or nation, and organized on principles of lawful debate, dispute, protest, and questioning. Browne had directly influenced Stephan Hopkins, who had led the resistance on Bermuda in 1609. Browne’s theory of self-organization had revolutionary implications, calling as it did for democratic covenants. Earlier, Thomas Nashe had written of the repression of the Anabaptists in the German peasant revolt: “What is there more as touching this tragedie that you would be resolved of? say quickly. . . . How John Leyden dyed, is that it? He dyed like a dogge, he was hanged & the halter paid for. For his companions, doe they trouble you? They troubled some men before, for they were all kild, & none escapt, no not so much as one to tell the tale of the rainbow.”⁵² In his work as a torturer (in 1619 he stretched a schoolmaster, Samuel Peacock, on the rack until he fainted), Bacon perhaps indulged a similar vanity, believing that “the tale of the rainbow” itself could be extirpated. He thus used Hercules and the hydra to suggest an expansion and intensification of state terror.

Bacon’s theory of monstrosity and terror was carried into the middle of the seventeenth century by Thomas Edwards, who studied the heresies of revolutionary England and published *Gangraena: Catalogue and Discovery of many of the Errours, Heresies, Blasphemies and pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this time*, in three volumes in 1646. Edwards cataloged 176 different heresies in volume 1, twenty-three in volume 2, and fifty-three in volume 3, for a total of 252. In his dedication he described his combat against the “three bodied Monster *Geryon*, and the three headed *Cerberus*,” and “that *Hydra* also, ready to rise up in their place.” At the beginning of volume 2 he noted that “whilest I was writing this Reply, had even finished it, striking off this three headed *Cerberus*, new heads of that monstrous *Hydra* of Sectarism sprung up.” The heads of Bacon’s hydra lunge out of Edwards’s work, in the shape of re-

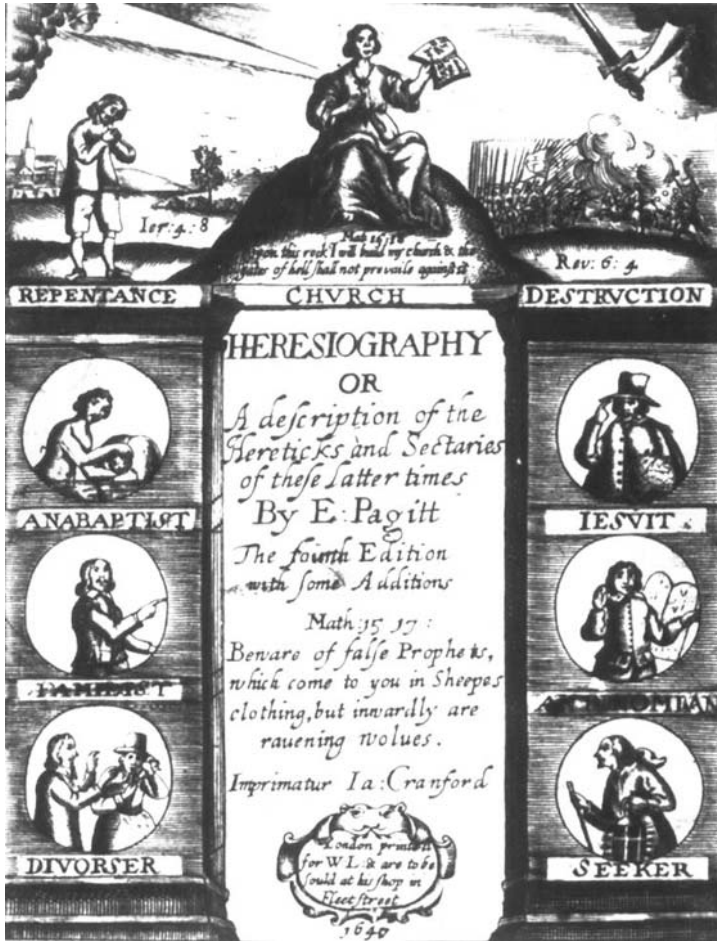
ligious radicals, indigenous Americans, Africans, commoners, sailors, and women.

The “Anabaptists” denounced by Bacon had multiplied during the subsequent generation, posing a revolutionary challenge during the 1640s and 1650s and setting men such as Edwards to work. Some of these heretics, Edwards explained, favored communism, claiming “that all men are Commoners by right” and that “all the earth is the Saints, and there ought to be a community of goods, and the Saints should share in the Lands and Estates of Gentlemen, and rich men.” An associated belief was the millenarian notion that Christ would visibly reign for a thousand years, putting down all oppressors, while Christians lived in worldly delight (though no one seemed to know when to begin the calculation of the millennium!). Many of the Anabaptists were also antinomians, believing that the “moral law [was] of no use at all to believers,” that the Old Testament was not binding on God’s chosen, and that faith and conscience took priority over good works and lawfully constituted authority. Indeed, some held that it was “unlawful for a Christian to be a magistrate,” while others felt that secular government itself was an oppression. Skepticism toward rules, ordinances, and rituals abounded, as did revelations and visions. Some religious radicals asserted that the “body of the common people is the Earthly Sovereign.”

Like Bacon, Edwards adopted an international perspective on his subject, remarking that many of the heresies had been promoted by persons “cast out of other Countries.” He condemned the numerous spiritual extremists of New England:

How many cast out of *New England* for their Antinomianisme, Anabaptisme, &c. have come over, and here printed Books for their Errors, and preach up and down freely; so that poor *England* must lick up such persons, who like vomit have been cast out of the mouth of other Churches, and is become the common shore and sinke to receive in the filth of Heresies, and Errors from all places; what was said of *Hannibals Army*, it was *colluvies omnium gentium*, the same may be said of us for all kinde of sects and sectaries, *Anglia colluvies omnium errorum & sectarum*.

The core of Hannibal’s army was African, and indeed the continent to which English slave traders were flocking in the 1640s was never far from



Title page of *Heresiography*, by Ephraim Pagitt, 1654.
By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Edwards's mind. Many of the heresies of seventeenth-century England seemed to Edwards to be variations of the North African heresies of early Christianity, such as those of the Donatists.⁵³ He wrote, "Error, if way be given to it, knowes no bounds, it is bottomlesse, no man could say how farre *England* would goe, but like *Africa* it would be bringing forth Monsters every day."

When Edwards singled out for particular scorn those monsters he described as "hairy, rough, wilde red men," Caliban reappeared in revolu-

tionary England, as did native America more generally. In much the same vein, the editor of an English newsbook reported in April 1649 the sayings of two “savage Indians” at the French court:

[One Indian] observed two things which he stood amazed at. First, that so many gallant men which seemed to have stout and generous Spirits, should all stand bare, and be subject to the will and pleasure of a Child [Louis XIV]. Secondly, that some in the City were clad in very rich and costly Apparel, and others so extream poor, that they were ready to famish for hunger; that he conceived them to be all equaliz’d in the ballance of Nature, and not one to be exalted above another.

The editor denounced the natives as “two Heathen Levellers.”⁵⁴ In the Americas, fear of Indian attacks and slave revolt went hand in hand with fear of “familisme [the doctrine of the sixteenth-century sect called the Family of Love], Anabaptisme, or Antinomianisme,” and the many-headed hydra summarized the threat in a powerful rhetorical figure.⁵⁵ Edwards wrote that John Calvin, who attacked popish heresy as well as the heresies of libertines and Anabaptists, was a “Christian Hercules, overcoming so many monsters.”

Bacon’s Amazons were also animated in Edwards’s account, in the heresy “that ’tis lawful for women to preach, and why should they not, having gifts as well as men?” Equally threatening were women who held it unlawful “to hear any man preach, either publicly or privately.” Dispossessed commoners and land rovers were likely the ones expressing the “jubilee” heresy that Christ came into the world to preach deliverance to the captives (in prison), or the critique of capital punishment, “God doth not hang first, and judge after.” Other heretics opposed Bacon’s whole strategy of warfare, holy or unholy, insisting “that ’tis unlawful to give thanks for victories for one man’s killing another”—that in short, “’tis unlawful to take up arms, or to kill any man.” More specifically, a “godly Citizen” had told Edwards of hearing a “great Sectary that belonged to the Army say, speaking of *Ireland*, he doubted, and so did many more in the Army, whether it were lawfull to go fight against the *Irish*; and that that Country was theirs, as well as *England* was ours.”

Bacon, in sum, approached the hydra from above, identifying subjects to be acted upon: the swarms, shoals, and routs, as he called the multi-

tude. A generation later, Edwards approached the monster from below, reactively, where it formed covenanted churches, politicized army regiments, rural communes, and urban mobs. The commoners, the vagabonds, the soldiers and sailors, the servants and the slaves, the masterless men and women, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water—all those many new slaves—came from far and wide and traveled further, preaching, interrupting, spouting, ranting, and organizing. As Edwards wondered, “How do persons cast out of other Countries for their Errours, not only live here, but gather Churches, preach publikely their Opinions! what swarms are there of all sorts of illiterate mechanick Preachers, yea of Women and Boy Preachers! What a number of meetings of Sectaries in this City, eleven at least in one Parish!” Across the ocean, on Bermuda, in 1640, an eight-year-old mulatto girl named Sarah Layfield was brought to court on charges of uttering “foolish and dangerous words touching the person of the King’s majesty.”⁵⁶

During the December Days of 1641, the London crowd, or mob, assembled tumultuously at Whitehall and Westminster, lending support to the radicals in the House of Commons whose views of liberty and restrictions on kingly power were listed in the Grand Remonstrance, which was printed in the same month. The king denounced them as a “multitude of Brownists, Anabaptists and other sectaries.” Two Common Councilmen for London were accused of contriving the tumult: they were said to have gone “from house to house and brought this Hydras Head to Westminster, and put in their mouths to cry out, ‘No Bishops, No Popish Lords.’” The hydra, composed of sailors, mechanics, watermen, apprentices, the lowly and the base—or, put another way, the revolutionary urban proletariat—was now taking independent action.⁵⁷ Francis Bacon’s sometime secretary Thomas Hobbes took notice of such new forms of organized power when, for example, mariners and ’prentices used the instruments of street warfare (a cudgel, a musket, an oar, a farmer’s trine, a bill hook) to break open the prisons on Mayday 1640—and noted, as well, the king’s inability to control them through the usual means, money. Hence Hobbes’s interpretation of the hydra:

B. You have read, that when Hercules fighting with the Hydra, had cut off any one of his many heads, there still arose two other heads in its place; and yet at last he cut them off all.



*The rising of Prentises and Sea-men, Mayday, 1640.
Thomason Tracts E116/49. By permission of the British Library.*

A. The story is told false. For Hercules at first did not cut off those heads, but bought them off; and afterwards, when he saw it did him no good, then he cut them off, and got the victory.

The king would not in the end “get the victory” because, as some said, he did not deploy sufficient violence and terror against the hydra. Strafford advised hanging some aldermen who refused to loan Charles money; instead, two young rioters were hanged, one after being tortured on the rack, the last time the device was used in England.⁵⁸ After Charles I was beheaded at Whitehall on January 30, 1649, Anthony Ascham wrote *Of the Confusions and Revolutions in Government* (1649), reminding all of the need for a new Hercules “to tame Monsters.” Thus was the role of Oliver Cromwell and the revolutionary bourgeoisie defined. Their task was to turn the many-headed hydra back into hewers of wood and drawers of water.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hydrarchy: Sailors, Pirates,
and the Maritime State



*When I was free once more,
I was like Adam when he was first created.
I had nothing at all, and therefore resolved
to join the privateers or buccaneers. . . .*

—A. O. Exquemelin, *The Buccaneers of America* (1678)

*All the ships crews are drawn out,
and the slaves that have deserted
to us from the plantations
are all brave determin'd fellows. . . .*

—John Gay, *Polly: An Opera* (1729)

RICHARD BRAITHWAITE, who supported Parliament in the English Revolution and lost a son to Algerian pirates, described the seventeenth-century mariner:

He was never acquainted with much civility; the sea hath taught him other rhetoric. . . . He cannot speak low, the sea talks so loud. His advice is seldom taken in naval affairs; though his hand is strong, his headpiece is stupid. . . . Stars cannot be more faithful in their society than these Hans-kins in their fraternity. They will have it valiantly when they are ranked together, and relate their adventures with wonderful terror. Necessary instruments are they, and agents of main importance in that Hydrarchy wherein they live; for the walls of the State could not subsist without them; but least useful they are to themselves, and most needful for others supportance.¹



Sailors telling tales belowdecks, c. 1810. Charles Napier Robinson, A Pictorial History of the Sea Services, or Graphic Studies of the Sailor's Life and Character Afloat and Ashore (1911). Brown Military Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University.

The upper-class Braithwaite condescended to his subject, calling him loud, stupid, even savage, but he knew him well. He knew that sailors were essential to English expansion, commerce, and the mercantilist state. He knew, moreover, that they had ways of their own—their own language, storytelling, and solidarity.

In this chapter we will employ Braithwaite's term *hydrarchy* to designate two related developments of the late seventeenth century: the organization of the maritime state from above, and the self-organization of sailors from below. As the strong hands of Braithwaite's sailors made the Atlantic a zone for the accumulation of capital, they began to join with others in faithfulness, or solidarity, producing a maritime radical tradition that also made it a zone of freedom. The ship thus became both an engine of capitalism in the wake of the bourgeois revolution in England *and* a setting of resistance, a place to which and in which the ideas and practices of revolutionaries defeated and repressed by Cromwell and

then by King Charles escaped, re-formed, circulated, and persisted. The period between the 1670s and the 1730s marked a new phase in the history of Atlantic capitalism, one in which the breakthrough discussed in the previous chapter was consolidated and institutionalized amid new and geographically expanded class struggles. During the pause when revolutionary ideas and action seemed to be missing from or muted in landed society, hydrarchy arose at sea to pose the era's most serious challenge to the development of capitalism.

IMPERIAL HYDRARCHY, OR THE MARITIME STATE

The seizure of land and labor in England, Ireland, Africa, and the Americas laid the military, commercial, and financial foundations for capitalism and imperialism, which could be organized and maintained only through Braithwaite's hydrarchy, the maritime state. A decisive moment in this development was the terrifying discovery by Cromwell and Parliament in 1649 that they had only fifty naval vessels with which to defend their republic against the monarchs of Europe, who did not look happily upon the severed head of Charles I. The new rulers of England urgently (and permanently) mobilized the shipyards at Chatham, Portsmouth, Woolwich, and Deptford to build the necessary ships. They passed "Laws and Ordinances Martial" authorizing impressment and warranting the death penalty for resistance, as a means to provide the necessary labor. By 1651 the New Model Navy had defeated the royalists at sea and begun to menace, even intimidate, the still-hostile other governments of Europe. England's new men took immediate steps to extend their commercial and military power by sea, enacting two linked pieces of legislation: one for the merchant shipping industry, the Navigation Act of 1651, and another for the Royal Navy, the Articles of War of 1652. These two acts, both reaffirmed by the Restoration government after 1660, would dramatically expand the powers of the maritime state.²

With these acts Cromwell and Parliament signaled their intention to challenge the Dutch for maritime supremacy and to assert their own sovereignty in the Atlantic. The writers of the first act intended to displace the Dutch as primary carriers of the transatlantic trades by reserving imports for English vessels. In 1660, a new Navigation Act detailed the At-

lantic commodities to be shipped by English merchants, sailors, and ships. An additional act, of 1673, established a staff to police colonial trade, enforce the acts, and make sure that the king was getting his proper share of the booty. Parliament emphasized foreign trade as the way to advance English shipping and economic power. In 1629 English merchants shipped only 115,000 tons of cargo; by 1686 that figure had tripled, to 340,000 tons, with a corresponding increase in the number of sailors who handled such immense amounts of cargo. The lucrative Atlantic trades in tobacco, sugar, slaves, and manufactures led English merchant shipping to expand at a rate of 2 to 3 percent a year from roughly 1660 to 1690.³

The success of the Navigation Acts depended on accompanying changes in the Royal Navy. The Articles of War of 1652 imposed the death penalty in twenty-five out of thirty-nine clauses and proved an effective means for governing English ships during the war against the Dutch. After the Press Act of 1659 (which renewed the martial law of 1649), the articles were reenacted in 1661 as the Naval Discipline Act, which established the power of courts martial and specified the death penalty for desertion. Meanwhile, Samuel Pepys set about reorganizing the English navy in other respects, professionalizing the officer corps and building more, ever bigger, and ever more powerful ships. During the second Dutch war, some three thousand sailors deserted the English navy to fight for the enemy, which moved English authorities to stage highly visible executions of deserters and to make “flogging round the fleet” a frequent form of discipline. The Articles of War were renewed yet again in 1674, during a third war against the Dutch. The transformation of the Royal Navy during these years can be summarized in terms that parallel almost perfectly the development of the merchant shipping industry: the navy had 50 ships and 9,500 sailors in 1633, and 173 ships and 42,000 sailors in 1688.⁴

If Cromwell inaugurated the maritime state and Charles II realized its promise, finally displacing the Dutch as the hegemonic Atlantic power, it was because of advisers such as Sir William Petty (1623–1687), the father of political economy or, as it was called in his day, political arithmetic. Petty, who wrote the *Political Anatomy of Ireland* for Charles II, had begun his working life as a cabin boy at sea. He was part of England’s

conquering army in Ireland, serving as physician general in 1652 and cartographer of confiscated lands in the Down survey of 1654 (he took fifty thousand acres for himself in County Kerry, where he organized hewers of wood, fishermen, quarrymen, lead miners, and iron workers.) Such experiences gave him a clear understanding of the primary importance of land, labor, and transatlantic connections. Labor, he believed, was the “father . . . of wealth, as lands are the mother.” Labor had to be mobile—and labor policy transatlantic—because lands were far-flung. He advocated shipping felons to plantations overseas: “Why should not insolvent thieves be rather punished with slavery than death? so as being slaves they may be forced to as much labour, and as cheap fare, as nature will endure, and thereby become as two men added to the commonwealth, and not as one taken away from it.”⁵ He noted the increasing importance of the slave trade to imperial planning: “The accession of Negroes to the American plantations (being all Men of great labour and little expence) is not inconsiderable.” He included reproduction in his calculus, projecting that the fertility of women in New England would compensate for losses in Ireland. Based on the assumption that “you value the people who have been destroyed in Ireland as Slaves and Negroes are usually rated, viz., at about £15 one with another; Men being sold for £25 and Children £5 each,” he estimated the financial losses of the war in Ireland (1641–51) at £10,355,000.⁶ Petty’s main point, however, was that ships and sailors were the real basis of English wealth and power. “Husbandmen, Seamen, Soldiers, Artizans, and merchants, are the very Pillars of any Common-Wealth,” he wrote, but the seaman was perhaps most important of all, as “every Seaman of industry and ingenuity, is not only a Navigator, but a Merchant, and also a Soldier.” He concluded, “The Labour of Seamen, and Freight of Ships, is always of the nature of an Exported Commodity, the overplus whereof above what is Imported, brings home money, etc.”⁷ Sailors thus produced surplus value above the costs of production, including their own subsistence; the political arithmetician called this process “superlucration.” Petty thus originated the labor theory of value by refusing to think of workers in moral terms; he preferred the quantifiable approach of number, weight, and measure. His method of thinking was essential to the genesis and the long-term planning of the maritime state.

Such planning emerged during the quarter century surrounding the three Anglo-Dutch wars (roughly 1651–75), when the shipping industry and the navy took on their modern forms, but it reached a new stage after the accession of William III in 1688 and the declaration of war against France the following year. Just as the theater of merchant shipping had in recent years shifted from the Mediterranean, the Baltic, and the North Sea to the Atlantic—to Africa, the Caribbean, and North America—so the theater of war followed, moving from the northern seas, where the Anglo-Dutch wars had been fought, to the Atlantic, where a broader and more forthright battle for overseas trade and territories would be waged. English rulers fought to protect their plantation economies, and not only against France and Spain. At the request of sugar planters and merchants who now wanted to trade and smuggle goods to New Spain, Sir Robert Holmes commissioned a squadron of ships in 1688 to dispatch the buccaneers who had once been based in Jamaica. The freebooters who had filled Jamaican coffers with Spanish gold were now an obstacle to a more orderly accumulation of capital, which would soon be planned from London and carried out on an Atlantic scale. “It is a sign of the growing importance of the distant colonies and oceanic trades in the estimation of all Europe,” wrote J. H. Parry, “that the age of the buccaneers should be followed by the age of the admirals.”⁸

The consolidation of the maritime state took place in the 1690s, by which time the Royal Navy had become England’s greatest employer of labor, its greatest consumer of material, and its greatest industrial enterprise. English rulers had discovered the navy as an instrument of national policy during the 1650s, in the defense of the republic, and had expanded its function as protector of shipping and overseas markets. A pamphleteer of 1689 echoed the Articles of War and the Naval Discipline Act of 1661 in writing that the navy was “the bulwark of our British dominions, the sole fence of our Country.”⁹ Here were Brathwaite’s “walls of the State,” an enclosure built around a new field of property whose value and appreciation were expressed in a congeries of changes in the 1690s: the concentration of maritime capital in joint stock companies, which grew from eleven in 1688 to more than a hundred by 1695; the formation of the Bank of England in 1694; the growth of the marine insurance industry; the beginnings of the deregulation of the Royal African Company (1698)

and the emergence of the free traders who would in the next century make England the world's greatest transporter of slaves; the increasing use of commercial newspapers; the booming importance of manufacture and the related export and reexport trades. The Act of Trade of 1696 brought all colonial affairs under the purview of the Board of Trade and generalized the admiralty court system throughout the empire. The Act of Trade consolidated the gains of the new Atlantic capitalism, but it also pointed to a threat that had not been eliminated by Holmes and the navy of 1688. One of the biggest and most worrying issues facing Parliament and the Board of Trade remained pirates: accordingly, Parliament passed an "Act for the More Effectual Suppression of Piracy" in 1698, hoping to convince colonial administrators and citizens of the necessity of the death penalty for a crime that had long been tolerated and sometimes even encouraged.¹⁰

THE SHIP

By the last half of the seventeenth century, capitalists had organized the exploitation of human labor in four basic ways. The first of these was the big commercial estate for the practice of capitalist agriculture, whose American equivalent was the plantation, in many senses the most important mercantilist achievement. Second was petty production such as the yeoman farmer or prosperous artisan enjoyed. Third was the putting-out system, which had, in Europe, begun to evolve into the system of manufactures. In Africa and the Americas, European merchants put out firearms, which were used by their clients to capture people (to sell as slaves), to kill animals (for their furs), and to destroy a wealth of common ecologies. The fourth means of organizing the exploitation of labor was the mode of production that united all of the others in the sphere of circulation—namely, the ship.

Each way organized human labor differently. The large-scale estate and plantation were among the first sites in modern history of mass cooperation. Petty production remained the context for resourcefulness and independent individualism. Manufacture and the putting-out system created the fragmented, detail laborer whose "idleness" would become the bane of the eighteenth-century political economist. The ship, whose

milieu of action made it both universal and *sui generis*, provided a setting in which large numbers of workers cooperated on complex and synchronized tasks, under slavish, hierarchical discipline in which human will was subordinated to mechanical equipment, all for a money wage. The work, cooperation, and discipline of the ship made it a prototype of the factory.¹¹ Indeed, the very term *factory* evolved etymologically from *factor*, “a trading representative,” and specifically one associated with West Africa, where factories were originally located. One trading syndicate off the Gold Coast in the 1730s would anchor a ship permanently to serve as a base for stocks, intelligence gathering, and cargoes; it was called a floating factory. By 1700 the ship had become the engine of commerce, the machine of empire. According to Edward Ward, who wrote in defense of the maritime state, it was “the Sovereign of the Aquatic Globe, giving despotic laws to all the meaner Fry, that live upon that Shining Empire.” For Barnaby Slush, a defender of the skilled sailor, it was, however, “too big and unmanageable a machine to be run by novices.” Sailors and the ship thus linked the modes of production and expanded the international capitalist economy.¹²

Despite the nationalism of the Navigation Acts and the Naval Discipline Act, and despite the bold declarations that English ships must be sailed by English seamen, it was nonetheless true that many of the ships were actually Dutch (having been seized in the wars) and that many of the seamen were not English. The expansion of the merchant shipping industry and the Royal Navy during the third quarter of the seventeenth century posed an enduring dilemma for the maritime state: how to mobilize, organize, maintain, and reproduce the sailing proletariat in a situation of labor scarcity and limited state resources. Rulers discovered time and again that they had too few sailors to operate their various maritime enterprises, and too little money with which to pay wages.

