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**‘Black Atlantic Maritime Networks, Resistance and the American ‘Domestic’
Slave Trade’**

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Abstract

This article contributes to the history of Atlantic maritime radicalism during the Age of Revolution by examining the formation and operation of maritime networks of resistance and solidarity in the context of the coastwise United States. ‘domestic’ slave trade. After 1807, the seas along the Atlantic seaboard and into the Gulf of Mexico were enclosed for the purposes of legally trans-shipping enslaved peoples from the Chesapeake to the antebellum slave markets. The Florida Straits – a densely trafficked maritime chokepoint – became a contested space shaped legally, geo-politically, and physically by the limits of slavery at sea. Rather than viewing this globally significant maritime space as primarily a site of contestation between British imperial sovereignty and US internecine national politics, this article focuses on the undercurrents of collective Black Atlantic political action, memory and connection that shaped the Straits as a trans-national maritime route from slavery to freedom from below.

Introduction

In 1841, just two years after the famous insurrection aboard the Spanish slave ship, the *Amistad*, the American brig, the *Creole* was plying the American coastwise trade route from Richmond, Virginia to the New Orleans slave markets. As the vessel neared the Bahama Islands, the captives took the ship and forced the crew to sail for Nassau where slavery had been abolished. On arrival, all 153 captives claimed their freedom (Jones 1975; Jervej and Huber 1980; Johnson 2008). Their success reverberated through the slave plantations and ports of the Greater Caribbean and around the Atlantic circuits of exchange. The mutiny alarmed already anxious antebellum planters, embroiled New Orleans maritime underwriters in a series of high profile court cases, radicalized the transnational abolition campaigns and contributed to highlighting Nassau a favoured destination for fugitive slaves. The revolt has since become an iconic moment in African American history and cultural memory where the singular brilliance of its leader, Madison Washington is justly celebrated (Sundquist 1993). Elsewhere, the story of the *Creole* has been of scholarly interest insofar as its outcome provoked a testy diplomatic incident between America and Britain. The American government, outraged at what they

termed the illegal ‘siezure’ of their bonds-people demanded financial redress from the British and in the end, after an increasingly heated correspondence that lasted for years, the British conceded to the demand (Downey 2014). The ruling by a claims commission decreed that the enslaved had been property aboard a lawful voyage and thus they remained subject to Virginia’s fugitive slave laws. Thus, as the historian of abolition, Seymour Drescher, has put it, the *Creole* mutiny marked ‘the apex of the clash between Britons and Americans over the limits of slavery at sea’ (Drescher 2009: 315).

Black Atlantic Networks and Maritime Radicalism

As the story attests, the limits of slavery at sea were not only fought over abstractly, yet vehemently, by high-ranking Euro-American politicians and diplomats, they were also constructed and dismantled violently and desperately, on the decks of transoceanic and coastal slaving vessels plying the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The making and unmaking of slavery at sea was constituted by, and through, the construction of maritime space. In this sense, the *Creole* mutiny can be productively linked into the global and connected character of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Age of Revolution illuminating the ways in which slave revolt intersected with wider transnational radicalisms and with maritime and subaltern dynamics of resistance during the period. As Rediker and Linebaugh have argued the oceans were connected and global spaces of incubation and vectors for the diffusion and circulation of political dissent (Rediker 1987; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). Recent research has begun to map further the complex and multiple ways in which these maritime and subaltern dynamics were contingently related to imperial, legal, national and commercial cross cutting lines of power both regionally and internationally (Benton 2009; Subramanian 2016).

This article builds on these sea-centred ways of viewing the confluence between space, agency and political economy in order to draw out more specifically the networked nature of early nineteenth century revolutionary Atlantic oceanic space into which the *Creole* mutineers and many other enslaved peoples sailed and found freedom, whether purposefully or unexpectedly. While the *Creole* mutiny was a singular event, placing it in a wider context helps to illuminate the transnational, translocal and local striations of

communication, solidarity and memory that gave political and socially subversive shape to the oceans, and particularly to one of the most strategically important, heavily trafficked, and treacherous waterways of the modern circum-Atlantic: the seas immediately surrounding and including the Straits of Florida.

This oceanic chokepoint, bordered by North America, the British and the Spanish Caribbean and classified as the high seas, condensed the heavy maritime traffic voyaging between the ports of the western Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico and ports along the eastern American coast and Europe. Historically, it had provided rich pickings for the pirates and wreckers who considered it a liquid commons. Over at least three centuries, the sea-way was a crucial nodal point in the development of global slave-produced commodity circuits, and by the early nineteenth century, it remained a key site for both illegal and legal slave trafficking and a regional space for the performance of inter-imperial rivalry. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the United State's nascent maritime empire sought to extend its sovereignty eastwards into the Atlantic and southwards into the Gulf in the context of British-lead abolitionism from above and Black Atlantic abolitionism from below.

Winsboro and Knetsch have recently been conceptualized the Florida Straits as a 'saltwater railroad' linking Florida to the Bahamas. Drawing on Thomas Bender's call for globalizing American history (Bender 2002), they argue that acknowledging the importance of this line of flight for fugitive slaves challenges the 'stereotypical "Bound for the Northern Star" imagery of the American Underground Railroad' (Winsboro and Knetsch 2013: 77). Shifting the focus away from traditional historical geographies of flight to the American North towards far less analysed areas of the Atlantic world – to the Bahamas and the wider Caribbean - certainly disrupts nationally bound histories of slave resistance. The idea that this route was an alternative 'railroad', however, maps a quite narrow set of connections (between Florida and the Bahamas) isolating them from a wider set of overlapping regional, trans-oceanic trajectories, political influences and networks within which slave resistance took place. Moreover, the idea of an alternative 'railroad', while useful, risks suggesting that it was established within, and in relation to, organized American anti-slavery activism. As Barnor Hesse has noted, however, the *Creole* mutiny, rather than the *Amistad* revolt was significant because it was an

‘indictment of slavery, not in the Caribbean under Spanish jurisdiction, but of slavery in the US under US jurisdiction’, registering a ‘black political ethos and a critique of *racial* democracy that denied and defied the paternalism of white abolitionism (Hesse 2002: 153, 154).