One result of this situation was a fitful but protracted war among rulers, planners, merchants, captains, naval officers, sailors, and other, urban workers over the value and purposes of maritime labor. Since conditions aboard ship were harsh and wages often two or three years in arrears, sailors mutinied, deserted, rioted, and altogether resisted naval service. Over and against these chronic struggles for freedom and money, the state used violence and terror to man its ships and to man them

cheaply, preying often on the poorest, most ethnically diverse populations. The press-gang, which swaggered to brutal prominence during the 1660s, swung bigger sticks in the 1690s as the demand for maritime labor continued to swell.¹³ For sailors, the press-gang represented slavery and death: three out of four pressed men died within two years, with only one in five of the dead expiring in battle. Those lucky enough to survive could not expect to be paid, as it was not uncommon, writes John Ehrman, the preeminent scholar of the navy of the 1690s, for a seaman to be owed a decade's wages. The figure of the starving, often lame sailor in the seaport town became a permanent feature of European civilization, even as the motley crew became a permanent feature of modern navies.¹⁴

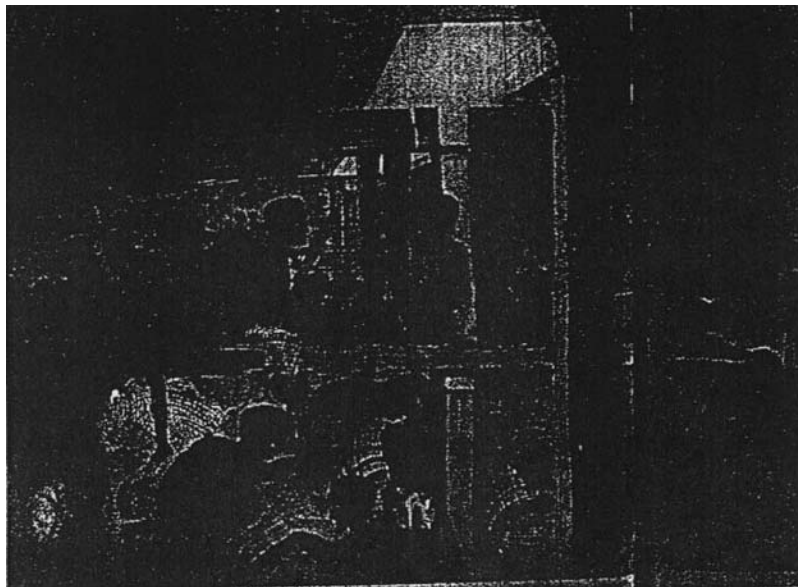
The dynamic of manning was different in merchant shipping, but the outcome was similar. As the conditions of seafaring life ebbed and flowed, as hard discipline, deadly disease, and chronic desertion thinned the ranks of the ship, the captain would take on sailors wherever he could find them. The ship became, if not the breeding ground of rebels, at least a meeting place where various traditions were jammed together in a forcing house of internationalism. Even though the Navigation Act of 1651 stipulated that three fourths of the crew importing English goods were to be English or Irish under penalty of loss of ship, tackle, and lading, English ships continued to be worked by African, Briton, quashee, Irish, and American (not to mention Dutch, Portuguese, and lascar) sailors. Ruskin was therefore correct in saying, "The nails that fasten together the planks of the boat's bow are the rivets of the fellowship of the world." Ned Coxere, who went to sea in 1648 and "served several masters in the wars between King and Parliament at sea," wrote, "Next I served the Spaniards against the French, then the Hollanders against the English; then I was taken by the English out of Dunkirker; and then I served the English against the Hollanders; and last I was taken by the Turks, where I was forced to serve then against English, French, Dutch, and Spaniards, and all Christendom." Alexander Exquemelin remarked on the mingling of cultures among the buccaneers in the late seventeenth century. William Petty also understood the international reality of the lower deck: "Whereas the Employment of other Men is confined to their own Country, that of Seamen is free to the whole world." During the 1690s, English sailors served under all colors, for, according to John Ehrman, "the inter-

change of seamen between the different maritime countries was too widespread and deep-rooted a custom” to eliminate.¹⁵

The ship was thus not only the means of communication between continents, but also the first place where working people from those different continents communicated. All the contradictions of social antagonism were concentrated in its timbers. Imperialism was the main one: the sun of European imperialism always cast an African shadow. Christopher Columbus had not only a black cabin boy but an African pilot, Pedro Niño. As soon as the *Mayflower* discharged the pilgrims, it sailed for the West Indies with a cargo of people from Africa.¹⁶ Forced by the magnitude of its own enterprise to bring huge and heterogeneous masses of men and women together aboard ship to face a deathly voyage to a cruel destination, European imperialism also created the conditions for the circulation of experience within the huge masses of labor that it had set in motion.

The circulation of experience depended in part on the fashioning of new languages. In 1689, the same year that the two factions of the English ruling class under the constitutional tutelage of John Locke learned to speak a common language, Richard Simson wrote of his experiences in the South Seas, “The means used by those who trade to Guinea, to keep the Negroes quiet, is to choose them from several parts of ye Country, of different Languages; so that they find they cannot act joyntly, when they are not in a Capacity of Consulting with one another, and this they cannot doe, in soe farr as they understand not one another.” In *The London Spy* (1697), Ned Ward described in sporting vocabulary the Wapping “salt water vagabonds” who were never at ease except at sea, and always wandering at home. To communicate, they had to develop a language of their own, which was, Ward asserted later, in *The Wooden World Dissected* (1708), “all Heathen Greek to a Cobbler.” A student of seventeenth-century ships’ logs has shown in sixty densely worded pages how very different was maritime phonetics from that of the landsman. Mariners spoke a “dialect and manner peculiar to themselves,” said a writer in the *Critical Review* (1757).¹⁷

What W. E. B. DuBois described as the “most magnificent drama of the last thousand years of human history”—the Atlantic slave trade—was not enacted with its strophes and prosody ready-made. A combination



Slaves below deck, by Lieutenant Francis Meynall, 1830.

© National Maritime Museum, London.

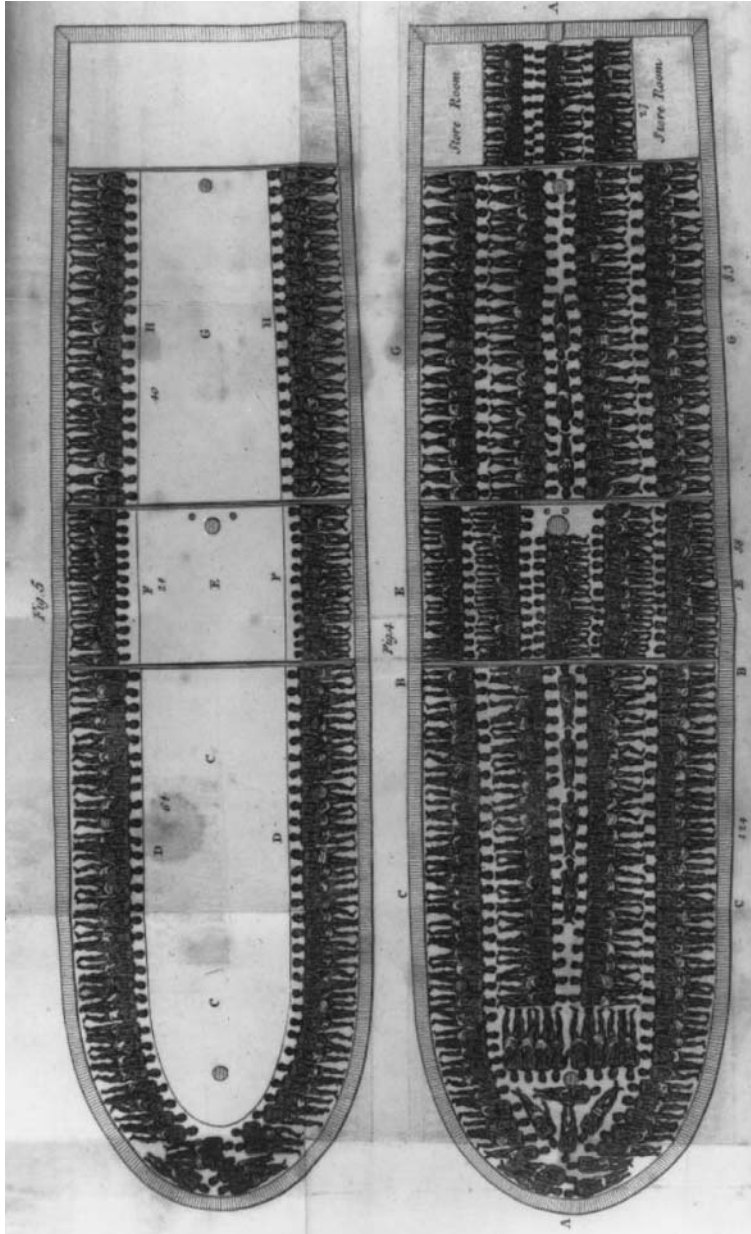
of, first, nautical English; second, the “sabir” of the Mediterranean; third, the hermeticlike cant talk of the “underworld”; and fourth, West African grammatical construction, produced the pidgin English that became in the tumultuous years of the slave trade the essential language of the Atlantic. According to one modern philologist, “No other form of speech in the history of the English language has been so deplored, debated, and defended.” The word *crew*, for example, originally meant any augmentation of a band of armed men, but by the end of the seventeenth century it had come to signify a supervised squad of workmen bent to a particular purpose, as the cooper’s, gunner’s, or sailmaker’s crew, or even the ship’s entire company—that is, all of the men of the vessel. B. Traven placed the emphasis on the collectivity, the crew, in contrast to William Dampier, Daniel Defoe, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for whom the sailor was an individualist. Traven asserted that “living together and working together each sailor picks up the words of his companions, until, after two months or so, all men aboard have acquired a working knowledge of about three hundred words common to all the crew and

understood by all.” He concluded, “A sailor is never lost where language is concerned”: no matter what coast he was thrown on, he found a way to ask, “When do we eat?”¹⁸

Linguists describe pidgin as a “go-between” language, the product of a “multiple-language situation,” characterized by radical simplification. It was a dialect whose expressive power arose less from its lexical range than from the musical qualities of stress and pitch. Some African contributions to maritime and thence standard English include *caboodle*, “kick the bucket,” and “Davy Jones’s locker.” Where people had to understand each other, pidgin English was the lingua franca of the sea and the frontier. By the mid-eighteenth century, pidgin-speaking communities existed in Philadelphia, New York, and Halifax, as well as in Kingston, Bridgetown, Calabar, and London, all of them sharing unifying syntactic structures.¹⁹ Pidgin became an instrument, like the drum or the fiddle, of communication among the oppressed: scorned and not easily understood by polite society, it nonetheless ran as a strong, resilient, creative, and inspirational current among seaport proletarians almost everywhere. Krio, itself a lingua franca of the West African coast, was spoken in many places, as were Cameroons pidgin, Jamaican creole, Gullah, and Sranan (Suriname). The multilinguality and Atlantic experience common to many Africans were demonstrated by a black man in the Comoros Islands of the Indian Ocean in 1694, who greeted pirate captain Henry Avery, the “maritime Robin Hood,” in English. The man, as it happened, had lived in Bethnal Green, London.²⁰

THE SAILORS’ HYDRARCHY

As thousands of sailors were organized for collective cooperative work in the merchant shipping industry, in the Royal Navy, and in wartime privateering, the motley crew began, through its work and new languages, to cooperate on its own behalf, which meant that within imperial hydrarchy grew a different hydrarchy, one that was both proletarian and oppositional. The process was slow, uneven, and hard to trace, not least because the alternative order of the common sailor was decapitated almost every time it reared its head, whether in mutiny, in strike, or in piracy. It took a long time for mariners to get, as one man put it, “the choice in them-



A language lesson. Thomas Clarkson, History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament (1808).

selves”—that is, the autonomous power to organize the ship and its miniature society as they wanted. The sailor’s hydrarchy went through several stages, appearing most clearly—and, to the authorities, most threateningly—when sailors organized themselves as pirates in the early eighteenth century.²¹

Piracy itself passed through a number of historical stages before common working sailors could make it a vessel of their own. Atlantic piracy had long served the needs of the maritime state and the merchant community in England. But there was a long-term tendency for the control of piracy to devolve from the top of society to the bottom, from the highest functionaries of the state (in the late sixteenth century), to big merchants (in the early to middle seventeenth century), to smaller, usually colonial merchants (in the late seventeenth century), and finally to the common men of the deep (in the early eighteenth century). When this devolution reached bottom, when seamen—as pirates—organized a social world apart from the dictates of mercantile and imperial authority and used it to attack merchants’ property (as they had begun to do in the 1690s), then those who controlled the maritime state resorted to massive violence, both military (the navy) and penal (the gallows), to eradicate piracy. A campaign of terror would be employed to destroy hydrarchy, which was thus forced belowdecks and into an existence that would prove both fugitive and durable.²²

The mass resistance of sailors began in the 1620s, when they mutinied and rioted over pay and conditions; it reached a new stage when they led the urban mobs of London that inaugurated the revolutionary crisis of 1640–41. In 1648 sailors aboard six vessels of the fleet mutinied in the name of the king; some would later mutiny against the king’s commanders, such as Prince Rupert. The immediate remaking of the fleet along republican lines brought religious radicals into the navy, though never as many as served in the army. The Cromwellian regime bought the support of many sailors by promising prize money and by creating, in 1652, a new occupational category, the “able seaman,” who made twenty-four shillings a month rather than the usual nineteen. Yet problems remained for the sailor, including the “turnover” (which sent a man from one vessel to another before he was paid), arrears and inflated tickets rather than money payment, and impressment, the response to which was a series of

riots and mutinies in 1653 and 1654. The “Humble Petition of the Seamen, belonging to the Ships of the Commonwealth of England,” dated November 4, 1654, complained of disease, poor provisions, bloodshed, wage arrears, and most of all the “thralldom and bondage” of impressment, which were “inconsistent with the Principles of Freedom and Liberty.”²³

The sailors’ struggles registered in the published radical discourse of the 1640s and 1650s, especially in pamphlets written by the Levellers. Richard Overton denounced impressment in 1646, decrying the need “to surprize a man on the sudden, force him from his Calling . . . from his dear Parents, Wife and Children . . . to fight for a Cause he understands not, and In Company of such as he hath no comfourt to be withall; and if he live, to returne to a lost trade, or beggary.” In the first *Agreement of the People*, the Levellers stated plainly, “The matter of impresting and constraining any of us to serve in the warres, is against our freedome.” In *A New Engagement, or; Manifesto* of August 1648 they expressly denied Parliament the power to conscript men for fighting on land or sea. There was “nothing more opposite to freedom,” they explained in a petition to Parliament of September 1648. They opposed impressment again in the second *Agreement of the People*, issued ten days before the king was beheaded. The following month Parliament approved impressment, and the Levellers again denounced it, in *New Chains Discovered* (1649). Finally, on May Day, 1649, even though the tide had turned against them, the Levellers wrote in the third *Agreement of the People*, “We doe not impower them to impresse or constraint any person to serve in war by Sea or Land every man’s Conscience being to be satisfied in the justness of that cause wherein he hazards his life, or may destroy an others.” This would be a fundamental idea in the lower deck’s oppositional tradition, even after the experience of defeat and the diaspora of thousands, sailors included, to the Americas.²⁴

The struggles waged by sailors of the revolutionary era for subsistence, wages, and rights and against impressment and violent discipline first took autonomous shape among the buccaneers in America. Even as buccaneering benefited the upper classes of England, France, and the Netherlands in their New World campaigns against their common enemy, Spain, common seamen were building a tradition of their own, at that

time called the Jamaica Discipline or the Law of the Privateers. The tradition, which the authorities considered to be the antithesis of discipline and law, boasted a distinctive conception of justice and a class hostility toward shipmasters, owners, and gentlemen adventurers. It also featured democratic controls on authority and provision for the injured.²⁵ In fashioning their hydrarchy, the buccaneers drew upon the peasant utopia called the Land of Cockayne, where work had been abolished, property redistributed, social distinctions leveled, health restored, and food made abundant. They also drew on international maritime custom, by which ancient and medieval seafarers had divided their money and goods into shares, consulted collectively and democratically on matters of moment, and elected consuls to adjudicate differences between captain and crew.²⁶

The early shapers of the tradition were those whom one English official in the Caribbean called the “outcasts of all nations”—the convicts, prostitutes, debtors, vagabonds, escaped slaves and indentured servants, religious radicals, and political prisoners, all of whom had migrated or been exiled to the new settlements “beyond the line.” Another royal administrator explained that the buccaneers were former servants and “all men of unfortunate and desperate condition.” Many French buccaneers, such as Alexander Exquemelin, had been indentured servants and before that textile workers and day laborers. Most of the buccaneers were English or French, but Dutch, Irish, Scottish, Scandinavian, Native American, and African men also joined up, often after they had in one way or another escaped the brutalities of the Caribbean’s nascent plantation system.

These workers drifted to uninhabited islands, where they formed maroon communities. Their autonomous settlements were multiracial in nature and organized around hunting and gathering—usually the hunting of wild cattle and pigs and the gathering of the king of Spain’s gold. These communities combined the experiences of peasant rebels, demobilized soldiers, dispossessed smallholders, unemployed workers, and others from several nations and cultures, including the Carib, Cuna, and Mosquito Indians.²⁷ One of the most potent memories and experiences underlying buccaneer culture, writes Christopher Hill, was the English Revolution: “A surprising number of English radicals emigrated to the

West Indies either just before or just after 1660,” including Ranters, Quakers, Familists, Anabaptists, radical soldiers, and others who “carried with them the ideas which had originated in revolutionary England.” A number of buccaneers, we know, hunted and gathered dressed in the “faded red coats of the New Model Army.” One of these was a “stout grey-headed” and “merry hearted old Man,” aged eighty-four, “who had served under Oliver in the time of the Irish Rebellion; after which he was at Jamaica, and had followed Privateering ever since.” In the New World, such veterans insisted upon the democratic election of their officers, just as they had done in the revolutionary army on the other side of the Atlantic. Another source of buccaneering culture, according to J. S. Bromley, was the wave of peasant revolts that shook France in the 1630s. Many French freebooters came, as *engagés*, “from areas affected by peasant risings against the royal *fisc* and the proliferation of crown agents.” Protesters “had shown a capacity for self-organization, the constitution of ‘communes,’ election of deputies and promulgation of *Ordonnances*,” all in the name of the “*Commun peuple*.”²⁸ Such experiences, once carried to the Americas, informed the life ways of the buccaneering “Brethren of the Coast.”

The early experiences were passed on to later generations of sailors and pirates by the hearty souls who survived the odds against longevity in seafaring work. When one privateering captain took on board four seasoned buccaneers in 1689, he designated them “to be a mess by themselves, but the advantage of their conversation and intelligence obliged him afterward to disperse them amongst the Shipp’s Company.” Some of the old-timers had served on Jamaican privateers during the War of Spanish Succession, then taken part in the new piracies after the Treaty of Utrecht. The Jamaica Discipline and the exploits that it made possible also lived on in folktales, songs, ballads, and popular memory, not to mention the widely published (and frequently translated) accounts of Alexander Exquemelin, Père Labat, and others who knew life among the buccaneers firsthand.²⁹

Therefore when sailors encountered the deadly conditions of life at sea in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, they had an alternative social order within living memory. Some sailors mutinied and seized control of their own vessels, stitching the skull and crossbones

onto a black flag and declaring war against the world. The overwhelming majority of those who became pirates, however, volunteered to join the outlaw ships when their vessels were captured. Their reasons are not difficult to fathom. Dr. Samuel Johnson put the matter succinctly when he said, “No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned. . . . A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.” Many sailors, of course, had made the comparison themselves, waking up punch-drunk or just plain drunk in the jails of the port cities or in the holds of outward-bound merchant ships. Johnson’s point, though, was that the lot of the merchant seamen was a difficult one. Sailors suffered cramped, claustrophobic quarters and “food” that was often as rotten as it was meager. They routinely experienced devastating disease, disabling accidents, shipwreck, and premature death. They faced discipline from their officers that was brutal and often murderous. And they got but small return for their death-defying labors, for peacetime wages were low and fraud in payment was frequent. Seamen could expect little relief from the law, for its main purpose was “to assure a ready supply of cheap, docile labor.”³⁰

Merchant seamen also had to contend with the impressment unleashed by the expansion of the Royal Navy. In the navy, shipboard conditions were as harsh as, and in certain respects even worse than, the mercantile equivalents. Wages, especially during wartime, were lower than in the merchant service, while the quantity and quality of food aboard ship were consistently undermined by corrupt pursers and officers. Organizing cooperation and maintaining order among the often huge numbers of maritime workers on naval vessels required violent discipline, replete with carefully staged, spectacular executions, more severe than those on merchant ships. Another consequence of the number of sailors crowded onto ill-ventilated naval ships was the omnipresence of disease, often of epidemic proportions. In an irony that the pirates themselves would have savored, one official claimed that the navy could not effectively suppress piracy because its ships were “so much disabled by sickness, death, and desertion of their seamen.” The knowledgeable anonymous author of a pamphlet entitled *Piracy Destroy’d* (1700) made it clear that impressment, harsh discipline, poor provisions and health,



The Sailor's Return, or Valour Rewarded, 1783.
 By permission of the British Library.

long confinement aboard ship, and wage arrears had caused thousands of sailors to turn pirate. It was “the too great severity Commanders have used as to their backs and their bellies” that “had occasioned the Seamen to mutiny and run away with the Ships.” The naval ship in this era, concludes one scholar, was “a machine from which there was no escape, bar desertion, incapacitation, or death.”³¹

Life was a little better on a privateering vessel: the food was more palatable, the pay was higher, the work shifts were shorter, and the power of the crew in decision-making was greater. But privateers were not always happy ships. Some captains ran their vessels like naval craft, imposing rigid discipline and other unpopular measures that generated grievances, protests, or even outright mutinies. Woodes Rogers, the gentleman captain of a hugely successful privateering voyage between 1708 and 1711 and later the scourge of the pirates of the West Indies as royal governor of the Bahama Islands, clapped into irons a man named Peter Clark, who had

wished himself “aboard a Pirate” and said that “he should be glad that an Enemy, who could over-power us, was a-long-side of us.”³² What would men such as Peter Clark do once they got off a merchant, naval, or privateering vessel and “aboard a Pirate”? How would they secure their own subsistence? How would they organize their own labor, their access to money, to power? Had they internalized the dominant ideas of the age about how to run a ship, or could these poor, uneducated men imagine better?

THE MARITIME WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

The early-eighteenth-century pirate ship was a “world turned upside down,” made so by the articles of agreement that established the rules and customs of the pirates’ social order, hydrarchy from below. Pirates distributed justice, elected officers, divided loot equally, and established a different discipline. They limited the authority of the captain, resisted many of the practices of the capitalist merchant shipping industry, and maintained a multicultural, multiracial, multinational social order. They sought to prove that ships did not have to be run in the brutal and oppressive ways of the merchant service and the Royal Navy. The dramatist John Gay demonstrated his understanding of all this when, in *Polly*, he had Macheath disguise himself as the black pirate named Morano and sing a song to the tune of “The World’s Turned Upside Down.”³³

The pirate ship was democratic in an undemocratic age. The pirates allowed their captain unquestioned authority in chase and battle, but otherwise insisted that he be “governed by a Majority.” As one observer noted, “They permit him to be Captain, on Condition, that they may be Captain over him.” They gave him none of the extra food, the private mess, or the special accommodations routinely claimed by merchant and naval captains. Moreover, as the majority gave, so did it take away, deposing captains for cowardice, for cruelty, for refusing “to take and plunder English Vessels,” or even for being “too Gentleman-like.” Captains who dared to exceed their authority were sometimes executed. Most pirates, “having suffered formerly from the ill-treatment of their officers, provided carefully against any such evil” once they were free to organize the ship after their own hearts. Further limitations on the captain’s power

were embodied in the person of the quartermaster, who was elected to represent and protect the interests of the crew, and in the institution of the council, the gathering that involved every man on the ship and always constituted its highest authority.³⁴

The pirate ship was egalitarian in a hierarchical age, as pirates divided their plunder equally, levelling the elaborate structure of pay ranks common to all other maritime employments. Captain and quartermaster received one and one half to two shares of plunder; minor officers and craftsmen were given one and one quarter or one and one half; all others got one share each. Such egalitarianism flowed from material facts. To merchant captains it was galling that “there is so little Government and Subordination among [pirates], that they are, on Occasion, all Captains, all Leaders.” By expropriating a merchant ship (after a mutiny or a capture), pirates seized the means of maritime production and declared it to be the common property of those who did its work. Rather than working for wages using the tools and larger machine (the ship) owned by a merchant capitalist, pirates abolished the wage and commanded the ship as their own property, sharing equally in the risks of common adventure.³⁵

Pirates were class-conscious and justice-seeking, taking revenge against merchant captains who tyrannized the common seaman and against royal officials who upheld their prerogative to do so. Indeed, the “Distribution of Justice” was a specific practice among pirates. After capturing a prize vessel, pirates would “distribute justice” by inquiring about how the ship’s commander treated his crew. They then “whipp’d and pickled” those “against whom Complaint was made.” Bartholomew Roberts’s crew considered the matter so important that they formally designated one of their men—George Willson, who was no doubt a fierce and lusty man—the “Dispencer of Justice.” Pirates roughed up and occasionally executed captured captains; a few bragged of their avenging justice upon the gallows. Pirate captain Howell Davis claimed that “their reasons for going a pirating were to revenge themselves on base Merchants and cruel commanders of Ships.” Still, pirates did not punish captains indiscriminately. They often rewarded the “honest Fellow that never abused any Sailors” and even offered to let one decent captain “return with a large sum of Money to London, and bid the Merchants defiance.” Pirates thus stood against the brutal injustices of the merchant

shipping industry, with one crew's even claiming to be "Robbin Hoods Men."³⁶

Pirates insisted upon their right to subsistence, the food and drink so often denied aboard the merchant or naval ship—the very shortage that led many sailors to go "upon the account" in the first place. One mutinous sailor aboard the *George Galley* in 1724 responded to his captain's orders to furl the mizzen-top by saying, "in a surly Tone, and with a kind of Disdain, So as we Eat so shall we work." Other mutineers simply maintained that "it was not their business to starve," and that if a captain was making it so, hanging could be little worse. Many observers of pirate life noted the carnivalesque quality of its occasions—the eating, drinking, fiddling, dancing, and merriment—and some considered such "infinite Disorders" inimical to good discipline at sea.³⁷ Men who had suffered short or rotten provisions in other maritime employments now ate and drank "in a wanton and riotous Way," which was indeed their custom. They conducted so much business "over a Large Bowl of Punch" that sobriety sometimes brought "a Man under a Suspicion of being in a Plot against the Commonwealth"—that is, the community of the ship. The very first item in Bartholomew Roberts's articles guaranteed every man "a Vote in Affairs of Moment" and equal title to fresh provisions and strong liquor. For some who joined, drink "had been a greater motive . . . than Gold," and most would have agreed with the motto "No Adventures to be made without Belly-Timber." The pirates of the Atlantic thus struggled to assure their health and security, their own self-preservation. The image of the freebooter as a man with a patched eye, a peg leg, and a hook for a hand suggests an essential truth: sailing was a dangerous line of work. Pirates therefore put a portion of all booty into a common fund reserved for those who sustained injuries of lasting effect, whether the loss of eyesight or of any appendage. They tried to provide for the needy.³⁸

The pirate ship was motley—multinational, multicultural, and multi-racial. Governor Nicholas Lawes of Jamaica echoed the thoughts of royal officials everywhere when he called pirates a "banditti of all nations." Another Caribbean official agreed: they were "compounded of all nations." Black Sam Bellamy's crew of 1717 was "a mixt multitude of all Country's," including British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Swedish, Native

American, and African American, along with two dozen Africans liberated from a slave ship. The main mutineers aboard the *George Galley* in 1724 were an Englishman, a Welshman, an Irishman, two Scots, two Swedes, and a Dane, all of whom became pirates. Benjamin Evans's crew consisted of men of English, French, Irish, Spanish, and African descent. Pirate James Barrow illustrated the reality of this internationalism as he sat after supper "prophanely singing . . . Spanish and French Songs out of a Dutch prayer book." The government often told pirates that "they [had] no country," and the pirates themselves agreed: when they hailed other vessels at sea, they emphasized their own rejection of nationality by announcing that they came "From the Seas." A colonial official reported to the Council of Trade and Plantations in 1697 that pirates "acknowledged no countrymen, that they had sold their country and were sure to be hanged if taken, and that they would take no quarter, but do all the mischief they could." But as a mutineer muttered in 1699, "it signified nothing what part of the World a man liv'd in, so he Liv'd well."³⁹

Hundreds of people of African descent found places within the social order of the pirate ship. Even though a substantial minority of pirates had worked in the slave trade and had therefore been part of the machinery of enslavement and transportation, and even though pirate ships occasionally captured (and sold) cargo that included slaves, Africans and African Americans both free and enslaved were numerous and active on board pirate vessels. A few of these maritime men of color ended up "dancing to the four winds," like the mulatto who sailed with Black Bart Roberts and was hanged for it in Virginia in 1720. Another "resolute Fellow, a Negroe" named Caesar, stood ready to blow up Blackbeard's ship rather than submit to the Royal Navy in 1718; he, too, was hanged. Black crewmen also made up part of the pirate vanguard, the most trusted and fearsome men who were designated to board prospective prizes. The boarding party of the *Morning Star*, for example, had "a Negro Cook doubly arm'd," while more than half of Edward Condent's boarding party on the *Dragon* was black.⁴⁰ A "free negro" cook divided provisions equally so that the crew aboard Francis Spriggs's ship might live "very merrily" in 1724. "Negroes and Molattoes" were present on almost every pirate ship, and only rarely did the many merchants and captains who commented on their presence call them slaves. Black pirates sailed with Captains Bel-

lamy, Taylor, Williams, Harris, Winter, Shipton, Lyne, Skyrn, Roberts, Spriggs, Bonnet, Bellamy, Phillips, Baptist, Cooper, and others. In 1718, sixty out of Blackbeard's crew of one hundred were black, while Captain William Lewis boasted "40 able Negroe Sailors" among his crew of eighty. In 1719, Oliver La Bouche's ship was "half *French*, half Negroes."⁴¹ Black pirates were so common as to move one newspaper to report that an all-mulatto band of sea robbers was marauding the Caribbean, eating the hearts of captured white men.⁴² In London, meanwhile, the most successful theatrical event of the period was prevented from depicting the reality of black pirates, as the Lord Chamberlain refused to license *Polly*, John Gay's sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*, which had ended with Macheath about to be hanged for highway robbery. In *Polly* he was transported to the West Indies, where he escaped the plantation, turned pirate, and, disguising himself as Morano, "a negro villain," became the principal leader of a gang of freebooters. Polly Peachum dressed herself as a man and sought her hero and his fellow pirates by asking, "Perhaps I may hear of him among the slaves of the next plantation."⁴³

Some black pirates were freemen, like the experienced "free Negro" seaman from Deptford who in 1721 led "a Mutiney that we had too many Officers, and that the work was too hard, and what not." Others were escaped slaves. In 1716 the slaves of Antigua had become "very impudent and insulting," causing their masters to fear an insurrection. Historian Hugh Rankin writes that a substantial number of the unruly "went off to join those pirates who did not seem too concerned about color differences."⁴⁴ Just before the events in Antigua, Virginia's rulers had worried about the connection between the "Ravage of Pyrates" and "an Insurrection of the Negroes." The sailors of color captured with the rest of Black Bart's crew in 1722 grew mutinous over the poor conditions and "thin Commons" they suffered at the hands of the Royal Navy, especially since many of them had lived long in the "pyratival Way." That way meant, to them as to others, more food and greater freedom.⁴⁵

Such material and cultural contacts were not uncommon. A gang of pirates settled in West Africa in the early 1720s, joining and intermixing with the Kru, themselves known for their skill in things maritime (and, when enslaved, for their leadership of revolts in the New World). And of course pirates had for many years mixed with the native population of Madagascar, helping to produce a "dark Mulatto Race there." Cultural

exchanges among European and African sailors and pirates were extensive, resulting, for example, in the well-known similarities of form between African songs and sea shanties. In 1743 some seamen were court-martialed for singing a “negro song” in defiance of discipline. Mutineers also engaged in the same rites performed by slaves before a revolt. In 1731 a band of mutineers drank rum and gunpowder, while on another occasion a sailor signaled his rebellious intentions by “Drinking Water out of a Musket barrel.” Piracy clearly did not operate according to the black codes enacted and enforced in Atlantic slave societies. Some slaves and free blacks found aboard the pirate ship freedom, something that, outside of the maroon communities, was in short supply in the pirates’ main theater of operations, the Caribbean and the American South. Indeed, pirate ships themselves might be considered multiracial maroon communities, in which rebels used the high seas as others used the mountains and the jungles.⁴⁶

That piracy was not only for men was proved by Anne Bonny and Mary Read, who showed, sword and pistol in hand, that the many freedoms of the pirates’ life might be enjoyed by women. Women were few aboard ships of any kind in the eighteenth century, but they were numerous enough to inspire ballads about cross-dressing female warriors that became popular among the workers of the Atlantic. Bonny and Read, whose exploits were announced on the cover page of *A General History of the Pyrates* and no doubt in many another yarn of their own day and after, cursed and swore like sailors, carried their weapons like those well trained in the ways of war, and boarded prize vessels as only the most daring and respected members of pirate crews were permitted to do. Operating beyond the reach of the traditional powers of family, state, and capital, and sharing in the rough solidarity of life among maritime outlaws, they added another dimension altogether to the subversive appeal of piracy by seizing the liberties usually reserved for men, at a time when the sphere of social action for women was narrowing.⁴⁷

THE WAR AGAINST HYDRARCHY

The freedoms of hydrarchy were self-consciously established and defended by pirates, not least because they knew that they would aid in recruitment and therefore in the reproduction of their oppositional cul-

ture. What they perhaps did not fully understand was that these same freedoms, once recognized by the ruling class, would fuel a campaign of terror to eliminate the alternative way of life, whether at sea or, more dangerously, ashore. Some among the powerful worried that pirates might “set up a sort of Commonwealth” in areas where no power would be able “to dispute it with them.” Colonial and metropolitan merchants and officials feared incipient separatism in Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Bermuda, North Carolina, the Bay of Campeche, and Honduras.⁴⁸ Colonel Benjamin Bennet wrote of pirates to the Council of Trade and Plantations in 1718: “I fear they will soon multiply for so many are willing to joyn with them when taken.” And multiply they did: after the War of Spanish Succession, as working conditions in the merchant shipping industry rapidly deteriorated, seamen turned to the black flag by the thousands. Edward England’s crew took nine vessels off the coast of Africa in the spring of 1719, and found fifty-five out of the 143 tars ready to sign their articles. John Jessup swore that a jovial life among the pirates was better than working at the big slave-trading fort of Cape Coast Castle. Such desertion was common between 1716 and 1722, when, as one pirate told a merchant captain, “people were generally glad of an opportunity of entring with [the pirates].”⁴⁹ The prospect of plunder and ready money, the food and the drink, the camaraderie, the equality and justice, and the promise of care for the injured—all of these must have been appealing. The attractions were perhaps best summarized by Bartholomew Roberts, who remarked that in the merchant service “there is thin Commons, low Wages, and hard Labour; in this, Plenty and Satiety, Pleasure and ease, Liberty and Power; and who would not ballance Creditor on this Side, when all the Hazard that is run for it, at worst, is only a sower Look or two at choaking. No, *a merry Life and a short one*, shall be my motto.” When John Dryden rewrote *The Tempest* in 1667, he had one of his sailors announce, “A short life and a merry, I say.” Two generations later, the aphorism had taken on a subversive tone that now called forth the executioner.⁵⁰

Hydrarchy was attacked because of the danger it posed to the increasingly valuable slave trade with Africa. A series of sailors’ mutinies shook the slave trade between 1716 and 1726, a logical outcome of the chronic complaints about food, discipline, and the general conditions of work-

ing life aboard the slave ships that left England for West Africa during those years. Sailors alleged in court that Captain Theodore Boucher of the slave ship *Wanstead* “did not allow victualls & liquor enough to support them & used them very barbarously and inhumanly in their diett.” Other sailors accused their captains of tyrannical discipline. Those who dared to object to shipboard conditions might find themselves “as Slaves linked and coupled by chains together & . . . fedd with Yams & Water the Usual dyett for Slaves.”⁵¹

Some mutinous sailors, however, averted a fate of chains by seizing their vessels, raising the black flag, and establishing hydrarchy. After George Lowther and his comrades mutinied aboard the slave ship *Gambia Castle* in 1720, they renamed the vessel the *Delivery* and sailed away in triumph, not unlike the mutineers in Prince Rupert’s convoy near the Gambia in 1652.⁵² Lowther and his men may have been emboldened by the knowledge that the coast of West Africa had already become a favorite haunt of pirates, especially since the British government in 1718 had recaptured the Bahama Islands and reestablished royal authority in the place that had for years been the freebooters’ main base of operations in the Caribbean. Hundreds of pirates had headed for the coast of Africa, attacking poorly defended ships and claiming their cargo. The greatest and most successful assaults on merchants’ property had been carried out by a pirate convoy under the leadership of Bartholomew Roberts, which ranged up and down the African coast “sinking, burning, and destroying such Goods and Vessels as then happen’d in [its] Way.”⁵³ Roberts’s interest lay in capturing not ships full of slaves but rather ships *on their way* to trade for slaves—“good Sailing Shippes well furnished with Ammunition, Provisions, & Stores of all Kinds, fitt for long Voyages.” He and his fellows also plundered the slave-trading forts, as a group of merchants explained: pirates “sometimes land at the chief Factories and carry off what they think fit.” Many a slave ship in the early eighteenth century was captured and converted to pirate duties, including the recently recovered *Whydah*, captained by Black Sam Bellamy.⁵⁴

As pirates with Bartholomew Roberts and other captains sailed from Senegambia to the Gold Coast and back again, disturbing the region most vital to British merchants in the 1720s, they “struck a Pannick into the Traders,” in the words of naval surgeon John Atkins, who spent sev-

eral months on the coast. One writer estimated in 1720 that pirates had already done a hundred thousand pounds' worth of damage on the coast of Africa. An anonymous writer to the Board of Trade asserted in 1724 that pirates had taken "near 100 sail of Ships in the space of two years" in the African slave trade.⁵⁵ Other estimates ran even higher. Merchants in Bristol, Liverpool, and London began to protest their losses, screaming to Parliament about the disorder plaguing the lucrative slave trade and demanding naval protection for their property. Their cries fell on sympathetic ears. When a group of merchants petitioned Parliament for relief in early 1722, the House of Commons ordered the immediate drafting of a bill for the suppression of piracy, which was, with Robert Walpole's assistance, quickly passed. Soon a naval squadron under the leadership of Captain Challoner Ogle was fitted out to sail to the African coast, where it arrived later in 1722, engaged the ships of Bartholomew Roberts, and defeated them. More than a hundred pirates were killed in battle, while others escaped into the jungle; scores were captured and ordered to stand trial. They were taken to Cape Coast Castle, the centerpiece of the British slave trade, where slaves awaiting ships were chained, confined, and "marked with a burning iron upon the right breast, D. Y. Duke of York." Within Cape Coast Castle's brick walls, fourteen feet thick and guarded by seventy-four mounted cannons, a gang of pirates were executed, and their chained corpses distributed and hanged along the coast in order to maximize the terror: nine at Cape Coast, four on the Windward coast, two each at Acera, Calabar, and Whydah, and one at Winnebah. Thirty-one others were hanged at sea, aboard the *Weymouth*. Another forty were sentenced to slavery, forced to work for the Royal African Company on ships or in gold mines; all of them apparently died within a matter of months.⁵⁶ After his triumphant return to London, Challoner Ogle became, in May 1723, the first naval captain to be knighted for his actions against pirates. He was honored by King George I, whom Roberts and his fellow pirates had ridiculed as the "turnip man."⁵⁷

The defeat of Roberts and the subsequent destruction of piracy off the coast of Africa represented another turning point in the history of capitalism, largely because piracy and the slave trade had long been linked, in the experiences of war, commerce, and imperial expansion. The conflict between pirates and slave traders on the coast of West Africa dated back



Pirate Bartholomew Roberts off the coast of West Africa.
Captain Charles Johnson, A General History of the Pyrates (1724).

to the end of the War of Spanish Succession in 1713, when thousands of sailors had been demobilized from the Royal Navy, causing wages to plummet, food to deteriorate, and the lash to fly among workers in the merchant shipping industry, which in turn moved sailors to cast their lot with the Jolly Roger. The end of the war brought a prize for British merchants: the *Assiento*, which gave these traders the legal right to ship 4,800 slaves a year (and the illegal right to ship many more) to Spanish America through the South Sea Company. This incentive, coupled with the final deregulation of the African slave trade in 1712, when the chartered Royal African Company had lost its battle against the free traders who had already begun to supply most of the slaves to American plantations, increased dramatically the importance of the slave trade in the eyes of British merchants.⁵⁸

Pirates now had to be exterminated in order for the new trade to flourish, a point that was made by the slave-trading merchant captain William Snelgrave, who published *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea*

and the Slave Trade, dedicated to “the Merchants of London, trading to the Coast of Guinea.” He divided the book into three sections, providing for his readers a “History of the late Conquest of the Kingdom of *Whidaw* by the King of *Dahomè*”; an account of the business practices and statistics of the slave trade; and “A Relation of the Author’s being taken by Pirates” and the dangers posed thereby. But by the time Snelgrave published his book, in 1734, the pirate was dead, defeated by the terror of hanging and enhanced naval patrols, though occasionally the corpse would twitch with a mutiny here or an act of piracy there. In the immediate aftermath of the suppression of piracy, Britain established its dominance on the western coast of Africa. As James A. Rawley has written, “In the decade of the 1730s England had become the supreme slaving nation in the Atlantic world, a standing she occupied until 1807.” There was a sharp jump of almost 27 percent in slave-trade exports over the previous pirate-infested decade.⁵⁹ If the plantation capital of the Caribbean, allied with the merchant capital of the metropolis, killed the first generation of pirates—the buccaneers of the 1670s—and if the capital of the East India Company killed the pirates of the 1690s, when the company’s ships were hothouses of mutiny and rebellion, it was African slave-trading capital that killed the pirates of the early eighteenth century. Hydrarchy from below was a deadly enemy to hydrarchy from above, as pirates had ruptured the middle passage. By 1726 the maritime state had removed a major obstacle to the accumulation of capital in its ever-growing Atlantic system.⁶⁰

It was not many years earlier that English and other, mostly Protestant European rulers had turned pirates loose on the riches of other realms. Now they and their former national enemies discovered common interests in an orderly Atlantic system of capitalism, in which trade would flow without attack and capital accumulate without disruption—unless, of course, the attacks and disruptions were the results of war declared by the rulers themselves. By the 1720s, thousands of pirates had deeply damaged world shipping. They had also self-consciously built an autonomous, democratic, egalitarian social order of their own, a subversive alternative to the prevailing ways of the merchant, naval, and privateering ship and a counterculture to the civilization of Atlantic capitalism with its expropriation and exploitation, terror and slavery. Whigs and Tories

alike responded by repeating the repressions of the 1690s and erecting gallows for pirates and the waterfront folk who dealt with them. Merchants petitioned Parliament, whose members obliged them with deadly new legislation; meanwhile, Prime Minister Robert Walpole took an active, personal interest in putting an end to piracy, as did scores of other officials, newspaper correspondents, and clergymen. They denounced pirates as sea monsters, vicious beasts, and a many-headed hydra—all creatures that, pace Bacon, lived beyond the bounds of human society. Their violent rhetoric demanded and legitimated the use of the gallows. The pirates and their living alternative were clearly marked for extinction. Hundreds were hanged, and their bodies left to dangle in the port cities of the world as a reminder that the maritime state would not tolerate a challenge from below.⁶¹

The sailors' hydrarchy was defeated in the 1720s, the hydra beheaded. But it would not die. The volatile, serpentine tradition of maritime radicalism would appear again and again in the decades to come, slithering quietly belowdecks, across the docks, and onto the shore, biding its time, then rearing its heads unexpectedly in mutinies, strikes, riots, urban insurrections, slave revolts, and revolutions. John Place, for example, would help in October 1748 to organize a mutiny aboard the H.M.S. *Chesterfield*, off the coast of West Africa, not far from Cape Coast Castle. He had been there before. He had sailed as a pirate with Black Bart Roberts, suffered capture by Captain Challoner Ogle in 1722, and somehow escaped the mass executions. When the time came, a quarter of a century later, for know-how about mutiny and an alternative social order, Place was the man of the moment. The authorities hanged him this time, but they could not kill the subversive tradition that lived in tales, in action, in sullenly silent memory, on the lower decks of the *Chesterfield* and countless other vessels. The Martinican poet Aimé Césaire captured this survival of resistance when he wrote, "It is this stubborn serpent's crawling out of the shipwreck."⁶²

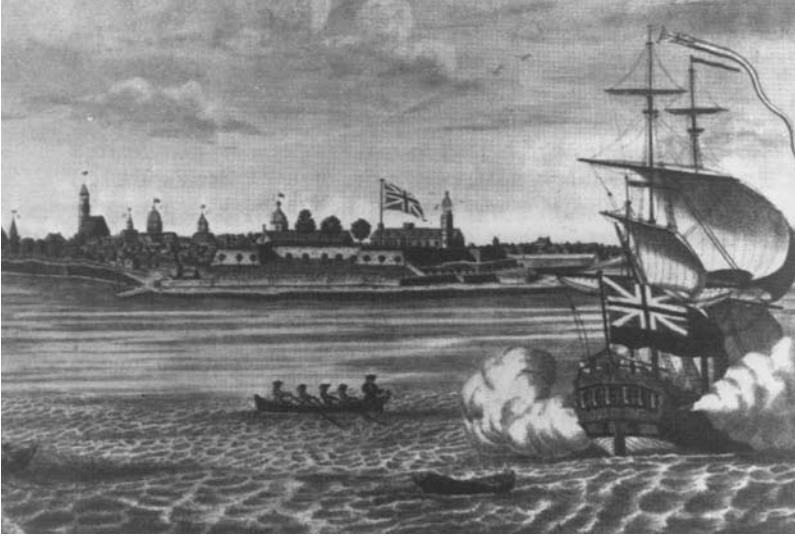
“The Outcasts of the Nations of the Earth”



AT THE HEART of the New York Conspiracy of 1741 lay a love story. The lovers were John Gwin (or Quin), “a fellow of suspicious character” rumored to be a soldier at Fort George, and “Negro Peg,” “a notorious prostitute” who lived at John Hughson’s waterfront tavern on the west side of Manhattan. Gwin paid Peg’s board at Hughson’s and joined her there many a night, climbing on top of a shed and through her open window. During one of these late-night meetings he gave her a ring, a pair of earrings, and a locket with four diamonds. Eventually Peg bore his child, whose color was a matter of considerable gossip and debate around town. Some said the baby was white; others insisted that it was black.¹

John Gwin had long been a regular at Hughson’s, and not only because he visited Peg. He often showed up with “a good booty”—speckled linen, stockings, even a worsted cap full of silver coins—that he gave to the tall, gaunt Hughson, who in turn fenced the purloined goods. Gwin’s friends at the tavern were always glad to see him, for they knew of the man’s generosity. Since aliases were common along the waterfront, where strangers and their secrets came and went with the tides, they also knew that Gwin and Peg were called by other names: Gwin, an African American slave, was known as Caesar, at least to his owner, John Vaarck. “Negro Peg” was the twenty-one- or twenty-two-year-old Margaret Kerry, though she was also known as the “Newfoundland Irish beauty.” Another thing tavern-goers knew was that Gwin and Peg were deeply involved in plotting what was later called the “most horrible and destructive plot that was ever yet known in these northern parts of America.” For it was at Hughson’s that they and dozens of others planned a “general insurrection” to capture the city of New York.²

Saint Patrick’s Day, 1741, was a day for remembering that Saint Patrick had abolished slavery in Ireland. A revolutionary arsonist named Quack set fire to New York City’s Fort George, the chief military installation of



A view of Fort George and the city of New York, 1735.
*I. N. Phelps-Stokes Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, New York Public
Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.*

the colony and one of the greatest fortifications in all of British America. The fire smoldered all night and on the following day exploded into billowing bursts of ocher and orange. Violent March winds carried the flames from the governor's mansion to the Church of England chapel, the army barracks, and the office of the general secretary of the province. Flying sparks and burning debris wafted above the wooden houses that sat just beyond the walls of the fort, threatening the city with conflagration. A shift in the winds and a sudden rain shower halted the spread of the blaze, but the damage had been done: the very heart of royal authority in this important Atlantic port now lay hollow and smoldering in ashes.