Escape from enslavement in the Americas depended more and more on the geopolitical literacy of fugitives. Haitian independence in 1804, British emancipation in 1833 and the legal complexities of efforts to suppress the transatlantic slave trade radically changed the contours of bondage and freedom. As outright marronage became less possible, knowledge of the ocean’s political geography, its shifting zones of slavery and freedom, imperial authority, peripheral possibility and contradiction became vital for identifying successful lines of flight. Such knowledge certainly circulated, and it was acted upon, at times successfully and at others unsuccessfully, highlighting the existence of multi-layered oceanic networks and circulations that do not tend to be explored or privileged in received histories of globalization. Excavating the nature of these networks – how they were forged, sustained, and enacted by subaltern actors - is notoriously difficult given the dearth of sources, the necessarily covert nature of such knowledge and actions, not to mention the long established tradition of nationally oriented land-based – or as Marcus Rediker has termed it, ‘terracentric’ - history-writing (Rediker 2014: 2-3). Nevertheless, when they rose, the *Creole* mutineers were sailing along porous eastern American seaboard, and were thus situated at the very edges of freedom. The following analysis takes its lead from the intimations of connection, shards of individual and collective memory and barely documented threads of solidarity that pepper the (white) archive of the *Creole* and pursues them in order to map something of the currents of collective Black Atlantic political action and connection from below which helped to negotiate, establish, and secure a trans-national maritime route from slavery to freedom not just for the enslaved aboard the *Creole* but for many others.

Most broadly, the *Creole* was sailing in the aftermath of a set of land-based American slave revolts inspired by the Haitian revolution and scriptural prophecy. The wave of revolts and conspiracies to revolt were politically motivated, collectively planned and included enslaved men and women who had been regarded as trustworthy. These features also extended to the maritime context of American slave transportation. In this

sense, the mutiny aboard the *Creole* needs to be viewed in the context of earlier unsuccessful slave ship rebellions which occurred aboard the American schooner, *Decatur* in 1826, and another on the *Lafayette* three years later. The two mutinies reveal that the enslaved, jammed together in the stinking slave pens on shore and then distributed across slavers leaving for New Orleans, were inspired by the proximity of Haiti to attempt mass insurrection. They embarked, already harbouring a sense of what it might mean collectively to rise up, spreading mutiny from ship to ship. Further, it looks as if, at least in one instance, there existed solidarity between white crewmen and captive cargoes in securing their goal.

When two of the *Decatur*'s crew members arrived in Boston at the end of May, 1826, their accounts of the mutiny were widely reported in the press. The vessel had left Baltimore bound for the slave markets of New Orleans carrying thirty two enslaved men and women, property of the well-known Baltimore slave merchant, Austin Woodford or Woolfolk. Apparently, one crew-member had been concerned 'there being only two or three pair of hand-cuffs on board of the vessel' although the Captain retorted that he 'had frequently been engaged in transporting slaves' and had 'never had any difficulty' (*Evening Post* 1826: p. 2).

On the morning of April 26th, two of the captives, Thomas Harrod and Manuel Wilson, came up behind the Captain and pitched him overboard. The others, who were on deck, immediately ran aft, jettisoned the mate and took possession of the cabin. John Sutton, the helmsman, did not alter the vessel's course until the captives ordered him to redirect to St. Domingo. In the late afternoon, they were accosted by the *Constitution*, a large whaling ship, returning from the Pacific with a full cargo of oil, bound for Nantucket. The mutineers hid the transformation of authority aboard by presenting themselves as victims of a terrible accident during which the ship's officers had been lost overboard. The whalers believed their performance and took seventeen captives aboard but failed to take the ship (*Salem Gazette* 1826: 3).

After three days, another American ship, the *Rourke*, en route from the Canary Islands to New York, found the *Decatur* drifting. The mutineers forced the crew to mask the mutiny again with the same story of the unfortunate loss of the ship's officers overboard. The *Rourke* took fourteen captives more aboard, and ordered that the *Decatur*

keep company back to New York. The ships became separated and the *Decatur* arrived in New York harbour a day before the *Rourke* (*Alexandria Gazette* 1826: 2). It is unclear how, but the fourteen mutineers aboard the *Rourke* fled North as soon as the vessel docked, initiating a huge man-hunt. Only one, William Bowser, was accosted in Westchester, and brought back to New York and convicted for the murders of the *Decatur*'s Captain and mate.

Something of Bowser's story prior to his arrest unfolded in court. The shred of biographical information casts some light on how Bowser was prepared to become one of the *Decatur* rebels. A young man of twenty-four at the time of his arrest, he was born near Baltimore and had been sold once before. He had also already made an attempt to free himself. He had been thrown in jail for absconding, which is where Woolfolk found him. Woolfolk took Bowser, along with several other imprisoned slaves, to his own pen where he held him chained for a month until he had acquired sufficient captives to make for a shipment South. Those four weeks would have provided ample time for the prisoners to tell their stories, and to reflect collectively on the imagined and real possibilities for escape afforded by their imminent transportation. Despite abolitionist reports that he had repented his crime of murder in his cell, he remained resolute about his reasons: 'The great object ... which he and his companions had in view, was to obtain their freedom' (*Berks and Schuylkill Journal* 1827: 1). Bowser was hung at Ellis Island on the morning of December 15th 1826.