It was the first and most destructive of thirteen fires that would terrorize the city of eleven thousand in the coming weeks. When Cuffee, a slave owned by city eminence Adolph Philipse, was seen leaving the premises of the tenth fire, the cry went up that “the negroes were rising.” A vast dragnet caught almost two hundred people, black and white, many of whom would be investigated and tried over the next several months. Peg,

Hughson, and others were charged with “conspiring, confederating and combining with divers negroes and others to burn the City of New-York and also to kill and destroy the inhabitants thereof.” The conspiracy had been organized by soldiers, sailors, and slaves from Ireland, the Caribbean, and Africa, whom the officials called “the outcasts of the nations of the earth.”³ Disrespected by the mercantile oligarchy of New York, they were not without a mutuality of respect among themselves.

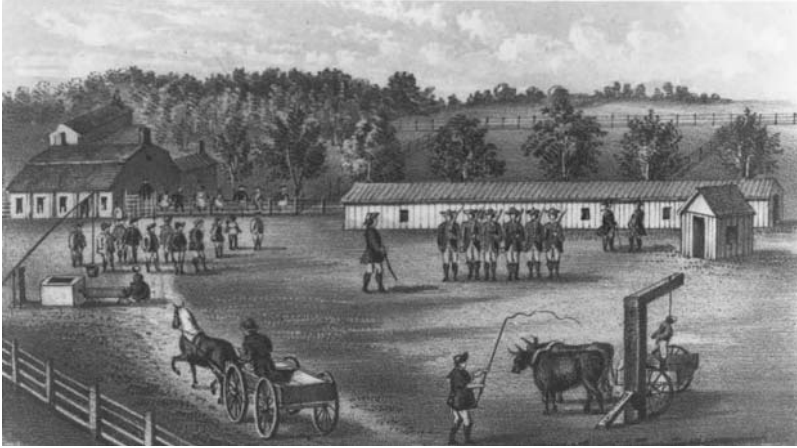
The outcasts had met regularly at Hughson’s, where they exercised “the hopes and promises of paradise.” Here the dispossessed of all colors feasted, danced, sang, took oaths, and planned their resistance. The enslaved Bastian remembered a table overflowing with “veal, ducks, geese, a quarter of mutton and fowls” from the butcher shops in which several of the conspirators worked. Others recalled the raucous, joyous fiddling, dancing, and singing for which Hughson’s was famous around town. Yet others emphasized the subversive conversation, followed by solemn oaths: Gwin asking a recruit “whether he would join along with them to become their own masters”; Cuffee saying “that a great many people had too much, and others too little”; Hughson announcing that “the country was not good, too many gentlemen here, and made negroes work hard.” At Hughson’s tavern, the rebels practiced a simple communism. Those who had no money were entertained “at free cost”; they “could have victuals and drink for nothing.” Hughson told them, “You shall always be welcome to my house, come at any time.” Bastian, exiled for his role in the rebellion, fondly recalled, “We always had a good supper and never wanted for liquor.” Here, once again, was a world turned upside down, a place where Africans and Irish were kings, as they would be in the larger society after the uprising. In New York, they believed, “there should be a motley government as well as motley subjects.”⁴

New York’s people in ruffles were terrified of the conspiracy, for reasons both local and global. A severe winter had made the city’s poor workers more miserable and more restive than usual. Trade, the lifeblood of New York, had stagnated in recent years, deepening divisions within the ruling class and creating an opening for revolt from below. Danger had also threatened from afar after the merchant mountebank Robert Jenkins waved his severed ear before the astonished bigwigs of Parliament, who then declared war against Spain (the aptly named War of Jen-

kins' Ear, 1739) and required the rulers of New York to supply both food and six hundred recruits (nearly one in six of the city's able-bodied white men) for the war effort. Imperial authorities had thus depleted New York's food supply as well as its defenses against French and Iroquois aggression from the north, Spanish privateers from the south, and domestic rebels from within.

The fires caused great damage to property, and New York's rulers made sure that there was ample human carnage to pay for it. On six afternoons and evenings between late May and mid-July, thirteen African men were burned at the stake. On six mornings between March and August seventeen more people of color and four whites were hanged, including John Gwin and Peg Kerry, whose romance came to an end on the gallows. John Hughson was also hanged, and his corpse, with Gwin's, gibbeted in chains and left to rot. Seventy people of African descent, among them Bastian, were exiled to places as various as Newfoundland, Madeira, St. Domingue, and Curaçao. Five people of European origin were forcibly sent off to join the British army, then at war against Spain in the Caribbean, where the conditions of soldiering life likely made theirs a delayed sentence of death. Sarah Hughson, the tavernkeeper's daughter, who was banished from the city for her own role in the conspiracy, took Gwin and Peg's baby to parts unknown.

The events of 1741 have long been controversial. The New Yorkers who lived through them argued fiercely about exactly what had happened and why, and since that time historians have done likewise. Indeed, the uniquely detailed record of the plot owes its existence to the dissension that surrounded the original events. After some expressed doubts about the conspiracy and the prosecutions, Judge Daniel Horsmanden of New York's Supreme Court compiled “the notes that were taken by the court, and gentlemen of the bar,” and published them in 1744 as *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York in America, and Murdering the Inhabitants*. His purpose was not only to prove the “justice of the several prosecutions” but also to sound, for the public benefit, a warning about the rebellious ways of slaves and to erect “a standing memorial of so unprecedented a scheme of villainy.”⁵



The hanging of an African in New York, c. 1750.
 Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York (1860).

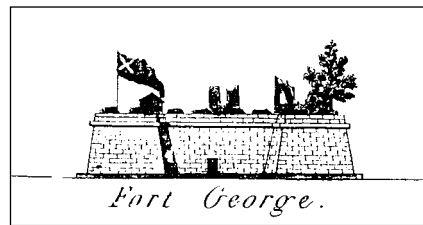
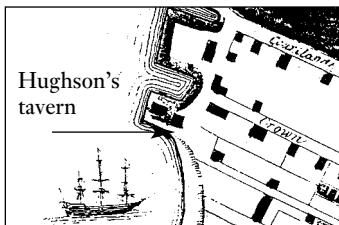
Contemporary accounts of the episode expressed three basic positions in the debate, which prefigured the views taken by modern interpreters of the events of 1741. Some historians have followed an anonymous writer of 1741 who maintained that there never was a conspiracy, and that the whole affair resembled the hangings for witchcraft that had taken place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692.⁶ Others have echoed the belief of William Smith, Jr., son of one of the prosecuting attorneys at the trial, who wrote that the conspirators wanted only “to create alarms, for committing thefts with more ease.”⁷ A third major interpretation, offered by T. J. Davis in *A Rumor of Revolt: The “Great Negro Plot” in Colonial New York* (1985), proved the original prosecutors right in claiming the existence of a dangerous conspiracy. This view holds that blacks and whites gathered and drank illegally, fenced their goods, and plotted against their masters at Hughson’s tavern. They sought for themselves money and freedom, revenge against particular powerful people (not all “white people”), and the destruction by fire of certain areas (not the entire city). The rebels had grievances and plans to redress them, but no genuinely revolutionary objectives.⁸

This chapter argues that a revolutionary conspiracy, Atlantic in scope, did develop in New York, though it was not the “popish plot” imagined

by Horsmanden, who saw the affair as having been orchestrated by a disguised priest. It was, rather, a conspiracy by a motley proletariat to incite an urban insurrection, not unlike the uprising led in Naples by the fisherman Masaniello in 1647. It grew out of the work of the waterfront, the organized cooperation of many kinds of workers, whose Atlantic experiences became the building blocks of the conspiracy. The rebels of 1741 combined the experiences of the deep-sea ship (hydrarchy), the military regiment, the plantation, the waterfront gang, the religious conventicle, and the ethnic tribe or clan to make something new, unprecedented, and powerful. The events of 1741 can thus be understood only by attending to the Atlantic experiences of the conspirators, in the villages and slave factories of the Gold Coast of Africa, the cottages of Ireland, the Spanish military outpost of Havana, the street meetings of religious revival, and the maroon settlements of the Blue Mountains of Jamaica and their surrounding sugar plantations.

THE WATERFRONT AND THE CONSPIRACY

The events of 1741 began along the city's docks. As valuable outposts of empire, New York and other Atlantic ports garrisoned soldiers to protect their cities and propertied people against enemies within and without. Soldiers such as William Kane and Thomas Plumstead, both stationed at Fort George, drilled, guarded, loafed, and grumbled their way through rounds of life endlessly governed by the soldier's quietest but most common enemy: boredom. As bustling centers of transatlantic trade, the seaports contained masses of workers who labored in the maritime sector of the economy, sailing, building, and repairing ships, manufacturing sail, rope, and other essentials, and moving commodities by boat, by cart, and by the strength of their backs. People of African descent, almost all of them enslaved, were especially important to the waterfront, representing about 18 percent of the city's population and fully 30 percent of its workers. Brash and Ben, for example, worked together on the Hudson loading timber, while Mink labored at his owner's ropewalk. Cuff's merchant master sent him down to the docks to work with a white boy to "sew on a vane upon a board for his sloop." The Spanish "negroes and mulattoes" involved in the conspiracy were all sailors, as were the slaves



Map of Manhattan, with details of Hughson's tavern and a burned-out Fort George. A Plan of the City and Environs of New York, 1742-4, by David Grim. Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

Ben and London. Quack worked with soldiers on a new battery near Fort George.⁹

After work these soldiers, sailors, and slaves retired to the dram shops, taverns, and “disorderly” houses along the waterfront “to drink drams,

punch and other strong liquors,” often staying “till two or three o’clock in the morning, . . . drinking, singing and playing at dice.” Here they told tales, sometimes tall, sometimes true, among which were the stories of an uprising that had shaken New York in 1712. Here, too, they cursed, caroused, fought, danced, and created constant public disturbances, after which they often awoke in the basement of City Hall, in jail. Mutinous soldiers and sailors had been a problem for New York’s rulers for several decades, prompting numerous acts of legislation to contain and punish their unruly ways.¹⁰

The rebels of 1741 traveled along the wharves for secret meetings, gathering at Hughson’s, at Comfort’s on the Hudson, and “at the house of one Saunders, upon the dock.” The docks and taverns, like ships, were places where English, Irish, African, Native American, and West Indian persons could meet and explore their common interests. The authorities could not easily circumvent the flow of subversive experience, for a port city was hard to police. There were always “some strangers lurking about the city”—people such as Sambo, described as “a tall negro living at John Dewit’s (a stranger).” Always there were “Vagrant and Idle persons” to be found, and “obscure people that have no visible way of subsistence,” for the growth of the cities, and especially of their maritime sector, depended upon a mass of desperate but necessarily creative proletarians’ being forced to work for wages in order to keep body and soul together. Everyone knew that a combination of such people was not only more likely in a port city, but more dangerous than it might be elsewhere to the concentrated, established power of a cosmopolitan ruling class.¹¹

The waterfront taverns were the linchpins of the waterfront economy, the places where soldiers, sailors, slaves, indentured servants, and apprentices met to sell illegally appropriated goods and pad their meager or nonexistent wages. Tavernkeepers sometimes encouraged such trade by extending so much credit that bills could be settled only after goods were taken and submitted as payment. New York’s rulers passed legislation to limit the amount of credit tavernkeepers could offer to workers, especially soldiers and sailors. The latter were especially important to illegal trade because they not only sold stolen goods but also purchased them, and conveniently disappeared when their ships set sail. Other bills were meant to halt the flow of pilfered goods (“Cloathing, or any other

Goods, Chattles, Wares, or Merchandizes”), promising double restitution or jail for offending tavernkeepers. New York’s comprehensive slave code of 1730, “An Act for the more Effectual Preventing and Punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negro and other Slaves,” also acknowledged the subversive potential of the waterfront economy: its first article prohibited any “trade or Traffick” with a slave without his or her master’s permission, “on forfeiture of trebel the Value of the thing or things traded.” Lieutenant Governor Clark noted—almost prophetically—that illicit transactions promoted “an habit of idleness, that may in time prove ruinous to the whole Province if not prevented.”¹²

None of the threats against tavernkeepers who traded with soldiers, sailors, or slaves worried John Hughson. His house was the perfect place for the “caballing and entertainment of negroes” and for the fencing of stolen goods: built into it were secret compartments—in the cellar, in various rooms, and under the stairs—where hot items, slipped in through a back-alley window in the middle of the night, could be hidden. As Bastian explained, “The negroes brought what they could steal to him.” In return, they, like apprentices, indentured servants, soldiers, and sailors, received money, some of which they left in the hands of the tavernkeeper, “to drink out” on credit. Other, lesser fences worked through Hughson’s network. The slave Will stole a silver spoon from his mistress and carried it to the wife of soldier William Kane, who then turned it over to her husband, who in turn sold it to the silversmith Peter Van Dyke and gave Will “eight shillings of the money.” Other Irish conspirators also had a hand in the illegal circulation of goods. Daniel Fagan, Jerry Corker, and John Coffin wanted William Kane “to rob houses with them and go off.” But before they “went off,” they would have stopped at Hughson’s, as Edward Murphy had done when he wanted to cash in some purloined jewelry.¹³ Indeed, so many “run goods” passed through Hughson’s house, making it “a mart of so great note,” that its customers had wryly begun to call the place Oswego, after the great provincial trading house where the English and Iroquois swapped their goods on the upper colonial frontier. Like the Iroquois, those who gathered at Hughson’s had a special interest in guns, powder, and ammunition, which they stockpiled through the winter of 1740–41.¹⁴

Two of the most daring and most notorious members of the waterfront

economy—and part of Hughson’s “black guard”—were John Gwin and Prince, who worked along the docks, wharves, and warehouses, taking hauls big and small: fifty firkins of butter, a cache of pieces of eight, beeswax, a shirt, stockings, a coat, and whatever else came their way. According to Horsmanden, these two “very wicked idle fellows had before been detected in some robberies, for which they had been publicly chastised at the whipping-post.” The authorities scarred their backs for a theft of gin, a Dutch contribution to civilization and the drink of mortal desperation of the London poor in this era. Carried by cart in a “suitable Procession round the Town,” they got “at every Corner . . . five Lashes with a Cowskin well laid on each of their naked black Backs,” as bystanders pelted them with “Snow balls and Dirt.” Gwin and Prince took the momentary defeat in stride and in humor: in honor of the event they soon founded the “Geneva Club” and proclaimed themselves its leaders. They continued to show up at Hughson’s with booty, in their pockets, on their backs, or “tied up in a large table cloth.” When it came to the plot, Gwin and Prince were “two principal ringleaders in it amongst the blacks.” Daniel Horsmanden made this point clear when he called the waterfront workers “brother criminals” whose thefts were the actual “ingredients of the conspiracy.” Such operations along the waterfront generated leadership, connections, and solidarities that proved crucial to the conspiratorial design.¹⁵

As the number of committed conspirators grew, the older, smaller gangs of the waterfront economy evolved into quasimilitary forms of social organization adapted to insurrectionary purposes. A gang called the Fly Boys met at John Romme’s tavern, while the Long Bridge Boys met at Hughson’s. Each group had its highest leader and below him several captains, each in charge of a company. Gwin was the leader of the Long Bridge company; his equivalent in the Fly Boys was the experienced Spanish-speaking soldier Juan. Both apparently reported directly to Hughson. Other captains included Ben, a “head man or captain” and “commander of a hundred at least,” and Jack, called a “head captain.” Curaçao Dick, York, and Bastian rounded out those named (or self-named) in the testimony as captains, though the group should have included both Cuffee and Prince as well. All stayed in close, steady contact with Hughson. Dundee, Cook, London, and Gomez’s Cuffee were lesser

officers. Each company had its own drummer, such as old Tom, and its fiddler, such as Braveboy, who, Albany insisted in recruitment, was needed precisely “because he was a fiddler.” Perhaps he would have been like Louis Delgres, the Martinican who led a slave revolt on the island of Guadeloupe and was last seen sitting in a cannon port in the island’s Fort Matouba, fiddling madly amid the smoke and the sizzling shot to inspire his fellow rebels against the French.¹⁶

WEST AFRICA

The cultures and memories of West Africa figured centrally in the plan for insurrection in 1741. Several distinct groups of Africans took part, and indeed John Hughson, among others, was keenly aware of their variety and importance. Central to the plan for organizing the revolt was an inner circle of “headmen,” each of whom was, as a leader within a specific community of Africans in New York, responsible for recruitment, discipline, and solidarity. Hughson instructed these most trusted men (they were all men) carefully: they were “not to open the conspiracy to any but those that were of their own country,” since as Daniel Horsmanden would observe, “they are brought from different parts of Africa, and might be supposed best to know the temper and disposition of each other.”¹⁷ They worked according to plan. In making his pitch on behalf of the insurrection, Cato asked Bridgewater, “Countryman, will you help?” A slave named Ben used the same approach, saying to Jack, “Countryman, I have heard some good news.” The word was that the Spanish planned to invade the city, which would support their own rising from within. Cato and Bridgewater appealed to ethnic groups such as the Papa, from the Slave Coast near Whydah; the Igbo, from the area around the Niger River; and the Malagasay, from Madagascar, who constituted the revolutionary cells of New York’s movement.¹⁸

The leading cell was made up of Africans from the Gold Coast of West Africa, the Akan-speaking people who were known by the name of the slave-trading fort from which they were shipped: Coromantee (or, in Fante, Kromantse). Many a “Coromantee” had been an *okofokum*, a common soldier trained in firearms and hand-to-hand combat in one of the mass armies of West Africa’s militarized, expansionist states (Ak-

wamu, Denkyira, Asante, Fante), before being captured and shipped to America. Peck's Caesar was identified as “a Caromantee,” as was an unnamed old woman owned by Gerardus Comfort. Moreover, five of the thirteen slaves who would be burned at the stake either had Akan day-names (Quack [Kwaku in Akan], Quash [Kwasi], and two called Cuffee [Kofi]) or were known to be Coromantee (Gwin), suggesting strong Gold Coast participation in the leadership of the plot. Yet another, Quamino (Kwamena), was hanged, while three more were transported. In the aftermath of the failed conspiracy, a slave named Warwick “cut his [own] throat,” probably in the style and tradition of a defeated Asante warrior. Doctor Harry, who was almost certainly an obeah man (an Akan shaman who had deep natural and spiritual knowledge and powers) of Gold Coast origins, had produced poison—“the same sort they saw in Guinea”—for the plotters to gulp down in the event of failure.¹⁹

The role of the Coromantees, and of Africa more broadly, was most obvious in the administering of war oaths, which Hughson shrewdly “accommodated to their own customs.” The Irish soldier William Kane testified that there existed a specific “negro oath,” but in truth there were probably, as Horsmanden believed, several different oaths. The most frequent of these involved “swearing by thunder and lightning,” a “terrible” oath commonly used among the Africans. Many of the slaves swore by this oath to support the revolt and never to reveal the common secret. Military oaths invoking the primal powers of thunder and lightning were in use on the Gold Coast of Africa in the middle of the eighteenth century, suggesting both the origin and the efficacy of the practice. Nanny, the legendary leader of the Windward Maroons in the 1730s, administered similar oaths, as did rebels in Antigua and elsewhere. Horsmanden sensed that the “obligation of that infernal oath” impeded the investigation in New York, but he never understood that the original source of his difficulty lay across the Atlantic, on the Gold Coast of Africa.²⁰

These oaths, like African traditions of resistance more generally, were not new to New York, for they had been used a generation earlier, in 1712, in one of the bloodiest revolts ever to hit the North American mainland, when a coalition of slaves of Coromantee and Papa backgrounds set fire to a building and then killed several whites who came to extinguish the

flames. Afterward, nineteen slaves were executed—burned, hanged, starved, broken on the wheel—but not forgotten.²¹ Horsmanden knew the earlier history, as did attorney William Smith, who had helped to send the rebels to their “brutish and bloody” executions.²² Now, in 1741, John Romme, it would be testified in court, encouraged the conspirators “to set them all a light fire; burn the houses of them that have the most money, and kill them all, as the negroes would have done their masters and mistresses formerly.” Hughson, who himself had grown up in the environs of New York, “proposed burning the fort before anything else; because at a former rising, the white people run into the fort.” The testimony of a slave named Sawney, who was only sixteen years old at the time of the second uprising, proved that he had heard the tales of 1712, perhaps from the likes of “old man” Cook or “Comfort’s old Caromantee woman.”²³

THE IRISH

Another cell in New York’s insurrectionary movement was Irish. These plotters, like their African counterparts, demonstrated a penchant for secret societies and conspiracy; they, too, called each other countryman. There were, in all, perhaps thirty to thirty-five Irish men and women involved in the conspiracy, though only eleven of these were recorded by name. One person testified that seventeen soldiers had attended a meeting at Hughson’s tavern; more commonly an ever-changing nine or ten turned up. Most all of the Irish were soldiers—“brother soldiers,” as they called themselves—stationed at Fort George. They wanted revenge against the Protestant English, expressing a desire “to burn the English church.” Hatred of the army was another motivation: Jerry Corker declared, “By G-d, I have a mind to burn the fort.” William Kane, whose involvement began when he told his fellow conspirators that “he would help them all that lay in his power” and ended in 1742 when he was shipped off to the Caribbean in punishment, wanted the fort in flames so that the soldiers “would have their liberty.” The complicity of Corker and Kane shows just how close the conspirators got to power: both had served as “sentry at the governor’s door” inside Fort George.²⁴

Although little is known about the Irish individuals who took part in

the conspiracy, it is possible to sketch in broad outline the historical experience that set the Irish in motion around the Atlantic in the years before 1741. A depression in the linen industry, intensified oppression by landlords and Anglican clergyman, and especially the famine of 1728–29 created new waves of Irish vagabondage and migration. Another famine in 1740–41, called in Gaelic “*bliadhain an air*” (“the year of the slaughter”), sent tens of thousands to their graves and thousands more across the seas in search of subsistence. Such vagabonds were called “Saint Patrick’s vermin.”²⁵ The traditional spalpeen migrations now moved into wider, Atlantic orbits. For many the movement led to a military experience—in the army of Britain, France, or Spain—which in turn led to a new posting at the outskirts of the empire as a soldier or military laborer. Others made their way to Irish harbors, signed on in the cod fishery, and sailed for Newfoundland, where many fell into debt and whence they traveled on as indentured servants or maritime workers to the port cities of North America.²⁶ Some variant of this process would appear to have been the experience of the “Irish Newfoundland beauty,” Peg Kerry.

Still others fell afoul of the law and ended up in the Americas as His Majesty’s seven- or fourteen-year passengers, having been sentenced as felons to long terms of punitive labor and shipped overseas. Crime and rebellion were inextricably intertwined for these Irishmen and Irishwomen, as for thousands of others in Britain who found themselves living on the wrong side of laws that were changing rapidly to protect new definitions of property. Irish felons transported to Georgia were denounced as a “Parcel of harden’d abandoned Wretches perfectly skill’d in all manner of Villainy, and who have been transported [from] their country for Committing Crimes by which they have been deemed too dangerous to be allowed to stay there.” Some of the transported were rioters who had lashed out against intolerable conditions; once in America, they stole their masters’ property and made “treasonable Designs against the Colony.”²⁷

The Irish had a history in America of betraying the English, who themselves had a history in Ireland of brutally subjugating the Irish. Several times during the seventeenth century (in 1655, 1666, and 1689), Irish indentured servants had assisted Spain or France in attacks against the English Caribbean colonies of St. Christopher, Montserrat, and Nevis.