There had been little that was exceptional about the voyage of the *Decatur* until the mutiny. It was one of the hundreds of vessels engaged in the burgeoning sea-borne part of the American domestic slave trade that transshipped thousands of enslaved African Americans southwards along the Eastern coast of North America, along the Gulf coast and on to the slave markets of New Orleans between 1808 and 1863 (Gudmestad 2003; Deyle 2006; Rothman 2009; Johnson 2009; Schermerhorn 2014; 2015).

The American 'domestic' slave trade

The contours of the domestic sea-borne slave trade were shaped by imperial tensions caused by commercial rivalry and the outlawing of the transatlantic slave. As

Jean Allain notes, the British decision to suppress the trafficking of Africans was to become *the* issue with global implications during most of the nineteenth century, requiring the collective organisation of states around the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. At the heart of the matter was not the slave trade per se but various states' understanding of the freedom of the seas. (Allain, 2004: 342) While the American government agreed to police the transatlantic route in an effort to stamp out the now illegal trade, it refused to assist in joint cruising exercises or to allow the Royal Navy to 'visit and search' American ships at sea. This refusal was bolstered domestically by the lobbying power of Southern slaveholders, Northern merchants, ship-builders and commercial houses seeking the protection of American 'freedoms' of trade (Sparks 2016: 27). Externally, the refusal to concede to the 'visit and search' policy reflected suspicions that British philanthropic efforts were serving as a cloak for maintaining their maritime imperial hegemony. It also reflected outrage at the British impressment of American sailors that led, in part, to war in 1812 (Allain 2004: 368).

The result of the American's position meant that slave traders worldwide could gloss their illegal voyages with the American flag. As further European nations agreed to the British right to search ships on the high seas, Africans were increasingly funneled into Cuba and Brazil, and into the antebellum states and westward to Texas under the cover of American sovereignty often through the Straits of Florida. Du Bois estimated that the American flag facilitated the transportation of more than a million Africans across the Atlantic between 1820 and 1860 (Sparks 2016; Du Bois 2007: 98).

Despite, or rather because of, their luke-warm commitment to suppression, the official abolition of the slave trade entailed American national sovereignty expanding to support the mercantile imperatives of the international slave trading economy. America sought to differentiate its domestic slaving from transatlantic slaving by enclosing the seas in support of the expansion of slavery inside the nation's borders. Nonetheless, while it appeared as 'national' in nature, it remained supported by much older, colonially inflected, transatlantic chains of commodity demand and credit (Schermerhorn 2014: 900).

The domestic saltwater slave trade from the Chesapeake through the Florida Straits and to New Orleans developed from an incidental activity emerging after 1807 to

a fully-fledged organized business operation by the 1820s. Several large shipping companies dominated the trade owning their own vessels and employing dedicated ship's captains for the routine route. If, as Marcus Rediker has powerfully argued, the transatlantic slaving vessels were 'world-changing machines' wholly dedicated transforming African captives into enslaved peoples while *en route* to the Americas (Rediker 2007: 41) then American domestic slavers considered their captives to be already made into slaves before embarkation.

Given the risk of British interference, and the ubiquitous uses to which the American flag could be put, American domestic slave traders distinguished and legitimized their coastal vessels and their human cargo via their documentation. Ship's manifests, sworn affidavits by carriers, ship's Masters and Customs Collectors and insurance policies nationalized the status of the enslaved as persons and as legal property. The affidavits confirmed that the enslaved were neither 'illegally imported' nor 'entitled to freedom ... at a certain time, and after a known period of Service' (Colonial Office 1835a: n.p.). Unlike the transatlantic ships, whose manifests were instrumental in the process of rendering African persons into slaves and items of cargo via the instrumentalism of numbers, domestic manifests listed the names, ages, and racialising marks of those who were already enslaved. The manifests and affidavits thus acted as both individualising and collective passports and bills of lading, designating those bound for the Southern slave markets as legally transportable (human) American property in transit between two American ports.

The manifests 'embodied the fiction of an intra-national trade route' but the vessels did not sail close to the coastline (Schermerhorn 2014: 904). As with all maritime traffic voyaging between ports of the western Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico and ports along the Atlantic east coast and in Europe, the swift flowing Gulf Stream current, unpredictable counter-currents, calms in summer, hurricanes and gales, vessels had to steer wide and then negotiate the hazardous and narrow shipping lanes through the Bahamas in order to access the Gulf. Sidney Edward Morse noted the necessity of an indirect route in his *New System of Modern Geography* published in 1822,

Owing to the immense number of sand banks, rocks, and breakers, everywhere dispersed over these seas, the navigation is extremely dangerous, and thousands of vessels have been wrecked here. Vessels bound to New Orleans from the

United States first make for the Hole in the Wall, the southern point of Abaco. Proceeding through the N.E. Channel, they enter the Great Bank S. of the Berry Islands, and leave it south of the Cat Keys, whence they make for the Havana (Morse 1822: 247).

While they were protected politically, by flag and by bill of lading, domestic slavers diffused the physical risks of taking to the high seas with potentially mutinous captive cargoes via their marine insurance policies.

It is not clear whether the *Decatur* was insured but the *Creole* certainly was (Robinson 1845: 202-354). The marine insurance business had crossed the Atlantic and extended coverage to American transatlantic slave traders by the end of the eighteenth century. By the 1820s, the domestic trade brought lucrative new business to the port cities from Baltimore to Charleston and New Orleans. The policies used the same legal infrastructure as had been used in the transatlantic trade with adaptations for the local geopolitical context and for the peculiar the nature of the American ‘cargo’. They covered standard ‘perils of the sea’ but they also included the risk of ‘foreign interference’. Moreover, clauses could be appended that extended the cover to account for the risk of ‘elopement’ or mutiny, although, they were not always used. The policies thus further secured the ships as national space and the trafficked peoples as American owned human property binding the vessels into a nationally oriented financially speculative network. The identification of the risk of mutiny or ‘elopement’ indicates that traffickers were aware of possibilities for resistance, and thus financial loss for them, given the nature of the maritime geography that needed to be negotiated. The fact that traders and slave owners did not always pay for these risks to be included in the standard marine policies speaks to a complacency born out of the everyday rhythms of the business of human trafficking and the assumption that enslaved Africans might be prone to rise up at sea but enslaved Creoles were not. These pathologising assumptions further domesticated American slavery in order to distinguish it from the global reaches of the transatlantic trade (Rupprecht 2016).

Domestic slave ships were never wholly given over to human trafficking. Like the *Decatur*, they always carried other commodities alongside their human cargoes, were rarely armed. Moreover, the enslaved were not usually restrained during daylight. While crews exerted mastery over their captives, unlike transatlantic voyages, they, and their

captives, spoke a common language that bore on the shape of any resistant action. Domestic slave ship crews suffered the degrading servitude and violence common to all maritime employment. The helmsman of the *Decatur* had remained at his post at the time of the mutiny suggesting that he may have supported the rebels. The helmsman of the *Creole* had done the same (Parliamentary Papers 1843b: 143).

The significance of the opportunity to plan maritime resistance prior to the voyage can be seen just three years later when in 1829, a revolt took place on the *Lafayette* which had left Norfolk harbour bound for New Orleans. Some of the 197 captives had been transshipped from another slaving vessel, the *Ajax*, which was also lying in the harbour. As with the *Decatur*, newspaper reports suggest the complacency of the Captain and crew in the face of the potential for an uprising. The large slaver carried extra cargo, and other white ‘passengers’.

The mutiny was triggered in the early hours of the morning of the third night out when three captives attacked the Captain with ‘handspikes, knives and billets of wood’. A vicious fight with the crew ensued, and then, allegedly, the thirty or forty rebels who had amassed made a critical mistake. Retreating along the deck, they jumped into the hold whereupon the mariners were able to trap them by securing the hatches. It was reported that twenty-five men, who were deemed to be the leaders of the affray, were ring-bolted to the deck, and kept that way until the *Lafayette* reached New Orleans.

During their interrogation, however, the captives revealed the magnitude of their plot. The details of the rising had been carefully developed and organized aboard the *Ajax* while it lay in Norfolk harbour, and calculated to roll out across a set of different slaving vessels. The *Ajax* sailed a few days after the *Lafayette*, and it was later reported that a revolt had been planned but that, reputedly, it was betrayed before it could be staged. The *Lafayette* rebels undercut whatever reassurance might have been supplied to the enemy by the revelation of fragile solidarities, however, when they also suggested that a third mutiny was yet to take place. They told their interrogators that another slaver, the *Transport*, following on behind the *Ajax*, was also carrying captives who were committed to the same plan (*Baltimore Patriot* 1830: 1).

Even though the twin insurrections aboard the *Lafayette* and the *Ajax* had been unsuccessful, the prospect of coordinated waves of shipboard mutinies, breaking along

the nautical trade route along the southeastern seaboard and into the Gulf, exacerbated the already well-established alarm amongst Southern slave owners. For Southerners who worried about the potential for slave insurrection, the revolutionary potential unleashed by St. Domingue loomed large in their fevered imaginations. The fact that these militants had, like the rebels aboard the *Decatur*, ‘confessed that their object was to slay the whites and run the vessel to St.Domingo’ simply confirmed for them that slave revolution haunted them at every turn. The *New Orleans Courier*, reflecting on the information that suggested that the *Lafayette* rising was not an isolated incident, glossed its incendiary nature, perhaps unsurprisingly, by claiming that the plots were the result of moral degeneracy rather than political impetus. The rebellions were, the editors argued, ‘among many of the evil consequences attendant upon the system followed, by our northern neighbours of sending the most worthless and abandoned portion of their slave population to this place’ (*New Orleans Courier* 1829). Nevertheless, the fact that the mutiny plots indicated the circulation of subversive communication that might lead to actual action also struck a lasting chord with the southern plantocracy.

When news of the *Creole* mutiny broke in 1841, it was assumed that the rebellion was also implicated in a wider and premeditated maritime conspiracy. One newspaper reported that

the entire scheme was resolved upon before the brig left Richmond is evident from the fact, that the negroes boasted at Nassau that they expected to encounter the brigs *Long-Island* and *Orleans*, which sailed from Richmond in company with the *Creole* with cargoes of slaves. Both of these vessels, however are safe in port (*Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* 1841: 2).

The newspaper’s claim was unsubstantiated although Solomon Northup had been trafficked aboard the *Orleans* a couple of months earlier. He wrote about his part in the detailed planning of a very similarly staged shipboard rebellion that was not finally activated (Northup 1855: 68-72). The report speaks to an historical accumulation of southern anxieties about the possibility that disparate moments of slave resistance might consolidate via maritime means.

As Sinha notes, the *Creole* revolt ‘smacked of cosmopolitan political sophistication rather than the elemental and natural terms in which writers and historians have described it’ although the rebels decided not sail for the new republic. (Sinha, 2016:

412) Madison Washington, who led the mutiny, perhaps remembering the *Amistad* rebels, had wanted, at first, to steer the ship across the Atlantic, demanding that the crew sail for Liberia. On being informed that the brig was too small and ill equipped for a transatlantic voyage, he listened to his fellow rebels who suggested an alternative route. They stated that ‘they wanted to go to the British islands; they did not want to go anywhere else but where Mr. Lumpkin’s Negroes went last year’. Lumpkin’s notorious slave jail was in Richmond, from where the *Creole* had departed. The rebel’s knowledge ‘Lumpkin’s Negroes’ speaks to what Phillip Troutman has termed the ‘geopolitical literacy’ of the enslaved (Troutman 2004). Their story is far less dramatic insofar as no mutiny took place. The success of the *Creole* rebels, however, can, in part, be understood in the context of the fate of those who had been aboard the domestic slave ship, the *Hermosa*.