These treacheries were well remembered among British colonial officials in the eighteenth century, especially after new calamities in Ireland sent new waves of migrants toward American shores. Governor Robert Hunter of Jamaica considered the Irish to be “a lazy useless sort of people, who come cheap and serve for deficiencies” (i.e., to expand the minority white population). On his island in the early 1730s were many—perhaps too many—Irish indentured servants and soldiers: “Many of them considering their religion might prove rather a disservice than of use to us in case of a rupture at any time with France or Spain.” Hunter could only conclude, ominously, “Their hearts are not with us.” The same fears gripped Hunter’s counterparts in New York, particularly after war broke out with Spain in 1739 and war with France simultaneously threatened.²⁸

SPANISH AMERICA

Members of a third cell within the insurrectionary plot whispered in Spanish. The leading figures here were Spanish-American sailors, “negroes and mulattoes,” who had been captured on a prize vessel by Captain John Lush in the early spring of 1740, brought to New York from the West Indies, condemned with the rest of the vessel in the city’s Vice-Admiralty Court, and promptly sold as slaves. A merchant testified that he had heard, while in Havana, that one of the sailors came from a family of slaves in Cartagena. The sailors themselves maintained that they were “free subjects of the King of Spain” and hence entitled to treatment as prisoners of war. Known among the conspirators as the “Cuba People,” they had probably come from Havana, the greatest port of the Spanish West Indies and a center of privateering, military defense, and a free black population. Having been “free men in their own country,” they felt that great injustice had been done them in New York. They “began to grumble at their hard usage, of being sold as slaves.”²⁹

The rage of the sailors heated many a conversation. Not surprisingly, Captain Lush, who had profited heavily from selling these prizes, was the object of special wrath. The sailors insisted that “if the captain would not send them to their own country, they would ruin all the city; and the first house they would burn should be the captain’s, for they did not care what they did.” Pointing to Lush’s house, they said, “*D--n that son of a b--h,*

they would make a devil of him,” doubtless by turning his home into an inferno. They even threatened to tie him “to a beam and roast him like a piece of beef.”³⁰

The Hispanic sailors had more than rage to contribute to the design to take the city, however, for they were highly skilled and knowledgeable in the ways of warfare. The tall, “very forward” Antonio de St. Bendito made no secret of their prowess. He bragged that when the time for the rising came, “while the York negroes killed one, the Spaniards could kill twenty.” The sailors’ reputation as experienced fighters circulated along the waterfront. John Hughson told York that “the Spaniards knew better than the York negroes how to fight”; he acknowledged their military experience by making Augustine an officer and Juan captain of the Fly Boys, one of the highest positions within the rebel command. Ben, a member of the conspiracy’s inner circle, considered it good news that the “Spanish negroes” were ready to lend a hand in the rising when “the wars came.” He told his skeptical countryman Jack that “those Spaniards know better than York Negroes, and could help better to take [the city] than they, because they were more used to war; but they must begin first to set the house (i.e. the houses) on fire.”³¹

Here, too, the Hispanic sailors had something to offer, in particular their knowledge of the incendiary substances called fireballs that had long been used in the marauding, plundering, city-burning warfare of the Caribbean. At one of the meetings at Hughson’s an unidentified Hispanic sailor “rolled something black in his hands, and broke it and gave to the rest, which was to be thrown in the houses, to set fire to the shingles in several places.” Antonio and Juan were especially knowledgeable about the “stuff to put the houses on fire, by flinging it into the house.” When on Monday, April 6, two fires broke out simultaneously on each side of Captain Sarly’s house, the cry went up, “The Spanish negroes; the Spanish negroes; take up the Spanish negroes.” Juan’s knowledge, motive of revenge, and insolent bearing upon being accused raised suspicions that eventually led to his hanging.³²

The Afro-Hispanic sailors also contributed to the plot an example of freedom based on their own maritime experience, and a means to achieve it, by coordinating an internal uprising with an external attack by Spanish forces. Of course, New York’s authorities could not comprehend that

news about Spanish military plans in the New World might circulate among sailors and waterfront workers. But sensing that there were real connections between the New York Conspiracy and Spanish America, they seized upon a letter written by General James Oglethorpe from Georgia in 1741 about a “popish Plot” in which secret emissaries—priests disguised as physicians, dancing masters, and the like—were inciting revolts “to burn all the magazines and considerable towns in English North America, thereby to prevent the subsisting of the great expedition and fleet in the West-Indies.” Although Oglethorpe himself “could not give credit to these advices,” many New Yorkers could. The real credit instead belonged to the Hispanic sailors, the human vessels who transported information and experience from one Atlantic port to another.³³

THE GREAT AWAKENING

Another Atlantic dimension of the conspiracy of 1741 was religious, for it occurred during the Great Awakening. Beginning in the 1730s, both sides of the Atlantic witnessed an outburst of popular religious enthusiasm in which itinerant preachers traveled from place to place, testifying about their own religious experiences and encouraging working people wherever they went to become, as Gary B. Nash has put it, the “instruments of their own salvation.” George Whitefield, a smallish preacher with crossed eyes, leather lungs, and burning charisma, ranged up and down the eastern seaboard of the colonies in 1739, delivering an endless succession of fiery sermons before the thousands, black and white (five to seven thousand in New York alone), who gathered to hear him.³⁴ The more radical itinerants preached a spiritual egalitarianism based on the biblical precept “God is no respecter of persons,” and many members of the colonial upper classes hated them for it. James Davenport, for example, was accused by the conservative Charles Chauncey of Boston of acting out the communism of the Book of Acts, seeking to destroy private property and make “all things common, wives as well as goods.” As the evangelicals preached justification by faith against the more traditional idea of justification by works, the specter of radical antinomianism hovered around their message and haunted their conservative adversaries. Some feared that the Levellers, Ranters, and Fifth Monarchy men of the

seventeenth-century English Revolution had reappeared a century later, and they were not entirely wrong. The physician Alexander Hamilton worried that such “New Light fanatics” would strip established religion of its ritualistic powers of mystification, letting loose “the mobile, that many-headed beast,” from its carefully constructed cage.³⁵

Although prosecuting attorney William Smith would call New York’s slave conspirators “Pagan negroes,” it is clear that Christianity, much of it a result of the Great Awakening, had affected many of them. John Hughson used the Bible to administer binding oaths to a number of the slave rebels. Bastian would testify in court that he and several other slaves “were sworn on a bible.” Cato agreed, claiming that Hughson took him and Albany upstairs in the tavern and “swore them upon a bible,” after which they “kissed the book.” Once captured, Cato would appear in court clutching his Bible to “his bosom”; “he said he read [it] in jail as often as he could.” Another slave, Othello, wanted assurance that his taking part in the revolt “would not hinder him from going to heaven.” Many others, black and white, fretted that by violating their sacred oath they would be “wronging their own souls.” Many New York slaves had lived long enough in English-speaking colonies to comprehend and engage the Christian message of the Awakeners, and even to endow it with revolutionary meaning. As an Anglican missionary explained, “the *Negroes* have this notion, that when they are baptized, they are immediately free from their masters.”³⁶

Whitefield made the issue of slavery central to the Great Awakening when, in 1740, he wrote and published a letter to “the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina,” remarking upon the slave rebellions that had recently convulsed Virginia and South Carolina and expressing his surprise that there had not been more of them. He considered rebellions past, present, and future to constitute a “judgment,” a “visitation” from God. He cited the biblical story of “Saul and his Bloody House,” who were subjected to famine for having enslaved the Gibeonites, “the Hewers of Wood and the Drawers of Water.” God had avenged the poor slaves in the day of David and he would so again. Whitefield commanded sternly, “Go to now, ye rich Men, weep and howl for your Miseries that shall come upon you!” But he also offered the sinful masters a way out of their self-built Babylon, through a proper

Christianity that attended to the souls of both masters and slaves. Masters would cease their brutalities and avert the awful judgment at the hands of the “sons of violence.” Slaves would cease to be rebellious and would naturally become better servants. Both would be conscious of their “relative Duties,” to the Lord and to each other.³⁷

Such words were more than many slaveowners could bear to hear. The Reverend Alexander Garden, who ministered to the slavemasters of Charleston, South Carolina, responded by accusing Whitefield of “enthusiasm and pride” and comparing him to “the *Oliverians, Ranters, Quakers, French Prophets.*” Such antinomianism, said Garden, led Whitefield to incite insurrection among the slaves. Others, such as William Smith, writing from the Caribbean, agreed: “Instead of teaching [the slaves] the *Principles of Christianity,*” enthusiasts such as Whitefield were “filling their heads with a Parcel of *Cant-Phrases, Trances, Dreams, Visions, and Revelations,* and something else still *worse,* which Providence forbids to name.”³⁸

The something worse reared its hydra head in New York in 1741, and Whitefield’s poisonous influence was duly noted. John Ury, a clergyman who would be hanged in 1742 for his role in the conspiracy, believed that “it was through the great encouragement the negroes had from Mr. Whitefield [that] we had all the disturbance.” Particularly pernicious, he thought, were Whitefield’s views of free grace, the theological issue at the center of the antinomian heresy, the embrace of which allowed self-declared, often poor saints to take the law into their own hands. Looking back on the conspiracy in 1746, Horsmanden would also denounce the “Enthusiastical Notions” and “New Fangled Principles” of Whitefield and other “Suspicious Vagrant Strolling Preachers.”³⁹

An Anglican missionary in New York went further in his indictment. Whitefield, he claimed, was directly responsible for the rising, for in New York as elsewhere he had unified and encouraged the slaves as he divided and discouraged their masters. His “greatest address hath been to the *Negroes* alone”: he had proposed to erect a school for slaves, which would cause many to “run away from the masters in hopes that they shall be here maintained, and have their liberty.” The result would be baptism and, from the slaves’ perspective, the freedom that came with it. Whitefield also inspired “feuds and animosities” everywhere he went. He

knew that a “kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, but is brought to desolation.” Whitefield thus “raised up a bitter spirit in the *Negroes* against their Masters.” In New York as elsewhere, “all the planters are forced to be doubly upon their guard, and are not sure when they go to bed, but that they shall have their throats cut before the next morning; and it may be the overturning of several colonies.”⁴⁰

A CARIBBEAN CYCLE OF REBELLION

The overturning of several colonies by insurrection seemed a real possibility in the 1730s and 1740s. During these years a furious barrage of plots, revolts, and war ripped through colonial Atlantic societies like a hurricane. No respecter of national or imperial boundaries, this cycle of rebellion slashed through British, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish territories, which stretched from the northern reaches of South America through the West Indies to the southern colonies and then the port cities of North America. Most of these events took place in plantation regions and were led by African Americans, but other areas (such as New York) and other actors (such as the Irish) were also involved. The magnitude of the upheaval was, in comparative terms, extraordinary, encompassing more than eighty separate cases of conspiracy, revolt, mutiny, and arson—a figure probably six or seven times greater than the number of similar events that occurred in either the dozen years before 1730 or the dozen after 1742. It was within this cycle of rebellion that the actions of the African slaves, Irish soldiers, and Hispanic sailors in New York in 1741 took on their greatest and most subversive meaning.

Scholars have studied the acts of resistance that constituted this cycle of rebellion, but almost always as isolated events; rarely have they analyzed them in relation to each other, as having both a coherence and a collective causal power. But of course both the rebels and the colonial authorities of the 1730s and 1740s were acutely aware of this profound, generative wave of struggle, even if their latter-day chroniclers have not been. Governor Mathews of the Leeward Islands in 1737 wrote of the cycle in the idiom of disease: “The contagion of rebellion is spread among these islands more than I apprehend is discovered.” Governor Edward Trelawny of Jamaica, who had witnessed firsthand the numerous

risings that climaxed in the Maroon War, saw clear political meaning in the rebellions, which for him expressed a “Dangerous Spirit of Liberty.” Daniel Horsmanden made repeated reference to other plots and revolts in his account of New York’s troubles. New York’s rebels likewise knew what was going on in “the hot country,” as one man called it. It had, in recent years, been hot in more ways than one.⁴¹

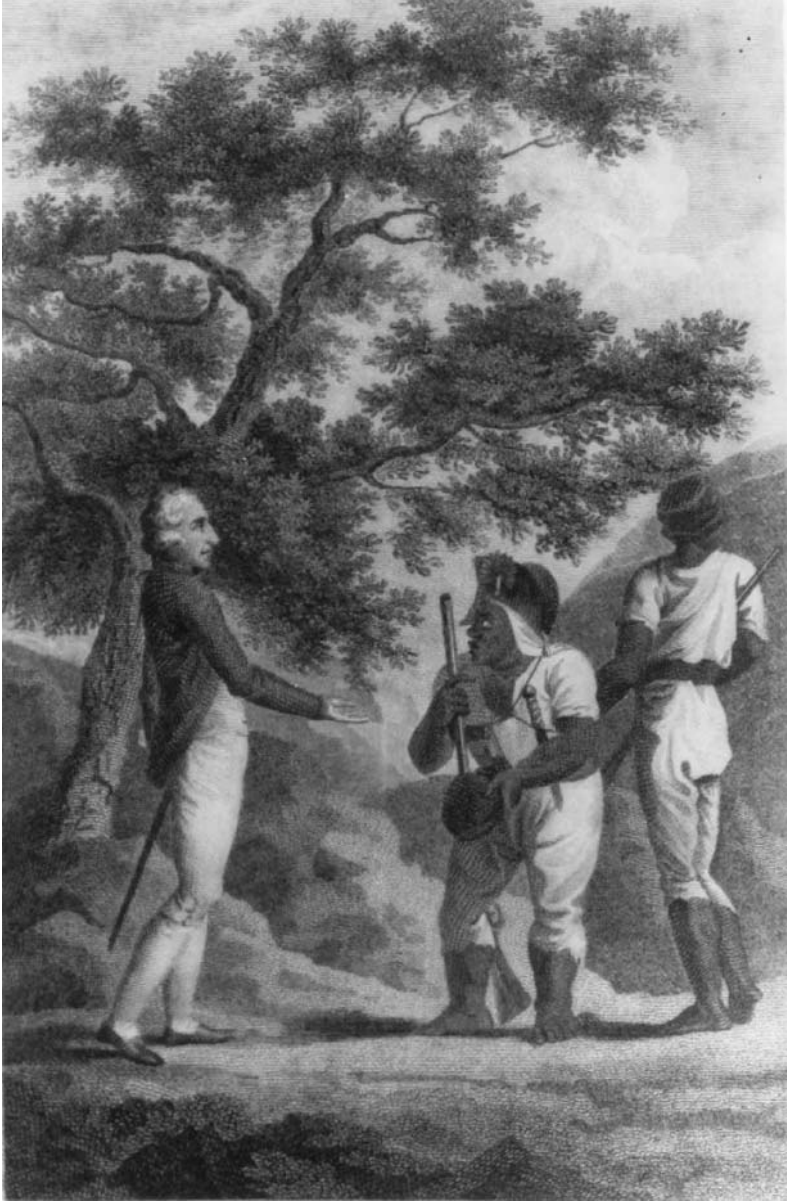
During the 1730s and early 1740s, the “Spirit of Liberty” erupted again and again, in almost all of the slave societies of the Americas, especially where Coromantee slaves were concentrated. Major conspiracies unfolded in Virginia, South Carolina, Bermuda, and Louisiana (New Orleans) in the year 1730 alone. The last of these featured a man named Samba, who had already led an unsuccessful revolt against a French slave-trading fort on the coast of Africa *and* a mutiny aboard a slave ship before the authorities of New Orleans broke his body on the wheel. The slaves of New Orleans were not intimidated by the terror, however, for they rose again in 1732. The following year witnessed rebellions in South Carolina, Jamaica, St. John (Danish Virgin Islands), and Dutch Guyana. In 1734 came plots and actions in the Bahama Islands, St. Kitts, South Carolina again, and New Jersey, the latter two inspired by the rising at St. John. In 1735–36 a vast slave conspiracy was uncovered in Antigua, and other rebellions soon followed on the smaller islands of St. Bartholomew, St. Martin’s, Anguilla, and Guadeloupe. In 1737 and again in 1738, Charleston experienced new upheavals. In the spring of 1738, meanwhile, “several slaves broke out of a jail in Prince George’s County, Maryland, united themselves with a group of outlying Negroes and proceeded to wage a small-scale guerilla war.” The following year, a considerable number of slaves plotted to raid a storehouse of arms and munitions in Annapolis, Maryland, to “destroy his Majestys Subjects within this Province, and to possess themselves of the whole country.” Failing that, they planned “to settle back in the Woods.” Later in 1739, the Stono Rebellion convulsed South Carolina. Here the slaves burned houses as they fought their way toward freedom in Spanish Florida. Yet another rebellion broke out in Charleston in June 1740, involving 150 to 200 slaves, fifty of whom were hanged for their daring.⁴²

Intensifying these events—and holding aloft a beacon of possibility—was the decade-long Maroon War of Jamaica. Beginning in the late

1720s, slaves escaped to the interior of Jamaica in swelling numbers, returned to the plantations in nocturnal raids, and seized livestock, tools, and sometimes other slaves to take back to their secluded and inaccessible maroon communities in the mountains. Over the next ten years the maroons created a major crisis in the plantation system, especially in the northern and northeastern regions of the island, where they repeatedly forced small, marginal planters to abandon their estates and sell off their slaves, some to New York. Writing in 1739, Charles Leslie claimed that the maroons had “increased to such a Degree, as many Times to make the Island tremble.” Others agreed: Jamaica was in “a tottering state.”⁴³

One of the reasons that the maroons were so dangerous to the rulers of England’s prize colonial possession was that they were in touch with the government of Spain by way of Cuba, which was, after all, only a canoe ride away off the northern shore of Jamaica. There were not only rumors but actual testimony that the maroons had contacted the Spanish authorities, “offering to hand over the island [of Jamaica] to Spain when they had taken it over, on condition that the Spaniards guarantee their freedom.”⁴⁴ The maroons may have been confident that they would eventually take over the island themselves, but they also knew that an external attack by Spain, coupled with their own uprising from within, represented an undeniably powerful combination. The authorities of Jamaica certainly did not deny it. Indeed, in 1739 and 1740 they made peace, first with the Leeward Maroons under the firm leadership of Cudjo, then with the Windward Maroons, giving both groups land and autonomy in exchange for their promise to return all future runaway slaves and, perhaps most crucially, to fight against foreign invaders. Its primary enemy within thus neutralized, Great Britain declared war on Spain a mere three months later.⁴⁵

A similar long-term struggle was taking place deep in the rain forests of Suriname, where maroons battled Dutch settlers who, according to Governor Mauricius, struggled to slay the hydra of resistance. A rising tide of rebellion in the Dutch colonies expressed itself in what another official called, in 1740, the intolerable “insolence of the Coloreds and Blacks, freedmen as well as slaves,” and in the subversive gatherings of soldiers, sailors, and slaves in waterfront taverns to smoke, drink, gamble, trade, and plot who knew what other dreaded cooperative ventures.



Maroon leader Cudjo signs a treaty with the English authorities, 1739; R. C. Dallas, The History of the Maroons, from their Origin to the Establishment of their Chief Tribe at Sierra Leone (1803), vol. 1.

Indeed, Dutch authorities were complaining about this explosive combination of workers in the spring of 1741, precisely when the same kinds of people were making trouble in New York.⁴⁶

The famines of 1728–29 and 1740–41 and their respective diasporas added an Irish dimension to the cycle of rebellion. Of special importance was the “Red String Conspiracy,” which took place in Savannah, Georgia, in March 1736 and foreshadowed the events in New York five years later. A gang of forty to fifty transported Irish felons met in a low tipping house, where they traded in stolen goods and formed “plots and treasonable Designs against the Colony,” even as the elites worried about “the Spaniards or French Instigations.” Eventually they designed to burn the town, kill the white men, save their women, and then meet up with a band of nomadic Indians with whom they would make their escape, perhaps to join the German-Cherokee Christian Gottlieb Priber, who was building a “City of Refuge,” a communist society for runaway African slaves and European indentured servants as well as Native Americans. The rebels in Savannah would know each other by a “Red string about the Right Wrist.” The plot was foiled but nonetheless threw the young colony into “great confusion.” Such events were not uncommon, as noted by Kerby A. Miller: “On numerous occasions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, colonial officials in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New York and the West Indies feared that Irish ‘papists’ were plotting insurrection with negro slaves or foreign enemies.”⁴⁷

Arson was a common instrument of destruction within the cycle of rebellion, not least because fire was the most accessible of weapons among the dispossessed, especially for those who worked with it in the normal course of their daily life.⁴⁸ On the island of Danish St. John in 1733, slaves entered Fort Christiansvaern, killed several soldiers, and set fires to signal a general rising. In Somerset, New Jersey, in 1734, slaves conspired to kill their masters, torch their houses and barns, saddle their horses, and fly “towards the Indians in the *French* Interest.” In the Red String Conspiracy, as we have noted, Irish workers planned to burn Savannah and escape to freedom. It was reported in October 1738 that a group of Native Americans, some of whom were whalers, had plotted in Nantucket “to set Fire to the Houses of the English Inhabitants in the night, and then to fall upon them Arm’d, and kill as many as they could.”⁴⁹ The slaves who

led the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina in 1739 burned several houses as they made their way toward St. Augustine and freedom among the Spanish. More ominously still, a suspicious fire devastated Charleston on November 18, 1740, consuming more than three hundred buildings and doing, in all, several hundred thousand pounds' worth of damage. Flames continued throughout 1741 to haunt the ports and towns of New York, Boston, Charleston, and Hackensack, New Jersey.⁵⁰

Fire also figured in prophecies, rumors, and tales. George Whitefield's friend Hugh Bryan of South Carolina wrote to his fellow slaveowners in early 1741 that the "repeated Insurrections of our Slaves" and the frequency of fires were proof of the great itinerant's dire prophecy that "God's just judgments are upon us." The big planters of South Carolina responded to this pious apostasy in their midst by arresting both Bryan and Whitefield for libel. Two weeks later—on Saint Patrick's Day, when arson was to ignite New York—a Grand Jury condemned Bryan, who taught Christianity to his own slaves, for his "sundry enthusiastic Prophecies of the Destruction of Charles-Town, and deliverance of the Negroes from their Servitude."⁵¹ The tales would continue in 1742, with Daniel Horsmanden's reporting "several pretended prophecies of negroes, that Charles-Town in South-Carolina, and the city of New York, were to be burnt down on the twenty-fifth of March next." The timing suggested that slaves were planning new fireworks to commemorate the earlier acts of revolutionary arson. Horsmanden knew that "there were yet remaining among us, many of the associates in that execrable confederacy, who might yet be hardy enough to persist in the same wicked purposes, and make new attempts." New attempts were in fact made in February and March 1742, as some New Yorkers tried to make good the prophecies. Fire remained a weapon of liberation. If it threatened apocalypse, a new world might yet arise from the ashes.⁵²

PATTERNS OF TRADE

When Dr. Alexander Hamilton arrived in New York on June 15, 1744, three years after the failed insurrection, the first thing he noticed was the forest of ships' masts in the harbor: the city truly had "a great deal of shipping." He made his way from the waterfront northward to Broad Street,

where he lodged at the home of merchant Robert Hogg. This was the place where the sailor Christopher Wilson had stolen a cache of coins, the search for which by the authorities had eventually unraveled the larger conspiracy. Here Hamilton read Horsmanden’s *Journal of the Proceedings*, then inspected the work of the rebels firsthand: “The castle, or fort, is now in ruins, having been burnt down four [*sic*] years agoe by the conspirators.” Little did Hamilton realize that what he saw as he gazed upon the charred rubble of Fort George had its origin in what he had observed when he first entered the city: in New York’s ships along the wharves and farther out at sea.⁵³

A key to the events of 1741 lay in the structure of New York’s commerce, which was, as Hamilton quickly understood, the driving force in this city of merchants and maritime workers. During the first half of the eighteenth century, New York’s trade was not triangular but rather bilateral, a shuttling from Manhattan down the North American coast to the West Indies and back. In the half century surrounding 1740 (1715–65), roughly three out of four voyages followed the coastal/Caribbean route, plying southward to Maryland, Virginia, and Carolina and even more commonly to Caribbean destinations, especially the English and Dutch islands, Jamaica and Curaçao in particular, and to a lesser extent the French and Spanish colonies, to and from which they regularly smuggled commodities of various kinds. Cadwallader Colden had noted in 1723 that New York’s greatest remittances went to Curaçao and Jamaica.⁵⁴

The conspiracy turned, however, not on what went out in New York’s ships but rather on what came home in them. And what came home in them, again and again and again, from coastal and especially from Caribbean ports, was slaves. The primacy of the West Indies in New York’s trade meant that the islands provided the vast majority of the city’s slaves to achieve a balance of trade. According to statistics compiled by Professor James G. Lydon from the naval officers’ record lists and the inspector general’s ledgers, in the dozen years before 1741, four out of five slaves (79.5 percent) came to New York from the Caribbean (the bulk of them from Jamaica), while another 6 percent came from the ports of the southern mainland colonies. They arrived in lots of three or four on small vessels of thirty to forty tons’ carrying capacity, most to be sold at the Meal