Translocal solidarities and local networks

‘Lumpkin’s Negroes’ had found freedom when the *Hermosa* foundered on the Bahamian shoals. That the men and women aboard the *Hermosa* were freed under British law is fairly well documented as well as the fact that this was not the first time that American slave traders had ‘lost’ their property through shipwreck. The legal eventuality was not inevitable, however. It was enabled, and enforced, by a set of localized actions by both land-based and maritime Africans and Afro-Bahamians – wreckers, newly arrived Africans ‘liberated’ from illegal transatlantic slavers, ex-slave Creole mariners, spongers, turtlers, fishermen and local Bahamians - which were then repeated when the *Creole* rebels finally arrived in Nassau. While these actions were not overtly co-ordinated, they ensured – repeatedly - that British colonial officials did not bow to American pressure to return the enslaved to their ‘owners’. When the *Hermosa* foundered, Bahamian wreckers were quickly on the scene.

The tradition of Bahamian wrecking reaches back to the period of Caribbean free-booting, and buccaneering and provides one of the central nodes for the overlapping networks at issue here. By the mid nineteenth century, the wrecking community maintained many of its customary practices, asserting their rights to the spoils of the sea

in contestation with colonial attempts to regulate salvaging activities. Made up of poor whites, enslaved and free Creoles, and Liberated Africans, the wreckers had long had a reputation for being little other than smugglers and pirates despite the fact that they were a community of skilled mariners dedicated to the profession (Wright 1915). When the Bahamian wreckers arrived at the *Hermosa*, they would have been interested in salvaging the vessel and its cargo of cotton and tobacco but they were also aware of the consequences of ferrying the American slaves into Nassau rather than Key West.

The wrecker's livelihoods had been severely diminished by aggressive American expansionism into what they regarded as the commons of the high seas. America acquired control of Florida in 1819, established an anti-piracy naval presence at Key West and passed legislation in 1825 that monopolized the regional wrecking business for themselves (Dodd 1944). These moves to extend American maritime sovereignty were not simply in the service of the regulating, protecting and indeed, stealing trade, however. Bahamian wreckers, with their motley crews and customary practices, also smudged the lines of the slave based racial order in ways that disturbed southerners. For example, in 1822, the U.S. Revenue Cutter, *Alabama*, duped Bahamian wreckers into locating a Cape Florida settler called Levi James whom they arrested on charges of piracy. In retaliation, James informed the cutter's captain that the wreckers had helped runaway slaves cross from the Keys to the Bahamas. On this information, the captain arrested the wreckers and transported them to Mobile where they were released without trial for lack of evidence. In exonerating themselves for these actions, Key West officials later explained to the Bahamian government that the arrests had not been made on the basis of aiding runaways but because there were enslaved crewmembers aboard the wrecking boats and the boats were in American waters (Veile 2001: 26). The inference was that the wreckers were engaged in illegally landing slaves in the United States. Levi James, the pirate, was most probably telling the truth, however. Wreckers were providing a crucial conduit to freedom by helping to ferry Black Seminoles and runaway slaves, escaping extermination in Florida, to the Andros Islands during the early 1820s (Howard 2002).

Nearly twenty years later, when the wreckers sailed out to the foundered *Hermosa*, they took the enslaved aboard their (British) vessels and, according to the Captain, Chattin's, 'Protest' they ignored his request that they sail for Florida. Instead,

they sailed to Green Turtle Key, a Bahamian port of entry. Once at the Key, colonial customs officials divested Chattin of the *Hermosa*'s manifest - the document sanctioning American sovereignty over the enslaved – and ‘caused a copy of it to be made including the description of the slaves’ which one wrecker then took to Nassau. While Chattin was ashore arguing with the Customs officers, stipendiary magistrates and a preacher boarded the wrecking vessels to speak privately to the enslaved. They informed the forty-eight that ‘they were free, and might go where they pleased’ (*Parliamentary Papers* 1843a: 200).

The following day, Chattin told how the wreckers ferried the group to Nassau where Customs House officials and the quarantine officer came alongside to inform the wreckers that the enslaved ‘were under siezure’. He sought support from the resident American Consul but before they could finish writing their protest, they saw the captives being landed on the harbour side, and then marched, under guard, to the magistrate’s office where officials were already in receipt of the *Hermosa*'s papers. Chattin and the Consul arrived to find magistrates confirming the identity of each African American, and then asking them, one by one, if they would like to remain in Nassau and ‘be free’ or to travel on to New Orleans. All elected to remain except one, who later changed his mind. The magistrates then identified those who were under twenty-one in order that they may be apprenticed, and ‘other things were said to the slaves’. This legal process took place as local Bahamians amassed around the court-house. ‘The mob was so great’, Chattin said, that he could not hear what was being said and that he and the American Consul were ‘forced out of doors’. He complained that the British West India Regiment, (who would have included armed Liberated Africans), then prevented him from having access to the African Americans as they spent their first night of freedom housed in Crown buildings on the harbour. By the time he arrived to make another attempt to claim them the next morning, it seems that the soldiers had made sure that the group had disappeared into the Nassau market crowds (*Parliamentary Papers* 1843: 201).