Market on the lower east side of Manhattan. Fewer than one in seven of New York's slaves came directly from Africa in the big slave ships that spent months gathering a "cargo" and months more in the Atlantic crossing. Some of New York's bondmen and bondwomen had been sent from the coastal/Caribbean trade routes on special order, and some on consignment; others were what the slave traders called "refuse negroes," with physical "defects" that prevented their sale in the South.⁵⁵

Most crucial for our purposes—and most alarming to a great many New Yorkers—was that many of the slaves who came to New York had a history, often a secret history, of making trouble. West Indian planters sold to New York's traders slaves who possessed "turbulent and unruly tempers" and often some experience in resistance. In the red wake of many a plot or insurrection in plantation America came a mini-diaspora, in which the leaders of the events were sold off, frequently away from their families and communities, to buyers in other parts of the Atlantic. Such was the practice on Antigua in 1736, when eighty-eight slaves were executed for taking part in a conspiracy, and another forty-seven sold and shipped off the island. The same program was followed on Jamaica, on Bermuda, and elsewhere, as it would be in New York after the fires of 1741.⁵⁶

New York was hardly alone in receiving such malefactors: all of the northern seaports, including Newport and Boston, served as markets of last resort in the regional trade in slaves. The governors of both Massachusetts and Rhode Island complained bitterly of the problem in the early eighteenth century, the governor of the former claiming that the traders sent "usually the worst servants they have," including slaves who had accumulated records of violent resistance to their condition. As Edgar J. McManus has written, "Since some colonies permitted masters to export slaves convicted of major crimes, including arson and murder, the intercolonial trade involved serious risks for importing colonies like New York. How many of these slaves were channeled into New York cannot be estimated precisely, but the number was probably large." Governor Rip Van Dam cautioned in the early 1730s that a majority of the slaves imported from the South posed a serious threat to the safety of New York. Governor Cosby objected in 1734 to the "too great Importation of Negroes and Convicts"; a "Negro" and a "Convict" were often one and the same person.⁵⁷

The New York Assembly acknowledged the problem by passing a resolution that warned the buyers of slaves against “refuse Negroes and such malefactors as would have suffered death in the places whence they came had not the avarice of the owners saved them from public justice.” Indeed, the assemblymen deemed the matter so serious that they did not stop at a warning; they also imposed a special duty on slaves imported indirectly—that is, from the Caribbean and coastal America—which was twice as high as the duty on slaves imported directly from Africa. The purpose of this policy was, writes Lydon, “largely to discourage importation of recalcitrant blacks from other colonies.”⁵⁸

Daniel Horsmanden knew that rebellious slaves imported from other English colonies had played a major role in the conspiracy. In “a modest hint to our brethren in the *West Indies*, and the more neighboring English colonies,” he explained how he and his fellow New Yorkers had *properly* transported seventy-seven rebels to other, non-English parts of the Atlantic. He asked other rulers within the British empire to note “how tender we have been of *their* peace and security, by using all the precaution in our power, *that none of our rogues should be imposed upon them.*” Horsmanden was quietly complaining that his brother gentlemen in coastal and Caribbean America had imposed *their* rogues on New York, thereby undermining the colony’s peace and security. Governor Trelawny, whose Jamaican planters had sent north many of the slaves in question, got the message. After reading Horsmanden’s published account of the trial, which identified the slave named Hanover as having been involved in the plot but now being missing, Trelawny personally *found* Hanover among the 112,000 slaves in Jamaica and promptly returned him to New York. Both Trelawny and Horsmanden understood that it was impossible to import slaves without also importing the experience of opposition to slavery. It was in this literal sense that the insurrection was promoted by those whom Horsmanden called “the outcasts of the nations of the earth.”⁵⁹

One of these outcasts was a slave named Will, whose life illustrated the connections among insurrection, diaspora, trade, and new insurrection as it represented one long, Atlantic ruling-class nightmare. In 1733, Will had participated in the slave revolt on Danish St. John, in which a gang of rebels carried concealed cane bills (knives) into Fort Christiansvaern, killed several soldiers, and took control of the island’s central military in-

stallation. They held the fort for seven months, until the imperial powers put aside their differences and organized a joint expedition to defeat the mostly Coromantee rebels, who had in the meantime damaged or destroyed forty-eight plantations. In the aftermath, 146 slaves were implicated in the rising, and twenty-seven of those executed. It was alleged, in New York, that during this rising Will had killed several white men with his own hands. Will was banished from St. John, sold to a planter on the island of Antigua.

Will did not wait long before beginning to plot again, for in 1735 the Akan-speaking slaves of Antigua combined with creole slaves in a plan to seize the island and make it their own. Unlike the rebels of St. John, the insurgents of Antigua never reached the stage of open action. An informer disclosed their plot, after which they were immediately rounded up and arrested. Imprisoned again and knowing that his failure to reform meant certain death, Will saved his own neck by turning state's witness, giving evidence against numerous slaves and earning, briefly, a traitor's reputation as he watched eighty-eight of his comrades be hanged, burned, and broken on the wheel. Along with forty-six others, Will was banished, sold this time to someone in New York, sold again to a new owner in Providence, Rhode Island, and then sold back once more to New York.

Will played a pivotal part in the New York Conspiracy, bringing his West Indian expertise to bear. He was, after all, "very expert at plots, for this was the third time he had engaged in them," as the court was at pains to point out. Will met, at Hughson's and other places, with the slaves and the Irish soldiers, no doubt telling the gripping, bloody tales of his earlier exploits and explaining precisely what had gone wrong. He held up the courage of the plotters on Antigua as an example, claiming that "the negroes here were cowards" and "had no hearts as those at Antigua." The plan of attack on Fort George may have owed something to Will's experience at Fort Christiansvaern. Will even showed the other rebels how to make a dark lanthorn, "a light that no body should see it," which made the nighttime work of conspiracy easier.⁶⁰

For Will and many others, New York was a sort of penal colony in disguise; southern and West Indian planters had surreptitiously made it so. But New York's rulers found them out, discovering in their midst an un-

knowable but significant number of slaves who were experienced in the ways of resistance. As it happened, New York’s merchants had been importing not only sugar, molasses, and slaves on their vessels but the literally explosive class relations of the slaveowning regions to the south—regions that had for several years witnessed a ferocious cycle of rebellion that featured prominently both arson and insurrection. The importation of such experience of rebellion—and the dawning recognition of its dangers—constituted the rational basis of New York’s hysteria in 1741.

INSURRECTION AND IMPERIAL RIVALRY

Many of the conditions for insurrection were present in New York in 1741. The city’s ruling class was divided and squabbling; a hard winter had caused misery for many; and war had broken out with Spain, increasing hardship all around and weakening military defenses when six hundred able-bodied men were shipped overseas to support the war effort. One conspirator, London, had advised some of his fellow insurrectionists that “now was the best time to do something, it being war time.” Moreover, as we have seen, New York’s slave traders had inadvertently brought to the city a motley crew of experienced veterans—insurrectionists such as Will, who brought their knowledge of the Caribbean cycle of rebellion of the 1730s and 1740s, *and* soldiers such as William Kane, Juan de la Sylva, and the numerous Coromantees, who brought their knowledge of war and military organization from Ireland, Cuba, and West Africa.⁶¹

Even though Albany believed “an hundred and fifty men might take this city” (he chose roughly the same number that had been involved in the uprising in Will’s St. John), the plotters knew from the beginning that the success of their insurrection would depend on support—local (in New York), regional (in the surrounding countryside), and international (from Britain’s imperial rivals, Spain and France). Hughson saw the insurrection as a rising of the mob, wherein early successes would draw more supporters to the cause. Another source of support would be people, both black and white, from the outlying areas, especially “country negroes” such as Jamaica and several sailors who had attended meetings at Hughson’s. Comfort’s Jack had brought his rural relatives into the

plot. Peg Kerry explained that the urban rebels “were to be joined by the country negroes” after the fires were set. Arson did indeed light up the countryside on Long Island and in New Jersey after the burning of Fort George.⁶²

The most important assistance would come from Britain’s imperial enemies, France or particularly Spain, for like the maroons of Jamaica, the rebels in New York planned to link their uprising from within to an invasion from without. The *New York Weekly Journal* made the point clearly: “The *Spanish* Negroes (of which there are many in this Place) were deeply concerned and active in the Business; and whatever Encouragement or Assurances they might receive from abroad, or hellish incendiaries at home, they were perswaded that an Attempt on this Province would be made by the Spaniards and French, for whom they agreed to wait some Time; and if it should happen that such an Attempt should be made, and our Enemies invade us, they were to rise and join with them.” A leader among the African Americans in the plot, Bastian, had the same understanding: “They had a parcel of good hands, Spanish Negroes, five or six of them (then present) who would join with the York Negroes: that they expected that war would be proclaimed in a little time against the French, and that the French and Spaniards would come here.” Trial records indicate that at least ten other conspirators saw matters the same way. Primus had heard that the French and Spanish were coming and that the rebels would assist them in taking the city. Kortrecht’s Caesar heard from Jack that “the Spaniards were coming here, and the negroes were going to rise, and would help the Spaniards.” Scipio also expected the French and the Spanish to invade, “and then would be a fair opportunity”: “they might all be free men.” The fires might be the beacon of insurrection, signaling to a Spanish flotilla offshore that the time for attack had arrived; or perhaps Spain would learn about the destruction of Fort George and then decide on its own to invade. The soldiers and sailors of New Spain would help the rebels to seize the city (which had, after all, already changed imperial hands once, from Dutch to English, in recent memory), or failing that, they would “carry them off into another country, and make them a free people.” In any case, the rebels would win freedom for themselves, and Spain would protect that freedom.⁶³

The references to Spain, in New York and throughout the cycle of re-

bellion of the 1730s and 1740s, bespoke a truth well understood at the time but seldom emphasized since. The slaves of the anglophone Atlantic often saw Spain as a liberator, not least because of the tradition of Spanish abolitionism. When Bastian told other conspirators that Spain might guarantee their eventual freedom, it was no idle fantasy, for Spain had already done just that for many people of African descent in the New World. Indeed, the Hispanic sailors were, by their own claims to freedom, living, breathing instances of liberation, there to confirm the possibilities that lay in New Spain. It was widely known that the Spanish king had aggressively enticed the slaves of English masters with royal *cédulas* in 1733 and 1740, promising first limited freedom and then full freedom to anyone who escaped an English for a Spanish settlement. New Spain's officials in Florida followed through on the promise by creating an official maroon village on the northern edge of their settlement, called Gracia Real Santa Teresa de Mose, where a hundred runaways, mostly from Carolina, were settled and transformed into a first line of defense against English attacks from the north. Spain had also for years been encouraging the maroons of Britain's Caribbean colonies, as New York's many Jamaican slaves knew well. It was an accident of history, though a fateful one, that Afro-Cubans and Afro-Jamaicans conversed about freedom in New York in 1741, just as they had done when communicating across the waters between Cuba and Jamaica in the 1730s.⁶⁴

More important still was that Spanish officials consciously planned to use agents such as the Hispanic sailors to foster slave revolt in English dominions in North America by late 1742, or perhaps even earlier. Juan Francisco de Güemes, governor general of Cuba, wrote to Manuel de Montiano, governor of Florida, to explain an imminent military action: three thousand Cuban soldiers would attack South Carolina between April and June 1742, unleashing a force of “negroes of all languages” to filter through the countryside, promising land and freedom to the slaves of English masters and inciting revolt throughout the province. The agitators and organizers of insurrection were to be not priests, as the paranoid Protestants of New York thought, but rather former slaves, who would operate through precisely the kinds of networks that existed in New York.⁶⁵

And yet the insurrection in New York failed. It is impossible to know

exactly what went wrong, but there is evidence to suggest that Quack burned the fort several weeks too early, catching everyone off guard and causing the carefully laid plans to unfold in a chaotic series of small fires, as the rebels did what they could to carry out the long-plotted uprising. Quack had been voted by his fellow conspirators “to be the person who should fire the fort” because his wife worked there as cook for the governor, which meant that he had the requisite knowledge of and access to that most strategic of places. Unfortunately for the rebels, Quack soon got into trouble with the authorities; he was prohibited from visiting his wife and banned from the fort. Acting in anger and apparently motivated by a desire for personal revenge, Quack broke discipline and set the first fire prematurely, on March 17. Several sources—including one rebel’s saying to another who set a fire, “You should not have done it till we were all ready”—indicated that the fires were scheduled to be set instead in early May, at the very moment when a flotilla of five Spanish privateers arrived off the coast, having captured eight prize vessels along the way and in so doing panicked the rulers of New York. The ships’ arrival coincided with the trials of John Hughson, Peg Kerry, Cuffee, and Quack.⁶⁶

REBELLION OF THE HANGED

The multiracial waterfront posed a political problem for New York’s rulers. The cooperative nature of work in the port had created dangerous insurrectionary connections between slaves of African descent—men such as Gwin and Cuffee—and “the most flagitious, degenerated, and abandoned, and scum and dregs of the white population,” represented by John Hughson and Peg Kerry. The love story alluded to at the outset of this chapter was an instance of the human solidarity that developed in the plot. Colonel Thomas Rainborough had warned at Putney that care must be taken to choose the right mother and father. Solidarity was not restricted to the genetic nuclear family, nor could it be so restricted among “outcasts.” As Francis spoke of the “sisters” of her spiritual community, so the Irish soldiers called one another “brother.” The love of John Gwin and Peg Kerry thus paralleled a broader alliance.⁶⁷

The authorities approached the solidarity with a trident in hand, each of its points carefully sharpened to puncture the prevailing multiracial

practices and bonds of proletarian life in Atlantic New York. First they went after the taverns and other settings where “cabals” of poor whites and blacks could be formed and subversive plans disseminated. Next they self-consciously recomposed the proletariat of New York to make it more difficult for workers along the waterfront to find among themselves sources of unity. And finally, they endeavored to teach racial lessons to New York’s people of European descent, promoting a white identity that would transcend and unify the city’s fractious ethnic divisions. Let us treat these three major consequences of the conspiracy of 1741 in turn.

Both during and after the trials for conspiracy, New York’s men in ruffles attacked the city’s low tipping houses, criminalizing black-white cooperation and controlling the sites where multiracial conspiracies might unfold. Horsmanden urged “diligent inquiry into the economy and behaviour of all the mean ale-houses and tipling house within this city,” especially those that entertained “negroes, and the scum and dregs of white people in conjunction.” Such establishments encouraged theft and debauchery, but even worse, they provided “opportunities for the most loose, debased and abandoned wretches amongst us to cabal and confederate together, and ripen themselves in these schools of mischief, for the execution of the most daring and detestable counterprizes: I fear there are yet many of these houses amongst us, and they are the bane and pest of the city; it was such that gave the opportunity of breeding this most horrid and execrable conspiracy.” Horsmanden was right: mean alehouses such as Hughson’s, where the wretched of many colors and nations gathered, were indeed schools. These were places where such people told their Atlantic tales, yarns, and stories, their oral histories and lore of insurrection.⁶⁸

The second major policy change was not a matter of governmental action but rather a series of private business decisions taken by the merchants of New York. In what may constitute the strongest evidence of the related Caribbean and insurrectionary dimensions of the conspiracy, the city’s big merchants responded to the upheaval by restructuring their slave trade, sending many more of their ships directly to Africa, and many fewer down the coastal/Caribbean route, in search of slaves. Partly this was a response to a growing demand for slaves in South Carolina and

Jamaica after the economic slump of the 1730s had passed. But it was also a collective recognition by merchants that their earlier business practices had endangered their own base of accumulation. Before 1741 they had imported seven out of every ten slaves from the regions to the south, and only three of ten from Africa. After 1741 they reversed the ratio, bringing seven of ten slaves directly from Africa and only three of ten from plantation regions to their south. As James G. Lydon has written, “The full range of reasons for this shift from dependence upon indirect sources to direct importations from Africa is difficult to establish, but the slave plot at New York in 1741 appears to have been quite important.” Fears about the importation of “incorrigible slaves,” or “malcontents,” concludes Lydon, “may well have dictated this shift in the city’s trading pattern.” New York merchants realized that the commodity was not always what it seemed: they had imported aboard their ships not just the scarred, beaten bodies of West Indian slaves but within those another bloody body of ideas and practices of insurrection. They would, in recognition of this fundamental fact, seek to recompose the proletariat of New York, counting at least in part on the linguistic and cultural barriers of African ethnicity to ensure social peace.⁶⁹

The third major response to the events of 1741 was the promotion of a white identity designed to cut across and unite a variety of ethnicities. Of course many New Yorkers, people in ruffles as well as negrophobic artisans, had long taken whiteness for granted. But to those who gathered at Hughson’s, the “white people” were, in code or cant, the rich, the people with money, not simply the ones with a particular phenotype of skin color. Racial typing in New York remained fluid, open, often ambiguous. The lovers John Gwin and Peg Kerry typified and exploited the ambiguity: Gwin used an Irish name, pretending to be a soldier at Fort George; “Negro Peg” complained about “that bitch” Mary Burton, who had implicated her in several thefts and thereby “made me as black as the rest.” The slave Tom described his recruitment into the conspiracy in a way that would have been impossible a generation later: “The white men wanted him to join to help kill the white people.”⁷⁰ The “white” David Johnson rose before an assembly at Hughson’s, can of punch in hand, and pledged “to burn the town, and kill as many white people as he could.”⁷¹

Ruling whites reacted to the racial fluidity within the conspiracy with

terror and mercy, the combination of which was meant to produce new discipline and a different solidarity. First they demonized the people of European descent who were involved in the plot: Hughson and his ilk were said to be “monsters in nature,” the very “disgrace of their complexion”; indeed, they were “much worse than the negroes.” Hughson himself was “blacker than a negro”: he was “the scandal of his complexion, and the disgrace of human nature!” Such language predicted a violent fate, and four Euramericans were accordingly hanged; others were forced into military service in the West Indies, and still others banished from the province. Another six, however, were quietly and mercifully discharged by the court, almost without comment. The decision to let them go was expressed in a simple notation in the trial records: “No person appearing to prosecute.” This, too, was a message for and about “whites.” New York’s rulers thus divided and weakened the proletariat as they unified and strengthened a fictive community based on whiteness.⁷²

And yet when Horsmanden and his like tried to use the trial and the executions to popularize lessons about race, about the unifying advantages of whiteness, the rebels, even in death, refused to cooperate. After Hughson was hanged, his corpse was gibbeted so as to offer moral instruction to anyone who dared to betray his or her race. So, too, was the corpse of John Gwin/Caesar strung up in chains, so that people of African descent would think at least twice before challenging the system of slavery in New York. Both, so the message went, would be punished into the afterlife. But curious things began to happen. Within three weeks after the hanging, Hughson’s remains—his “face, hands, neck, and feet”—had turned “a deep shining black,” while the hair of his “beard and neck (his head could not be seen for he had a cap on) was curling like the wool of a negro’s beard and head.” Moreover, “the features of his face” had assumed “the symmetry of a negro beauty; the nose broad and flat, the nostrils open and extended, the mouth wide, lips full and thick.” Gwin/Caesar, in contrast, in life “one of the darkest hue of his kind,” had in death undergone the opposite transformation: his face “was at the time somewhat bleached or turned whitish.”

In the end, it was said, “Hughson was turned negro, and Vaarck’s Caesar a white”; they had “changed colours.” New Yorkers “were amazed at these appearances”—and not least of all Daniel Horsmanden, who once

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.⁷³

CONCLUSION

Tyger! Tyger!



ADAM SMITH (1723–1790), the first comprehensive theorist of capitalism, and Karl Marx (1818–1883), its profoundest critic, agreed in their approach to globalization. Both understood its maritime origins, arguing that the discovery of the sea routes to the Americas and the East Indies marked a new stage in human history. And both understood its social consequences, the fact that the expansion of commodity production (Smith called it the extent of the market, Marx the social division of labor) resettled the globe and transformed the experience of work. Smith noted that the accumulation of wealth depended on an increasing division of labor, which in turn caused workers to become “as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.” Marx, for his part, argued that the colonial system and the extension of the world market converted “the worker into a crippled monstrosity.” He considered the imposition of factory discipline to be a “Herculean enterprise.”¹ In other words, the despotism of the workplace and the anarchy of the global market developed together, intensifying work and redistributing workers in what Marx called a “motley pattern.” This book has shown that the monster had a head—indeed, many heads—of its own, and that those heads were truly motley.

In the preceding pages, we have examined the Herculean process of globalization and the challenges posed to it by the many-headed hydra. We can periodize the almost two and a half centuries covered here by naming the successive and characteristic sites of struggle: the commons, the plantation, the ship, and the factory. In the years 1600–1640, when capitalism began in England and spread through trade and colonization around the Atlantic, systems of terror and sailing ships helped to expropriate the commoners of Africa, Ireland, England, Barbados, and Virginia and set them to work as hewers of wood and drawers of water. Dur-

ing the second phase, in 1640–1680, the hydra reared its heads against English capitalism, first by revolution in the metropolis, then by servile war in the colonies. Antinomians organized themselves to raise up a New Jerusalem against the wicked Babylon in order to put into practice the biblical precept that God is no respecter of persons. Their defeat deepened the subjection of women and opened the way to transoceanic slaving in Ireland, Jamaica, and West Africa. Dispersed to American plantations, the radicals were defeated a second time in Barbados and Virginia, enabling the ruling class to secure the plantation as a foundation of the new economic order.

A third phase, in 1680–1760, witnessed the consolidation and stabilization of Atlantic capitalism through the maritime state, a financial and nautical system designed to acquire and operate Atlantic markets. The sailing ship—the characteristic machine of this period of globalization—combined features of the factory and the prison. In opposition, pirates built an autonomous, democratic, multiracial social order at sea, but this alternative way of life endangered the slave trade and was exterminated. A wave of rebellion then ripped through the slave societies of the Americas in the 1730s, culminating in a multiethnic insurrectionary plot by workers in New York in 1741.

In 1760–1835, the motley crew launched the age of revolution in the Atlantic, beginning with Tacky's Revolt in Jamaica and continuing in a series of uprisings throughout the hemisphere. The new revolts created breakthroughs in human praxis—the Rights of Mankind, the strike, the higher-law doctrine—that would eventually help to abolish impressment and plantation slavery. They helped more immediately to produce the American Revolution, which ended in reaction as the Founding Fathers used race, nation, and citizenship to discipline, divide, and exclude the very sailors and slaves who had initiated and propelled the revolutionary movement. The liberty tree, however, sprouted branches elsewhere in the 1790s—in Haiti, France, Ireland, and England.

The proletariat has appeared throughout our book in a double aspect. First, when docile and slavish, it was described as the hewers of wood and drawers of water. The Irish revolutionary Wolfe Tone feared in 1790 that Ireland would forever be a “subordinate nation of hewers of wood and drawers of water.”² Similarly, Morgan John Rhys, a remembrancer of the

revolutionary 1640s and an abolitionist, asked in the first political periodical published in the Welsh language, *Cylchgrawn Cymraeg* (November 1793), whether the Welsh were condemned always to be hewers of wood and drawers of water.³ John Thelwall, a poet and leading speaker for the London Corresponding Society (L.C.S., England's first independent political working-class organization), worried in the face of government repression in England in 1795 that "nine out of ten of the human race (it will, anon, be nineteen out of twenty) are born to be beasts of burthen to the remaining tythe: to be hewers of wood and drawers of water."⁴ The African abolitionist Ottobah Cugoano knew that the Canaanites had been enslaved—that is, made hewers of wood and drawers of water—but he showed that slavery in the West Indies was even worse.⁵ Irish, Welsh, English, and Africans alike struggled to liberate the hewers and drawers.

Conversely, when the proletariat was rebellious and self-active, it was described as a monster, a many-headed hydra. Its heads included food rioters (according to Shakespeare); heretics (Thomas Edwards); army agitators (Thomas Fairfax); antinomians and independent women (Cotton Mather); maroons (Governor Mauricius); motley urban mobs (Peter Oliver); general strikers (J. Cunningham); rural barbarians of the commons (Thomas Malthus); aquatic laborers (Patrick Colquhoun); free thinkers (William Reid); and striking textile workers (Andrew Ure). Nameless commentators added peasant rebels, Levellers, pirates, and slave insurrectionists to the long list. Fearful of the energy, mobility, and growth of social forces beyond their control, the writers, heresy hunters, generals, ministers, officials, population theorists, policemen, merchants, manufacturers, and planters offered up their curses, which called down Herculean destruction upon the hydra's heads: the debellation of the Irish, the extermination of the pirates, the annihilation of the outcasts of the nations of the Earth.

Hercules had been known since the time of Diodorus as an executioner. Hangings, burnings, mutilations, starvings, and decapitations have filled our every chapter in this black book of capitalism. What was to become of Despard's head, for example? It was reported that "the Cabinet was called at the request of the Lord Chancellor to consider what advice should be given to His Majesty respecting the disposal of the Heads

of the Prisoners.”⁶ Dessalines, the ferocious, uncompromising leader of the Haitian revolt, tried to widen the ownership of land in Haiti, an aspiration that led to his death by mutilation in 1806. He embodied a revolutionary *lwa* or *lao*, spoke Congo, and called his people the Incas of the Sun. Défilé carried away the remains of his body, seeking to piece them together for the cemetery.⁷ Masaniello, leader of the galley slaves, fishwives, prostitutes, weavers, students, and lazzaroni of Naples during their ten days of proletarian revolt, was killed and chopped up on July 16, 1647. The following day his supporters gathered up the pieces, reattached the skull to the corpse, and gave his body a funeral befitting a martial commander.⁸ Walt Whitman would write a story about Richard Parker’s widow and her search for his body after he was hanged for leading the mutiny at the Nore in 1797. Thus our first step has been to remember the proletarian body. We have had to translate it out of the idiom of monstrosity.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some workers wanted to turn the tables on their class enemies, representing themselves as having the strength to win *and* the authority to impose a new order. They assumed the mantle of Hercules and commenced to battle a different many-headed monster. Coleridge in the 1790s referred to the counterrevolutionary forces as a hydra. The L.C.S. predicted to a similar society in Newcastle-upon-Tyne that “the Hydra of Tyranny and of Imposition will soon fall under the Guillotine of truth and reason.” In November 1793, the French revolutionary artist David proposed that the convention erect a colossal statue of Hercules to represent the French people, replacing Marianne, the feminine personification of liberty. By 1795 the coins of the French Republic were divided between silver pieces bearing the figure of Hercules and bronze ones bearing that of Liberty. In November, during the Festival of Reason, held in Notre Dame Cathedral, the radical deputies again introduced Hercules: “The Terror was the people on the march, the exterminating Hercules.” Charles Lamb wrote in the early nineteenth century that gorgons and hydras and chimeras were “transcripts, types,—the archetypes are in us, and eternal. These terrors—date beyond body—or, without the body, they would have been the same.”⁹

In England, tribunes of the radical working class were likewise fasci-

nated by Hercules and the hydra. “All things are sold,” began Shelley in *Queen Mab*, a catalogue of human corruption through the commodity form. Light, liberty, love—each had a price,

. . . whilst the pestilence that springs
From unenjoying sensualism, has filled
All human life with hydra-headed woes.

Richard Carlisle called his penny weekly newspaper the *Gorgon*, arguing in its first issue (1818) that “although the hydra of corruption still rears its accursed head amongst us, we are persuaded, that it must ultimately fall beneath general indignation and contempt.” Henry Hunt issued a weekly entitled the *Medusa; Or, Penny Politician*; the first number, which appeared on February 20, 1819, under the motto “Let’s Die like Men, and not be Sold like Slaves,” was addressed “TO THE PUBLIC, *alias*, the *ignorantly-impatient Multitude*.” In an attempt to provide national leadership by skilled male trade unionists over the burgeoning female and Irish textile proletariat of the northern factories, John Gast, a London shipwright, formed the Philanthropic Hercules in December 1818, just before the massacre at Peterloo in England (1819). Before the Haymarket Massacre (1886) in America, the “Revenge” circular called on the working class to rise like Hercules. Defining moments in the labor histories of England and America thus hinged on working-class references to this mythical hero.

The embrace of Hercules reflected a deepening fissure between skilled artisans—who, upon close inspection, often proved to be foremen or small managers—and the mass of migrants to the city, including young orphaned workers, female proletarians, discharged soldiers, and casualties of factory, workshop, and ship. The technological changes wrought by the steam-driven screw propeller and the substitution of iron and steel for wood in ship construction undermined the material basis of the motley crew and intensified the fragmentation of Atlantic dockside and maritime labor. The artisan, by contrast, was often a property holder, a temperate, prudent, punctual, literate citizen. His patriotism easily became nationalism. He was frequently a disciplinarian, an advocate of police. The fissure had cultural and political significance. Asa Briggs noted that in the early nineteenth century, “the gulf between skilled and unskilled

workers was so great that one acute observer spoke of them as two separate races.”¹⁰ Tom Paine, Karl Marx, and Edward Thompson (who held that “working people were thrust into a state of *apartheid*”) wondered if the poor were becoming a race unto themselves.

The emphasis in modern labor history on the white, male, skilled, waged, nationalist, propertied artisan/citizen or industrial worker has hidden the history of the Atlantic proletariat of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. That proletariat was not a monster, it was not a unified cultural class, and it was not a race. This class was *anonymous, nameless*. Robert Burton noted in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1624), “Of 15000 proletaries slaine in battle, scarce fifteene are recorded in history, or one alone, the General perhaps, and after a while his and their names are likewise blotted out, the whole battle it selfe is forgotten.” It was *landless, expropriated*. It lost the integument of the commons to cover and protect its needs. It was *poor*, lacking property, money, or material riches of any kind. It was often unwaged, forced to perform the unpaid labors of capitalism. It was often hungry, with uncertain means of survival. It was *mobile, transatlantic*. It powered industries of worldwide transportation. It left the land, migrating from country to town, from region to region, across the oceans, and from one island to another. It was *terrorized, subject to coercion*. Its hide was calloused by indentured labor, galley slavery, plantation slavery, convict transportation, the workhouse, the house of correction. Its origins were often traumatic: enclosure, capture, and imprisonment left lasting marks. It was *female and male, of all ages*. (Indeed, the very term *proletarian* originally referred to poor women who served the state by bearing children.) It included everyone from youth to old folks, from ship’s boys to old salts, from apprentices to savvy old masters, from young prostitutes to old “witches.” It was *multitudinous, numerous, and growing*. Whether in a square, at a market, on a common, in a regiment, or on a man-of-war with banners flying and drums beating, its gatherings were wondrous to contemporaries. It was *numbered, weighed, and measured*. Unknown as individuals or by name, it was objectified and counted for purposes of taxation, production, and reproduction. It was *cooperative and laboring*. The collective power of the many rather than the skilled labor of the one produced its most forceful energy. It moved burdens, shifted earth, and transformed the landscape. It was *motley*, both dressed in rags and multi-

ethnic in appearance. Like Caliban, it originated in Europe, Africa, and America. It included clowns, or cloons (i.e., country people). It was without genealogical unity. It was *vulgar*. It spoke its own speech, with a distinctive pronunciation, lexicon, and grammar made up of slang, cant, jargon, and pidgin—talk from work, the street, the prison, the gang, and the dock. It was *planetary*, in its origins, its motions, and its consciousness. Finally, the proletariat was *self-active, creative*; it was—and is—alive; it is onamove.¹¹

What does the experience of this proletariat have to offer us today? To answer this question, we turn to a story about three neglected friends of the human race: Thomas Hardy, founder of the L.C.S.; his wife, Lydia Hardy; and Olaudah Equiano, whom we have met in previous chapters. We conclude with reflections on the lives and works of the revolutionary savant C. F. Volney and the poetic visionary William Blake. All three—the forgotten, the utopian, and the visionary—illustrated the transatlantic circulation of experience and the effect of struggles in Africa/America upon social and political developments in Europe, and all expressed an egalitarian, multiethnic conception of humanity, which, we wish to argue, represented the grandest possibility of both their age and ours. The defeat of their common idea in the pivotal years of the early 1790s gave rise to two narratives of class, race, and nation that have served to hide the history we have attempted to recover in this book.

The first is the story of the Working Class. London artisans, faced in the 1790s with the economic pressures of rising prices, outsourcing, and mechanization, were inspired by the French Revolution and their own Dissenting and craft traditions to enter into correspondence with the emerging factory proletariat in the north of England, where the first steam-driven cotton factory opened in Manchester in 1789. They proposed the common purpose of Parliamentary reform. Despite domestic repression and the prohibition of trade-union organizing, the English working class emerged after the Napoleonic Wars (1815) with a vibrant intellectual, political, and moral culture (radicalism) and became a distinct and enduring class formation, able to force its industrial and constitutional opponents first to admit trade unions and then to expand the franchise. A defining document of this story was the “Address of a Journeyman Cotton Spinner,” published in the *Black Dwarf* in 1819, which described class relations in the cotton factories in terms of the length of

the working day, the child labor, the gruel, the steam engine, and the blacklist.¹² The “Address” contrasted the factory worker with the plantation slave: “The Negro slave in the West Indies, if he works under a scorching sun, has probably a little breeze of air sometimes to fan him: he has a space of ground and time allowed to cultivate it. The English spinner slave has no enjoyment of the open atmosphere and breezes of heaven.” This view—opposite to the pledge of solidarity expressed by the Sheffield journeymen cutlers thirty years earlier—shows working-class insularity and its vulnerability to racist appeal.

The second is the narrative of Black Power. The people of the African diaspora fought against American slavery and the deliberate degradation, dehumanization, and destruction of name, lineage, culture, and country. Organized in mass in the mine or on the plantation (the cotton gin was invented in 1793), black or pan-African consciousness arose from resistance of blood and spirit, which achieved historic successes in the 1790s. The resistance of the spirit encompassed obeah, voodoo, and the black church (including the African Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia, founded in 1788; the Free African Society of Philadelphia, 1787; and the Abyssinia Baptist Church of New York, 1800). The resistance of blood comprised revolts in Dominica, St. Vincent, Jamaica, and Virginia, and most significantly, the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804. Haiti was the original Black Power. If the distinctive accomplishment of the English working class was its labor press, the singular achievement of the black freedom struggle was its music. Ideological resistance would lead to David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison, and armed resistance to Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. An ideology of providence, called Ethiopianism because it located redemption in Africa, was nurtured in opposition to the racist myths of the ruling class and the racial exclusions of the working class.¹³ Even if we wished to bring these two narratives together, it would be impossible because they are true stories of their time and since. But we can remember a time before they separated.

THREE FRIENDS OF THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE

Oludah Equiano, Lydia Hardy (née Priest), and Thomas Hardy lived together at Taylors Building, Chandos Street, Covent Garden, London, from August 1790 to February 1792. Every morning in season fruits and

vegetables—parsnips, carrots, peas, apples, and strawberries—arrived from the nurseries and gardens up the river Thames, and every evening piles of rubbish were collected. The three friends shared an experience of separation from the earthly commons, so they either had to buy commodities in the market or scavenge food. None was paid much, and prices were rising. Even if they shifted for goods (people then depended upon the customary wastes of urban manufactures), they lived an insecure life, if not one of constant destitution. The three friends belonged to the “swinish multitude,” as Edmund Burke had recently called the people in his diatribe against the French Revolution.¹⁴ They were pigs in the eyes of the upper class, and motley ones at that, for Olaudah was an African, Lydia was English, and Thomas was a Scot.

Olaudah had been both a plantation slave and a sailor. Lydia’s social role was parturition, hence she was a proletarian, a mother and a child-raiser. Thomas was an artisan, a shoemaker. The slave/sailor, proletarian, and artisan—to identify them crudely by their economic types—were friends and would seek freedom together in 1792. Olaudah had been kidnapped at the age of ten with his sister and sold into slavery, torn from a “nation of dancers, musicians, and poets.” He described the West African commons: “Our tillage is exercised in a large plain or common . . . and all the neighbours resort thither in a body.” He noted that “every one contributes something to the common stock.”¹⁵ In Lydia’s native Buckinghamshire, acts of Parliament had enclosed the common lands. An anonymous ditty summed up the loss and the crime:

*The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But lets the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose.*

Resistance to expropriation was strong in her home region, dating back to Captain Pouch and the Midlands Revolt of 1607 and to the Digger colonies of the English Revolution. Thomas, for his part, had been forced to leave his ancestral tenancy as capitalist farmers enclosed fields, consolidated runrig strips, and took in the commons, leaving the “gude-man” and cottar to join the landless.¹⁶ “Ah, man was made to mourn!” sighed the Scottish poet Robert Burns.

Having lost the commons, all three then saw their labors undergo de-

valuation. Olaudah experienced the terrors of merchant capitalism aboard the slave ship that transported him (among some 1.4 million other Igbo) across the Atlantic. He labored at sea, amid the cane fields, and in the tobacco rows. He observed but could not stop the terror against his fellow creatures, off whose labors the Bank of England, the Houses of Parliament, and much of the nation thrived. Lydia, meanwhile, became pregnant six times in London, where 74 percent of all children died before the age of five.¹⁷ She attempted to nurture five infants to childhood, but amid circumstances of penury, dearth, insecurity, and infestation, they all died young. Thomas found work as a brickie at the Carron armaments works not far from his birthplace. The “carronades” that gave the men-of-war of merchant capitalism their destructive firepower were produced amid volcanic conditions of darting flames, glowing coals, and molten iron. Severely injured when some scaffolding collapsed beneath him, Thomas recovered and sailed to London in 1774 with eighteen pence in his pocket.

Thus grounded in common experiences of expropriation and exploitation, the three friends shared rooms and ideas. Olaudah reached back to the antinomian abolitionism of the English Revolution to express through Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (2:332–40) his own experience of American slavery:

. . . for what peace will be giv’n
 To us enslaved, but custody severe,
 And stripes, and arbitrary punishment
 Inflicted? and what peace can we return,
 But to our power hostility and hate;
 Untamed reluctance, and revenge though slow,
 Yet ever plotting how the Conqueror least
 May reap his conquest, and may least rejoice
 In doing what we most in suffering feel?

Wherever Olaudah carried this “untamed reluctance,” miracles of social alliance followed, for he played a catalytic role in the making of the United Irishmen, the English working class, and the Scottish convention movement. His life story, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African*, was “the most important single literary

contribution to the campaign for abolition.”¹⁸ While living with Lydia and Thomas, he prepared the fourth edition of the book, which he took with him on a journey to Ireland in May 1791. The sixty Irish subscribers to the *Interesting Narrative* included a large number of radicals who would become United Irishmen later in that year.¹⁹ Wolfe Tone came to Belfast about the same time as Olaudah and wrote his *Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, which shared common ideas with Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*.²⁰

Lydia Hardy was, like other women, active in the abolitionist movement, not in lobbying members of Parliament or participating in the deliberations of the national committee of the abolitionists, but at the parish pump or kitchen hearth. On April 2, 1792, she would write to Thomas and report on the progress of abolitionism in her hometown of Chesham: “Pray let me no how you go on in your society and likewise we [illegible word] as been donn in the parlement house concurring the slave trade for the people here are as much against it as enny ware and there is more people I think hear that drinks tea without sugar than there drinks with. . . .” The inclusive “we” here refers to the sugar boycott, one of the movement’s most effective campaigns, which had been launched the previous autumn. In the same letter, Lydia would ask Thomas to give Olaudah her best wishes for “a good journey to Scotland” (he had been working in their common quarters on the fifth edition of his book, which he would carry with him). Her acquaintances in Chesham, she bid Thomas to pass on, were “very fond of Vassa book.”

Thomas Hardy had arrived in London when the unfolding American Revolution was the subject of every political discussion. Influenced by the organizational and intellectual innovations of the motley crew (the committees of correspondence and abolitionist literature), Thomas explained that “his heart always glowed with the love of freedom, and was feelingly alive to the sufferings of his fellow creatures.” He developed a concern for the “future happiness of the whole human race.” By 1790 he kept a shoemaker’s shop located just a few yards from their rooms in Covent Garden, in Piccadilly, the embarkation point for coaches going to the west—to Bath or Bristol—and from there for ships headed for the West Indies. Here he formed the London Corresponding Society, which was egalitarian by income (membership cost one penny) and by status (titles

were forbidden), though it excluded people “incapacitated by crimes.” After the first meeting, in January 1792, Hardy and the other founders repaired to a tavern, the Bell in the Strand, for supper, and listened to a parable by William Frend about “certain brethren dwelling together in one house and having all things in common.” Thus, at the very beginning of its deliberations, the L.C.S. considered the commons and slavery, the ideal of the one and the evil of the other. It began to seek out similar societies elsewhere for correspondence. But where? Olaudah suggested Sheffield—“a damn bad place,” according to George III.²¹

Thomas pursued the suggestion. On March 8, 1792, he wrote to the Reverend Thomas Bryant of Sheffield, “Hearing from Gustavus Vassa that you are a zealous friend for the Abolition of that accursed traffick denominated the Slave Trade I inferred from that that you was a friend to freedom on the broad basis of the Rights of Man for I am pretty persuaded that no Man who is an advocate from principle for liberty for a Black Man but will strenuously promote and support the rights of a White Man & vice versa.” Equiano opened for Hardy the doors to the steel and cutlery workers of Sheffield. The Reverend Bryant led a congregation that would soon be labeled the “Tom Paine Methodists,” and many of its members were up in arms. In June 1791, six thousand acres of land in Sheffield and its vicinity had been enclosed by an act of Parliament. The commoners, the colliers, and the cutlers reacted in fury, releasing prisoners and burning a magistrate’s barn.²² A witness at Hardy’s 1794 trial for treason laid the ax to the root: “The original cause of discontent was the inclosing a Common, which was opposed by the populace.”²³ The struggle for customary rights was common to both field and manufacture; a song of 1787 illustrated the interrelationship between expropriation and criminalization. Jonathan Watkinson and the masters of the Cutlers Company calculated their compensation and decreed that thirteen knives thenceforth be counted to the dozen, since among the twelve “there might be a *waster*,” a customary taking for the workers. The people sang in protest,²⁴

*That offspring of tyranny, baseness and pride,
Our rights hath invaded and almost destroyed,
May that man be banished who villainy screens:
Or sides with big W——n and his thirteens.*

The reference was, of course, to common rights. The ballad thumped along, comparing Watkinson to Pharoah:

*But justice repulsed him and set us all free,
Like bond-slaves of old in the year jubilee.
May those be transported or sent for marines
That works for the big W—n at his thirteens.*

Jubilee thus meant the restoration of manufacturing rights.

When Hardy wrote to Bryant, he mentioned the “broad basis of the Rights of Man,” referring to Tom Paine’s book, whose second part had just been published. *The Rights of Man* demonstrated the economic feasibility of public education for all children, social security for those over fifty, and health care for everyone. The rights encompassed by the phrase “rights of man” were growing; they would soon include the rights of women and the rights of infants. Dr. William Buchan, a physician in Sheffield, considered air, water, and sunshine to be “among the most essential articles of the knowledge and rights of man.”²⁵ Hardy’s own “vice versa” suggested that any advocate of workers’ rights to bread, commons, fresh air, clean water, and representation in Parliament must stand against slavery and advocate the same for the black person.

In April, Hardy wrote, “There is an absolute necessity for us to unite together and communicate with each other that our sentiments and determinations may center in one point, viz., to have the Rights of Man re-established especially in this nation but our views of the Rights of Man are not confined solely to this small island but are extended to the whole human race, black or white, high or low, rich or poor.”²⁶ Like J. Philmore before him and the Despardes after, he sought the liberation of the whole human race. The idea arose from his roommates, from his reading, from London Dissent, and from his knowledge of the gathering slave revolts in the Caribbean.

April 2, 1792, was a historic day. It was announced that “the LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY with modesty intrudes itself and opinions on the attention of the public.” The delicately worded proclamation, however, said nothing about slavery, the slave trade, or the commons. On the same day, Lydia, visiting family, wrote Thomas her letter from Chesham, politely inquiring about his society but emphasizing abolition and her news for Olaudah. Early the next morning, Parliament agreed to

what, in the history of English abolitionism, is called the April Compromise. Wilberforce had asked Parliament on April 2 to resolve that the slave trade “ought to be abolished”; after midnight, the home secretary moved to amend the resolution by adding the word *gradually*. In the wee hours, the prime minister waxed eloquent. Then, after debating all night, not least about levelling principles, the members of Parliament went to breakfast, one or two of them perhaps blithely humming the hit tune of the year, “Oh, Dear! What Can the Matter Be?”²⁷ The way was now clear for an *expansion* of the slave trade.²⁸

The coincidence of these events suggested a betrayal, which became more obvious with the passage of time. In May, Olaudah, who had joined the L.C.S., wrote to Thomas and expressed “my best Respect to my fellow members of your society.” The confusion of pronouns indicated a deepening problem. By summer Hardy had begun to worry that the abolitionist movement might sidetrack the society from its main objective, parliamentary reform. Looking back on the history of the organization from the vantage point of 1799, Hardy omitted any mention of the equality of race in observing of the society’s charter, “There was a uniform rule by which all Members were admitted high and low, rich and poor.” The three friends soon separated. Olaudah married and dropped out of the movement; Lydia died in childbirth after being harassed by a church-and-king mob; Thomas was attacked by the government, went to prison, was acquitted, and survived to publish, in 1832, his memoirs, which minimized Olaudah’s role as midwife to the birth of the L.C.S.

As we have seen when considering Despard’s situation, the ramifications of the Haitian revolt undermined the revolutionary possibilities epitomized by the three friends, because it divided the abolitionist movement. In November 1791, a debate took place at Coachmakers’ Hall on the Haitian slave insurrection. “People here are all panic-struck with the transactions in St. Domingo,” wrote Wilberforce, but to him “people” meant the middle class.²⁹ The idiom of monstrosity sanctioned violent, steady repression. In debate in the House of Lords, Abingdon argued that “the order and subordination, the happiness of the whole habitable globe is threatened” by abolition: “All being equal, blacks and whites, French and English, wolves and lambs, shall all, ‘merry companions every one,’ promiscuously pig together; engendering . . . a new species of

man as the product of this new philosophy.”³⁰ Abolish the slave trade, he warned, and other abolitions will pop out of Pandora’s box: the transporting of felons to Botany Bay, the flogging of soldiers, the pressing of seamen, the exploiting of factory workers. London bankers and merchant houses embraced the Baconian argument of monstrosity, urging the government fully to prosecute the attempt to repress the Haitian Revolution and eagerly supporting the exiled French planters in their city. Seventeen banking firms soon petitioned the Duke of Portland to annihilate and exterminate the insurgent slaves.³¹ Meanwhile, the poor mechanics of Leeds acknowledged the effects of propaganda in 1792: “We are beheld more like Monsters than Friends of the People,” they wrote to the L.C.S. in 1792.³² Henry Redhead Yorke, who had been born in the West Indies, spoke against slavery at a mass meeting in Sheffield in the spring of 1794. The speech got him arrested, imprisoned, and tried. At his trial he brilliantly defended himself by turning the rhetoric of monstrosity back against the authorities, promising, “The more sacrifices, the more martyrs you make, the more numerous the sons of liberty will become. They will multiply like the hydra, and hurl vengeance upon your heads.”³³

VOLNEY’S MOTLEY CROWD

In 1791 the revolutionary savant Constantin François Volney published his *Ruins; Or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires*, a learned, sensible, and rhapsodic work of religious anthropology and world history.³⁴ Its most famous passage is a dialogue between the “People” and the “Privileged Class”:

PEOPLE: And what labor do you perform in our society?

PRIVILEGED CLASS: None; we are not made to work.

PEOPLE: How, then, have you acquired these riches?

PRIVILEGED CLASS: By taking the pains to govern you.

PEOPLE: What! is this what you call governing? We toil and you enjoy! we produce and you dissipate! Wealth proceeds from us, and you absorb it. Privileged men! class who are not the people; form a nation apart, and govern yourselves.

The Privileged Class sends its lawyer, its soldier, and its priest to plead their characteristic arguments with the People, but none prevails. Then it plays the race card: “Are we not men of another race—the noble and pure descendants of the conquerors of this empire?” But the People, who have studied the historical genealogy of the Privileged, burst out in gales of laughter. Finally, the Privileged Class concedes, “It is all over for us: the swinish multitude are enlightened.”