It is not clear whether the *Creole* mutineers knew about the process by which ‘Lumpkin’s Negroes’ became free, only that they knew freedom had been the outcome of shipwreck. Thus, it is not possible to know whether they knew that the wreckers, the Afro-Bahamian ‘mob’ and the Liberated African soldiers had acted collaboratively to

ensure this outcome more than once before. In 1831, prior to the British Emancipation Act, the *Comet*, one of the four dedicated slavers owned by the powerful trading firm, Franklin & Armfield, had departed from Alexandria, Virginia bound on its routine voyage for New Orleans with 165 captives aboard. On January 3rd, 1831, it was wrecked off Abaco. Bahamian wreckers rescued the Captain, crew, and the enslaved, transporting them in a number of their small boats first to Spanish Key, little more than a bare rock, and then on to Green Turtle Key. In his Protest, the Captain, Staples, said that he ‘endeavoured to make terms with the Wreckers to convey the slaves to Key West or some other Port of the United States, which they positively refused to do and insisted on conveying the Passengers Slaves and materials of the Wreck to the Island of New Providence’ (Colonial Office 1834a: n.p.).

The enslaved arrived outside Nassau aboard three Bahamian wrecking vessels and thus under the British flag, one of which was aptly named *The Carpenter’s Revenge*. Staples, who had been ‘compelled to accede to their terms’ was still determined to make New Orleans and attempted to prevent his ‘cargo’ from landing on British soil. He sent notice to the Commercial Agent of their arrival seeking confirmation that they might enter the port so that he might procure another ship. On the Agent’s positive reply, the wrecking vessels entered the harbor. Nevertheless, eleven enslaved men who could not have been sure that they had reached safety, leapt overboard and swam to shore. In one of the only moments where the enslaved can be heard in the records of these events, one of these captives, Nelson Lemon, later told the police magistrate that they had swum to shore in the middle of the night where they ‘walked about’ until they met ‘a negro’ who told them to go to the Governor (Colonial Office 1834b: n.p.). With a \$4,000 loan from the American Consul, Staples bought a ship, and began fitting it out. Yet on Saturday, January 15th, he was served with a writ which stated that the slaves were to be seized and freed.

In 1834, the American slave ship, *Enconium*, sailing from Charleston with rice, naval stores, mill stones, sundry merchandise and sixty-one slaves aboard, also foundered off Abaco, and the same Bahamian wrecking crews stymied onward the voyage by insisting on diverting the salvaged goods, and the enslaved, to Nassau. This time, the Collector informed the Captain that if ‘there should be any attempt to communicate with

the Town, they would be fired into by His Britannic Majesty's Sloop of War Pearl, then lying in the harbor'. Despite protestations by the American Consul, the wreckers again ensured that the captives were safely landed. They were taken to the Police Magistrate who asked each individually whether they would like to remain as free persons or leave for New Orleans. All but three decided to stay (Colonial Office 1834c: n.p).

The cases of the *Comet* and the *Enconium* drew ire from the Southern press, from the American Government, and also from the Bahamian Assembly. Both shipwrecks had occurred during the dying days of slavery in the West Indies, and the Bahamian ruling class, already exasperated by waves of Africans arriving in the colonies through shipwreck or by British naval capture, were even more concerned about the prospect of the release of American slaves into the already politically unstable circumstances. The day before the authorities seized the captives from the *Comet*, the House of Assembly sent a letter of protest to the colony's Governor, warning that a 'general panic' about letting loose 'so large a body of so dangerous a class of negroes' on the island was already underway. Conflating their concerns about the arrival of 'new negroes from Africa', impounded from illegal transatlantic slaving vessels under the auspices of the British Abolition Acts, with echoes of Southern planter fear and prejudice regarding enslaved American Creoles, they wrote,

The sudden irruption ... of this large body of strange Creole slaves, also combining as the American negroes generally do the Intelligence and cunning of the lower order of Freemen, with the characteristic want of thought and foresight almost inseparable from a state of Slavery, the profligate habits, the vices, the crimes, which have notoriously been the frequent occasion of the deportation of Slaves, from the Atlantic States to the Western settlements of North America would be but too justly calculated to inspire fears in this quarter of the most alarming character (Colonial Office 1834d: n.p.).

Six months after the passing of the British Emancipation Act, a storm drove yet another domestic slaver, the *Enterprise*, on its way from Alexandria, Virginia, to Charleston, South Carolina, dramatically off course. After some three weeks at sea, damaged and with stores depleted, it sailed into Hamilton Harbour, Bermuda. The brig carried no mounted guns, and, together with three paying passengers, was loaded with a cargo of 40,000 bricks, six hogsheads of tobacco, a large supply of seeds and seventy-eight enslaved persons. Once repaired and restocked with food and water, local Customs

officials refused to give clearance for the vessel until a legal ruling had been made regarding the status of the captives on board (Colonial Office 1835b: n.p.).

Over the several days, while the *Enterprise* languished in the harbour, word spread across the island that there were enslaved Americans incarcerated in the vessel. Again, the resident planter class expressed their concern about the political and social implications of releasing seventy-eight free African Americans into a society where, despite emancipation, ex-slaves remained bound to the plantations. The newly apprenticed and free black Bermudan population, on the other hand, began to mobilize among themselves. They were catapulted into action when, on the morning of February 18th, Smith, determined to hold on to his valuable cargo, made ready to sail. Crowds gathered as Richard Tucker, leader of a newly instituted Young Men's Friendly Institution – one of the many post-emancipation collectives founded by the free Blacks to provide mutual welfare, support, and to campaign for political and labour rights - applied for a writ of Habeus Corpus against Elliott to prevent his departure. The Chief Magistrate issued the writ, and Smith was compelled to watch helplessly as the seventy-eight captives were landed at Barr's Bay Park in Hamilton to the cheers of an immense crowd which surged along with them, and then packed the court-house determined to see justice done (Colonial Office 1835c: n.p; Missen 1979: 65-67).