Written in an accessible, liberating style, Volney’s *Ruins* was as important to the age of revolution as Paine’s *Rights of Man*. First published in Paris, it was translated into German and English in 1792, with American editions appearing shortly after, and numerous fly-sheets, pamphlets, and abridged editions distributed elsewhere. It was printed in Sheffield, and in Welsh translation. Its fifteenth chapter, a vision of a “New Age,” was reprinted often. On the very day in May 1794 when habeas corpus was suspended and Tommy Spence was dragged off to Newgate, he included “The New Age” in the second volume of his *Pig’s Meat; Or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude*. The L.C.S. reprinted chapter 15 under the title *The Torch*, a circumstance “made use of to countenance the report of an intention to set *London on fire*.”³⁵ In Bahia, Brazil, a copy was found in the hands of a mulatto in the midst of the 1797 conspiracy of whites, browns, and blacks.³⁶ The United Irishmen reworked it as a chapbook and distributed it to Belfast mill workers.³⁷ A second or third English translation, prepared by Joel Barlow with anonymous assistance from Thomas Jefferson, came out in 1802, when Volney may have been visiting England.³⁸

Volney voted in the French revolutionary assembly to abolish slavery. He foresaw a new age, and like Tom Paine and the United Irishmen, he saw it dawning in the west: “Turning towards the west . . . a cry of liberty, proceeding from far distant shores, resounds on the ancient continent.” He assailed the ruling logic of nationalism, having his Privileged Class say, “We must divide the people by national jealousies, and occupy them with commotions, wars, and conquests.” He critiqued the patriarchal family: “The King sleeps or smokes his pipe while his wife and daughters perform all the drudgery of the house.” He stood against the cupidity that “fomented in the bosom of every state an intestine war, in which the citizens, divided into contending corps of orders, classes, families, unremittently struggled to appropriate to themselves, under the name of su-

preme power, the ability to plunder every thing.” From this “arose a distinction of castes and races, which reduced to a regular system the maintenance of disorder” and perfected the science of oppression.³⁹

Volney explained that civilization had begun in Africa: “It was there that a people, since forgotten, discovered the elements of science and art, at a time when all other men were barbarous, and that a race, now regarded as the refuse of society, because their hair is woolly and their skin is dark, explored among the phenomena of nature, those civil and religious systems which have since held mankind in awe.”⁴⁰ Volney was a planetary wanderer who observed the variations inherent in humankind: “I contemplated with astonishment this gradation in color, from a bright carnation to a brown scarcely less bright, a dark brown, a muddy brown, bronze, olive, leaden, copper, as far as to the black of ebony and jet.” He wondered “who causeth his sun to shine alike on all the races of men, on the white as on the black, on the Jew, on the Mussulman, the Christian, and the Idolater”? He believed in a grand family of the human race. He wrote,

A scene of a new and astonishing nature then presented itself to my view. All the people and nations of the globe, every race of men from every different climate, advancing on all sides, seemed to assemble in one inclosure, and form in distinct groups an immense congress. The motley appearance of this innumerable crowd, occasioned by their diversity of dress, of features and of complexion, exhibited a most extraordinary and most attractive spectacle.

Volney raised the motley crowd to a universal ideal.

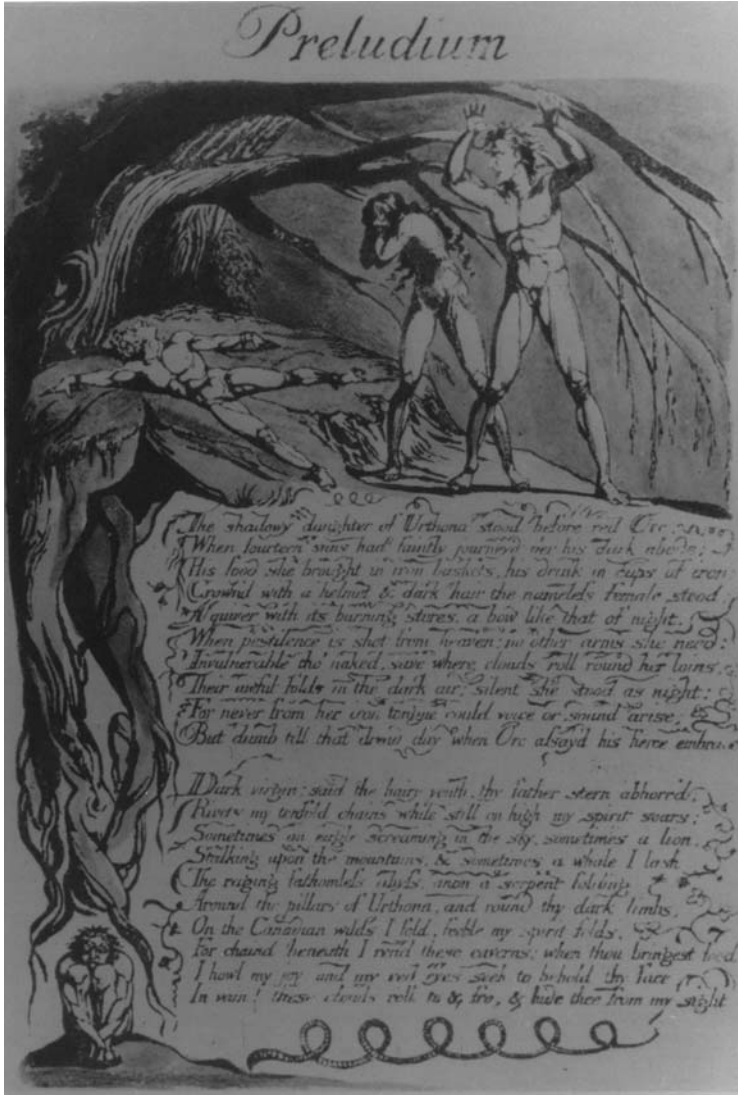
Although he escaped the guillotine under Robespierre, Volney, like Tom Paine, landed in prison. He was released, along with Paine, on 9 Thermidor 1794. He soon sailed to America, taking his first English lessons from a Venetian sailor. In the winter of 1795–96, he lived in Philadelphia, across the street from the African Church, which was crowded with refugees from revolutionary St. Domingue. Volney admired the inscription over its portal, “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 42). He made contacts in “enlightened” circles, but his behavior apparently transgressed the norms of white supremacy. He visited Thomas Jefferson at Monticello in the summer of 1796 and later wrote about a personal encounter he had there with slavery:

After dinner the master [Jefferson] and I went to see the slaves plant peas. Their bodies dirty brown rather than black, their dirty rags, their miserable hideous half-nakedness, these haggard figures, this secretive anxious air, the hateful timorous looks, altogether seized me with an initial sentiment of terror and sadness that I ought to hide my face from. Their indolence in turning up the ground with the hoe was extreme. The master took a whip to frighten them, and soon ensued a comic scene. Placed in the middle of the gang, he agitated, he grumbled, he menaced, and turned far and wide (on all sides) turning around. Now, as he turned his face, one by one, the blacks changed attitude: those whom he looked at directly worked the best, those whom he half saw worked least, and those he didn't see at all, ceased working altogether; and if he made an about-face, the hoe was raised to view, but otherwise slept behind his back.⁴¹

William Cobbett denounced Volney as an infidel and a cannibal, while Joseph Priestley accused him of Hottentotism. John Adams probably had him in mind when he complained that the United States was becoming a “receptacle of malevolence and turbulence, for the outcasts of the universe.” Jefferson himself believed that Volney was the principal object of the Act Concerning Aliens of 1798, which was designed to promote “purity of national character” and forced the Frenchman to sail back to Europe.⁴²

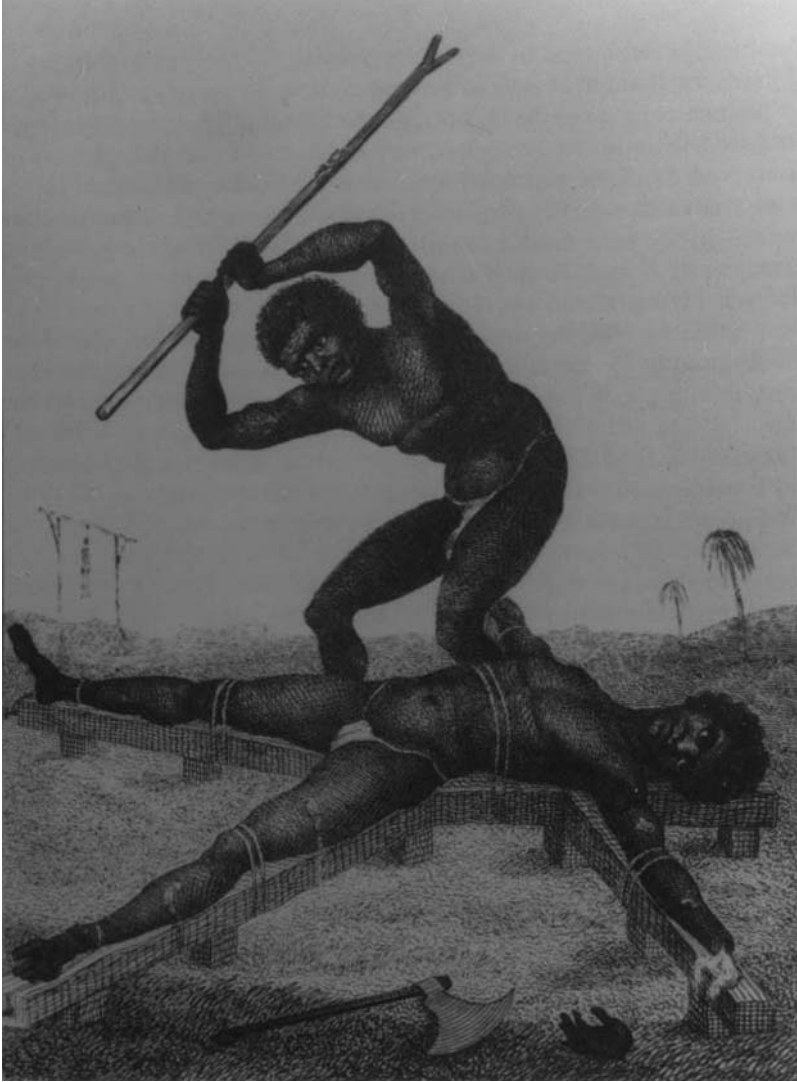
BLAKE'S AFRICAN ORC

William Blake wrote his prophecy *America* in 1793. Its prelude was illuminated, like the initial letter of a medieval manuscript, by the image of an outstretched figure—Orc, the symbol of revolution—pinioned spread-eagled to the ground, straining to be free. Blake derived the image from Captain John Gabriel Stedman, a mercenary soldier who had fought four years in Suriname against the maroons—escaped slaves who shared the tropical rain forest with Indians and other state-of-the-art forest dwellers—and lived to tell the tale. Stedman wrote a “narrative” and painted a hundred watercolors that he submitted in 1790 to Joseph Johnson, a publisher, who in turn hired Blake to help engrave the plates.⁴³



Orc, by William Blake. William Blake, *America a Prophecy* (1793).

From 1791 to 1794 Blake bore down, elbow grease mixing with the burin and copperplate, on these images of an American slave revolt. His poetry of this period—*Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Songs of Experience*, *America a Prophecy*, *The Four*



The Execution of Breaking on the Rack, c. 1776, by William Blake.
Stedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition.

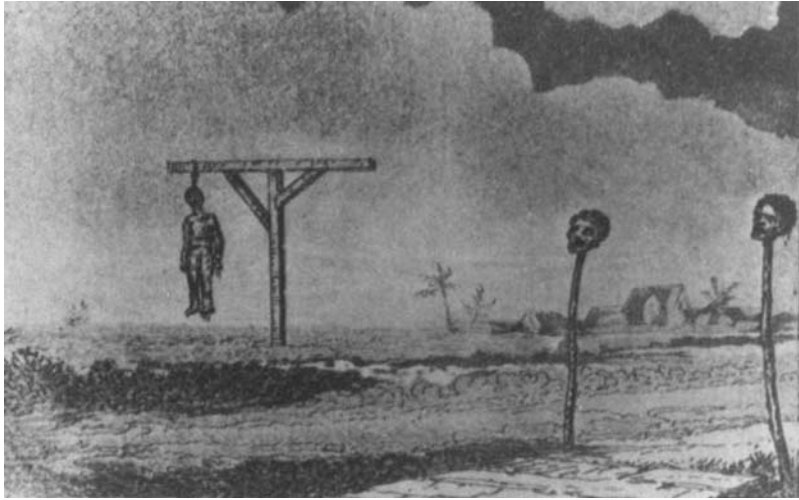
Zoas—and his politics (he paraded in a red liberty cap, the symbol of the emancipated slave) were deeply colored by Stedman's text, pictures, and friendship. One of the plates, entitled *The Execution of Breaking on the Rack*, provided the basis of his depiction of red Orc.

In the summer of 1776, Stedman had followed a crowd to the savannah to watch the execution of three African Americans. One of them, Neptune, had killed an overseer. He was pinioned to a rack on the ground. The executioner, a fellow African, chopped off his left hand, then used an iron rod to break and shatter his bones. Neptune lived. He fell from the rack “and Damn’d them all for a Pack of Barbarous Rascals, at the Same time Removing his right hand by the help of his Teeth, he Rested his Head on Part of the timber and ask’d the by Standers for a Pipe of Tobacco Which was infamously Answered by kicking & Spitting on him”—a final insult that Stedman and some American sailors intervened out of sympathy to stop. Neptune begged for the coup de grace, but it was denied him. He sang a song to take leave of his friends, and a second to tell his deceased relations that he would soon join them. He asked the sentinel on guard “how it came that he a White Man should have no meat.” The soldier answered, “Because I am not so rich.” Neptune responded, “Then I will make you a Present first pick my Hand that was Chopt off Clean to the Bones Sir—Next begin to [eat] myself till you be Glutted & you’ll have both Bread and Meat which best becomes you.” He laughed. When Stedman returned to the site of execution later in the day, he observed Neptune’s skull on the end of a stick, nodding at him. Frightened out of his wits, Stedman recovered only when he saw that a pecking vulture had set the skull in motion.

Reflecting fourteen years later on the experience, Stedman quoted the prophet Daniel in passages that referred to the island slave trade and prophesied deliverance by a prince. Blake conjoined the redeeming warrior of Daniel with the rebellious African American Neptune to create a revolutionary symbol of energy, desire, and freedom: Orc. In contrast to Neptune’s fate, in Blake’s *America*, a dark virgin brings food and drink to Orc and inspires him to break free. They make love. She exclaims,

*I know thee, I have found thee, & I will not let thee go;
Thou art the image of God who dwells in darkness of Africa.*

And with that ecstatic shout, Blake began his praise-song of the American Revolution, in which the meaning of “America” was no more restricted to the thirteen states of the U.S.A. than the meaning of “revolution” was restricted to the mutilating Constitution, which treated each African American as three fifths of a human being. Blake’s America was



Aftermath of the Demarara slave revolt, 1823. Joshua Bryant, Account of an Insurrection of the Negro Slaves in the Colony of Demarara (1824).

an African America, and his revolution included the emancipation of the whole person:

*Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field:
Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air;
Let the in chained soul shut up in darkness & in sighing,
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years;
Rise & look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open,
And let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge.*

Blake's vision was further compressed into a single, powerful symbol: the tiger. Stedman had written about the tigers and other wild cats of Suriname, where he and his fellow soldiers had once captured a jaguar in a chicken coop and drowned it. He described the cougar and the "Tiger-Cat Which is Extremely Beautiful . . . a Very Lively Animal With its Eyes emitting flashes of Lightning;—But ferocious, Mischievous, and not Tameable like the rest." Of the "Red Tiger" he wrote, "the head is small the Body thin the Limbs Long with tremendous whitish Claws The Teeth are Also Very Large, the Eyes prominent, and Sparkling like Stars." These observations inspired Blake's "The Tyger," part of *Songs of Experience*, published in 1793.⁴⁴

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

It lived in the forest, ferocious and untamable, a creature of the commons. In the poem's trochaic rhythm we hear hammer blows or the march of soldiers, or perhaps the blows upon Neptune's body:

*And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?*

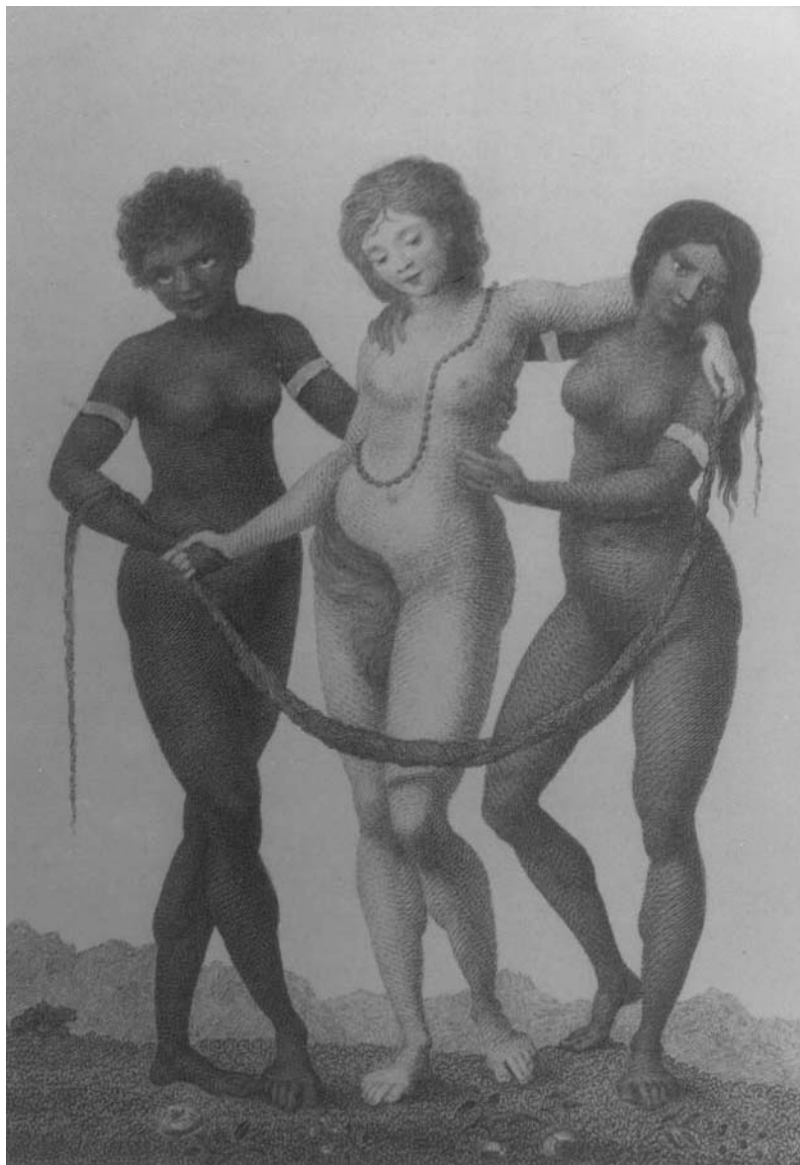
*What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?*

Stedman respected the creature, but only with the hunter's wish to kill it. Blake also wondered about the relation between hunter and hunted, but he widened it to include the larger social forces of oppressor and oppressed.

Stedman's *Narrative* concluded with *Europe supported by Africa & America*, a plate depicting three idealized nude women—white, black, and brown—standing arm in arm upon a green, with mountains in the distance. Stedman called it an emblematical picture “accompanied by an ardent wish that in the friendly manner as they are represented they may henceforth & to all eternity be the prop of each other; and I might have included *Asia* but this I omitted as having no Connection with the Present Narrative—we all only differ in the Colour but we are Certainly Created by the same hand & after the Same Mould”—lines that echoed Blake's own belief about the “everlasting gospel” and that helped him to compose his first draft of “The Tyger,” which asked,

*In what clay & in what mould
Were thy eyes of fury roll'd?*

Stedman himself had fought against freedom, but he nonetheless brought the revolution of the Americas to Blake in a way that was consis-



*Europe supported by Africa & America, by William Blake.
Sedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition.*

tent with what Blake would have learned during the same period from Ottobah Cugoano and other abolitionists. Blake discovered in the revolts of the slaves of the Americas a revolutionary energy, politics, and vision.

After 1795, Blake would continue to write poetry that drew on American struggles, but he would not publish another line for ten years. In 1797 he wrote *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, describing child labor at grinding wheels and workers in brick kilns:

*Then All the Slaves from every Earth in the wide Universe
Sing a New Song drowning confusion in its happy notes.*

The New Song would be sung by an African, wrote Blake. The phrase referred either to Revelation 4, in which the scroll is opened by the harp players and the Lion of Judah, or to Isaiah 42, where justice will shine on every race, “a beacon for the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring captives out of prison.” Blake continued, “The good of all the Land is before you, for Mystery is no more.” He meant that ideological manacles were to be cast away.⁴⁵ Isaiah 42 was the most well-thumbed part of the Hebrew Bible for the Atlantic proletariat; these passages would have been instantly recognizable to the Afro-Baptists of Savannah, the Iroquois followers of Joseph Brant, the worshipers of the Free African Society in Philadelphia, George Liele’s congregation in Kingston, or the “Tom Paine Methodists” of Sheffield. They would have known about jubilee, universalism, and Isaiah’s appeal to “you that sail the sea, and all the sea-creatures, and you that inhabit the coasts and islands.” These people had affected Blake himself, who in 1793 had expressed his hopes of freedom through an African torture victim in a South American colony. Yet ten years later he could ask in the song “Jerusalem,” an unofficial anthem in the English-speaking world,

*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England’s mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England’s pleasant pastures seen?*

The world had been different ten years earlier, when freedom was not merely *English*.

“SEIZE THE FIRE”

The years 1790–1792 were a revolutionary moment. Egalitarian, multi-ethnic conceptions of humanity had not evolved in isolation, but rather through solidarity and connection, within and among social movements and individuals. Blake had certainly crossed paths with Equiano (perhaps their mutual acquaintance Cugoano introduced them). The L.C.S. published a cheap edition of the *Ruins*, which Hardy carried in his pocket. Blake studied Volney. The friendship of Olaudah Equiano and Thomas and Lydia Hardy proved that Atlantic combinations—African and Scot, Englishwoman and African American man—were powerful and of historic significance. Volney demonstrated the power of laughter and the centrality of Africa, to civilization in general and to the struggle between Privileged Class and People in particular. Blake embodied the anamnesis of seventeenth-century radicalism and insisted that the liberation of the imprisoned and the enslaved was necessary to all freedom struggles. All showed that the early 1790s were an expansive time for redefining what it meant to be a human being. But that time would not last.

When casualties began to mount after the British expeditions against Haiti in 1795–96, panic—and racism—spread through society. This was, as we have seen, the very moment when the biological category of race was being formed and disseminated in Britain and America, and no less the moment of the formation of the political and economic category of class. Organizations such as the L.C.S. would eventually make their peace with the nation, as the working class became national, *English*. With the rise of pan-Africanism, the people in diaspora became a noble *race* in exile. The three friends became unthinkable within ethnic and nationalist historiography. Volney disappeared from radical scholarship, except among the pan-Africanists and “Ethiopianists” who kept him in print.⁴⁶ What began as repression thus evolved into mutually exclusive narratives that have hidden our history.

English sailors and commoners wanted to stay in Bermuda rather than sail on to Virginia, and some, after they got there, deserted to Algonquian villages. Diggers built communes upon the “earthly treasury” on George’s Hill as the light shone in Buckinghamshire. Resistance to slavery extended from Putney Common to the estuarial waters of the river

Gambia. Renegades who fought with Bacon against slavery in Virginia escaped to the swampy commons of Roanoke. Pirate rovers of the deep hindered the advance of West African slaving and offered occasional refuge. The outcasts gathered at John Hughson's tavern in New York for laughter and hospitality. Black preachers searched the Atlantic for a place to build a new Jerusalem. Sheffield cutlers pocketed the "wasters." Colonel Edward Marcus Despard redistributed land in Belize. Elizabeth Campbell staged a little jubilee in Jamaica. The mutineers escaped the regimen of the *Bounty* for the beautiful ecology and people of Tahiti. One of them, Peter Heywood, his legs covered with tattoos, composed a poem, "Dream," in praise of the "beauteous morals," simplicity, and generosity of the friendships he formed in Tahiti, contrasting them with the expropriation, exploitation, and possessive individualism of his own civilization. He would have gazed at the sky to see the southern constellation of stars known as the Hydra, the ancient sign of navigators, preceding even the agrarian signals of the Nile for the wanderers of the planet. To do this he would have sat not quite on the ground, but upon the root of the breadfruit tree, the nourishing commons of the Pacific. He would have meditated, in that hopeful moment of 1791, like Thomas and Lydia Hardy, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Wolfe Tone, Constantin François Volney, Edward and Catherine Despard, and William Blake—but only Heywood sat in the Pacific. Captain William Bligh used Pacific breadfruit to support Atlantic slavery, and he had Heywood captured and tried for his life. The globalizing powers have a long reach and endless patience. Yet the planetary wanderers do not forget, and they are ever ready from Africa to the Caribbean to Seattle to resist slavery and restore the commons.

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes!
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?*