The Judge asked each captive in turn whether they wanted to continue on to Charleston, or to remain in Bermuda as free persons. All but one woman and her five children elected to claim their liberty. The Governor recorded that,

The members of the Friendly Institution who had been active in obtaining their discharge borrowed an empty house for them that night; a voluntary subscription to relieve their immediate wants was set on foot among the bystanders – and the next day by the interposition of their Society nearly all of the 72 obtained places in different parts of the Colony (Colonial Office 1835c).

There is no intimation in the archive that the cases of the *Comet*, *Enconium*, *Enterprise* and the *Hermosa* involved any attempt to overturn shipboard authority violently, or that mass efforts at escape by covert means were attempted. Unlike the first two cases produced by a shipwreck, events concerning the fate of the captives aboard the *Enterprise* developed out of the *potential* for shipwreck but, as with the *Comet* and the *Encomium*, the members of the local maritime community were crucial players in

securing the captives' release. As with the later *Hermosa*, the course of events leading to the liberty of the African Americans in Bermuda was actively shaped by the political solidarity spanning shipboard and harbour-side. Even if the British colonial officials (without the support of the planter class) might well have legally pronounced the American slaves free, in each case the local community's identification and solidarity with the captives forced the issue. In the last two cases, it was the direct action of the local community which prevented the ships' masters from absconding. By insisting on bearing witness throughout, and in huge numbers, they ensured that the captives were recognized as free under British imperial law.

When the *Creole* mutineers sailed into Nassau, they could not have been sure that British officials would act in the same way again. Clearly, they were not victims of natural hazard. They had committed mutiny and they had murdered a reviled overseer. Their arrival, however, set off a train of local action that would develop and spread over the coming days. A pilot ship came to meet the *Creole*, crewed by black mariners. The black pilot was to become a key orchestrator of the pattern of social protest that unfolded. As they boarded, one seaman told the rebels that 'he came out from Charleston and that he got free by coming out there in that way (McCargo v New Orleans Insurance Co. 1841: n.p.). The mariner may well have been one of the American captives aboard the wrecked *Encomium* eight years previously. To the American's alarm, British officials stationed twenty-four armed Liberated Africans on the *Creole* to secure the leaders of the mutiny but remained conspicuously passive while the mate lobbied the American Consul to take back the ship and continue on to New Orleans. It was revealed in the later insurance trial that the Consul and *Creole*'s mate plotted to take back the *Creole* by force but local arms dealers refused to sell them weapons (Robinson 1845; 213). Meanwhile, jeering crowds again gathered along the quays eventually taking to the water in their several thousand. As a 'mosquito fleet' of some fifty small boats and lighters packed with locals, some armed with clubs, gathered around the *Creole*, the Consul was informed, by 'respectable' white inhabitants, that their servants had been meeting by night and were planning to liberate the rebels themselves (Robinson 1845: 227). The British governor finally acted, sending the Attorney General to the *Creole* to identify those implicated in the murder, remove the African troops and to oversee the landing of the rest of the

enslaved. In his later report, he recorded that the water-borne crowd, led by the pilot, protested at the delay until they erupted in cheers as they ferried the enslaved ashore, the Attorney General having left the ship to watch the proceedings in a small boat a safe distance away from the crowd (Parliamentary Papers 1843c: 129-130).

In their protests and in the later insurance trials, the defeated American crew repeatedly claimed that they had been violently threatened by the water-borne crowd although there was nothing they could do except protest the liberation. Their humiliation continued as the next day the Captain received a legal writ demanding the landing of the slave's belongings. The American Consul advised the slavers that it was not worth protesting the writ because, as he stated, 'the juries as far as I have observed were mostly composed of coloured people, never having seen more than two white persons on a jury at a time' (Robinson 1845: 230) Clearly the Americans saw themselves not only as victims to British imperial despotism but also to a local racial order turned upside down. It continued to function in the aid of liberating escaping enslaved Americans up until the Civil War.

Enslaved mariners, working on American merchant and naval vessels, also absconded from their vessels docking in Nassau. In the same year as the *Creole* mutiny for example, the Baltimore merchant ship, the *Margaret Hugg* was damaged en route from Montevideo, Brazil to Havana and brought into Nassau by pilots and wreckers. Henry Jones, working onboard as a steward and diver, disappeared while the boat was being repaired. In 1848, Isaac Williams, 'a coloured man' deserted from the *Onkahye*, a vessel assigned to the African Squadron and patrolling the Florida straits (Dalleo 2008: 7-8). While enslaved mariners deserted their ships, others took their chances by attempting the short voyage from the US across the Bahamian straits in their own commandeered vessels. In early July 1843, two years after the *Creole* drama, seven Florida slaves stole a boat and though 'closely pursued', they managed to reach the Bahamas. A St Augustine newspaper bitterly reported that 'they have ever since been sheltered and have no doubt been made free' (Morotti 2013: 80).

Two weeks later, Robert Williams, Joe Williams, Gasper Mickler and Henry Fontane, all enslaved crewmen of the United States *Transport* schooner and three others, Andrew Gue, William Hernadez and Jim Ashe, also dared to make the journey. This last

story highlights the continuing role that Bahamians, post their emancipation, played in securing freedom for others. The seven men stole in the *Transport's* boat, taking provisions, the federal vessel's spy-glass, compass and lead-line, 400 cartridges and seven muskets. During a search for food, they entered the home of John Henry Geireen, a German immigrant settler. An altercation ensued during which Geireen was killed.

Nearly three months after they had absconded and five weeks after the killing, the men finally reached Nassau aboard Bahamian wrecking vessels. The Florida courts indicted the seven men for robbery and murder and requested that London order a warrant for their arrest as criminals under 'Article X' of the 1842 Webster-Ashburton Treaty to deliver the prisoners to the US marshal from Key West. The Article outlined a bilateral agreement for the mutual extradition of individuals convicted of set of criminal acts including murder, piracy, arson, robbery or forgery, but not slave revolt or mutiny. Under the treaty, extradition was contingent on the outcome of a trial held in the place where suspected criminals had been accosted. As Morotti notes, Henry Fox, the British minister in Washington sent instructions to the governor of the Bahamas, Sir Francis Cockburn and the U.S. Marshal, Browne, set sail for Nassau immediately. Seven months previously, in May 1843, one of Browne's own slaves, Coleman Royal, had taken a considerable amount of property and goods from him, and along with a party of four men and a woman had stolen a pilot boat from Key West and sailed for Nassau where they had been subsequently declared free (Marotti 2013: 80-88).

News soon spread that the marshal was on his way to Nassau and the local Bahamian community once again began to organize. Now long experienced in pressurizing British authorities in relation to enslaved Americans, arriving under whatever circumstances, and by this time possessing collective funds via their establishment of a Friendly Society, they were in a position to oversee the legal proceedings with more than simply the presence of their amassed bodies and collective voices. Cockburn wrote to Fox in Washington noting that the Friendly Society, 'composed of emancipated negroes', had employed a 'professional gentleman to watch the case on the part of the accused' (Parliamentary Papers 1844: 4).

As local networks mobilized, wider sympathetic transnational ones did too, telegraphing knowledge of the American runaways through the wider Atlantic world.

Morotti records the exchanges, noting that from Boston, Joshua Leavitt, the American abolitionist who had played a pivotal role in defending the *Amistad* rebels wrote to Thomas Clarkson, veteran leader of the British anti-slavery campaigns and now president of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, about the plight of black Floridians in the Bahamas. The Reverend J.H. Hinton, of the BFASS, relayed information about the fugitives back to Reverend Henry Capern of Nassau asking him to lobby local colonial authorities and to keep his English counterparts abreast of developments. The *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter* castigated the Americans for initiating a ‘national negro hunt’. While the federal authorities maintained that the escaped bondsmen were ‘fugitives from justice’ the *Reporter* celebrated them as refugees who had fled ‘from oppression’ (Marotti 2013: 88).

As Winsboro and Knetsch note, the Bahamian court interpreted ‘Article X’ of the Ashburton Webster strictly on their own terms, trying the men – under British imperial law - for murder. As the American indictments did not include any eyewitness accounts of the Florida shooting, only the testimony of a small child who had merely heard shots in the distance, as far as the Bahamian jurors were concerned, the precise grounds on which the American indictment had been reached could not be established.

Much to American outrage, the court relied on imperial British sovereign rights rather than bilateral treaty conventions to reach their decision. The seven men were acquitted, and released from custody as free men (Winsboro and Knetsch 2013: 69). Again, to read the outcome simply as the result of a contest between American slave interests and aggressive British abolitionism on the other, risks effacing the part played by local Afro-Bahamians and indeed the actions of the seven geopolitically literate runaways. When the US marshal arrived in Nassau to apprehend them, he also confronted a historically situated local dynamic with an established tradition of negotiating legal and diplomatic authority in ways that reverberated back to the metropolitan centres. Active intervention from below helped to re-shape the ‘criminal trial’ so that it was effectively transformed into a ‘freedom suit’ over which the American marshal had little or no control.

Conclusion

Southern politicians continued to lambast the federal government for failing to exercise properly its constitutional powers to protect the southern slave interest. In 1849, James Westcott, Florida's first senator, expressed his outrage in a speech laced with alarm about the possibility of widespread slave revolt. He demanded an explanation for why the federal government had not returned the *Amistad* rebels to Spain, had not returned the *Creole* mutineers to Virginia, and had failed to uphold the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in relation to the seven Florida fugitives. Denying the agency of enslaved Americans themselves, he focused his fury on the subversive maritime activities of local Bahamians. He wrote,

The coasts of Florida are infested by dozens of British smacks from the Bahamas, manned and often commanded by the mulatto and negro emancipees of those islands, who lurking about our harbours, inveigle off slaves and excite them to disaffection. Does this federal government seek to afford its aid for our protection against their incendiarism? (*Floridian & Journal* 1849)

Westcott resurrected historical anxieties about the proximity of revolutionary Haiti in relation to the current British 'incendiarism' evoking the local laws passed at the beginning of the century in an attempt to short circuit the network of black rebellion by building legal obstacles to colony to colony communication. He noted bitterly that these laws had never applied to the *crews* of vessels sailing in American waters.

Whether the possibility of freedom was scripted by unpredictable weather, treacherous seaways, by the initial bravery of stealing away and setting sail, or by plotting and carrying through shipboard mutiny, that possibility was shaped and supported by fragile networks of communication and solidarity from below. As these few cases demonstrate, these politically subversive networks dissolved and re-made themselves over time, sometimes operating in concert with, and sometimes outside, the structures of organized transnational abolitionism and colonial authority. At times, and always contingently, British imperial sovereignty was either enlisted or forced to comply in the aid of constituting and expanding the free Black Atlantic constituency.

In this sense, the southern 'saltwater railroad' was far less a railroad than mobile and fluid transnational set of dynamic spatial and political practices that breached land of sea in a myriad of imagined and material ways. To this extent, the *Creole* mutineers -

however spectacular their actions – need to be viewed in relation to a broader tradition in which shared maritime knowledge circulated and solidarity and co-operation was enacted. They, like many others, sailed into, and were embraced by, a sphere of Black Atlantic practices and memories not easily conceptualized or documented but which were central to constituting the collective nature of the revolutionary Atlantic.

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