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## White lies: Human property and domestic slavery aboard the slave ship *Creole*

Walter Johnson\*

We cannot suppress the slave trade – it is a natural operation, as old and constant as the ocean.

George Fitzhugh

It is one thing to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation and quite another to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty.

Frederick Douglass

This paper explores the voyage of the slave ship *Creole*, which left Virginia in 1841 with a cargo of 135 persons bound for New Orleans. Although the importation of slaves from Africa into the United States was banned from 1808, the expansion of slavery into the American Southwest took the form of forced migration within the United States, or at least beneath the United States's flag. About two-thirds of a million slaves were transported in this “domestic” slave trade between 1820 and 1860 (another three hundred thousands were moved by their owners in the same period). But those aboard the *Creole* were not to be among them: a group of slaves aboard revolted, and took the ship to Nassau in the Bahamas, where slavery had been abolished in 1834. The 1807 Congressional Act, which paralleled the British Act of 1807 ending British involvement in the African trade, forbade the further importation of African slaves after 1 January 1808 and sought to draw a line between the henceforth “domestic” economy of American slavery and the global economy in human beings. By instituting a distinction between “slaveholding” and “slave trading”, the act sought to align the limits of its economy with its polity, its slavery with its security, and its “property” with its “humanity”. The American flag gave protection to these trade actions, which became the flag of convenience for slave traders worldwide. The *Creole* and the contradictory imperatives of slaveholding and security aboard the boat; the dramatic attempts by those slaves aboard to attain freedom and transportation to a new home in Africa – although they came from different parts of Virginia, different communities, and different families – moments of white collusion, inter-racial cooperation, and black mercy aboard vessel; all combine in the telling of this story of slavery in the nineteenth-century Atlantic.

**Keywords:** slavery; Creole; slave-trade; Liberia; slave revolt; slave legislation; Black Atlantic; Blake; Delaney; Douglass; Bahamas

Let us begin with the account of a man whose world was collapsing.

At about nine o'clock in the evening the ship's mate came back to tell the slave trader that one of the men was in the hold with the women, and they went up the steps out of the cabin to investigate. Merritt, the trader, left the mate on the deck and went down into the hold. He struck a match and lit the lamp. Madison Washington was directly behind him, and Merritt addressed him. “Doctor, you are the last person I should expect to find here,

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and that would not obey the orders of the ship.” Washington replied, “Yes sir, it is me,” and started up the ladder. Merritt, holding the lamp in one hand, tried to grab Washington’s leg with the other, but Washington made the deck, and shouted for the others to join him. There was a shot and the mate fell to the deck. Merritt, silhouetted in the darkness of the hold, blew out his lamp and went up toward the deck. There was just a sliver of a new moon to help him make out what was happening.

One of the slaves on the deck grabbed him around the shoulders. “Kill him, God damn it, he is one of them.” A handspike swung for his head. Merritt struggled and ducked as the bar leveled the man who had been holding him. As he ran for the cabin, he saw the captain go onto the deck and another trader, John Hewell, come out of his stateroom into the cabin with a musket; he was moving it back and forth, as if it was armed with a bayonet. The slaves threw a handspike at Hewell and he fired the charge in the gun, injuring no one. The slaves wrenched the weapon from his hands, and he picked up the handspike in its place. One of the slaves said, “He has another gun,” and they moved back from the door. Hewell followed them out with the handspike in his hands. Soon, he came back into the cabin covered with blood. “I am dead,” he said, “the Negroes have killed me.” He collapsed and crawled toward one of the staterooms.

Merritt tried to climb out of the skylight of the cabin, but could hear the slaves on the deck above and outside the door. He hid in one of the staterooms at the back. Two of the slave women they had been keeping in the cabin were there. He covered himself with a blanket and they sat on him, crying, and praying. Outside, in the cabin now, he heard one of the slaves say, “Take it on deck,” and some of them seemed to go out, dragging with them the body of the dead slave trader.

Soon he could hear them in the cabin again, looking for the whites and saying “Come out here, damn you.” He heard the cook go out into the cabin to surrender. One of the sailors and the steward were also out there. The captain’s wife, her baby, and her niece also went out from where they had been hiding. They begged for their lives as the slaves took them away.

Ben Blacksmith called for Merritt to come out. Blacksmith said that whoever was hiding the trader would be killed and then the women left. The slaves tore through the staterooms looking for him. When they found him, they dragged him out. Ben Blacksmith stood there with a knife, getting ready to kill him. He remembered Mary, the girl they kept in the cabin, pleading for his life, and he, too, must have pleaded.

He had once been the mate on a boat like the *Creole*, he told them, and he could navigate for them. Madison Washington entered; he took Merritt into one of the staterooms to talk. Washington said, “they wanted to go to Liberia.” Merritt replied that they had neither the water nor the provisions aboard to make it that far. Blacksmith and several of the others said, “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.” Merritt understood them to be referring to the slave ship *Hermosa*, which had run aground on the island of Abaco in the Bahamas the year before. Merritt got out the chart and the Coast Pilot and showed them the route. “They agreed that if he would navigate them, they would save his life; otherwise, death would be his portion.” Merritt thought the captain and the mates were all dead; indeed, for all he knew, he was the only white man left alive on the boat. One of the blacks asked him to read out the time. It was about one o’clock in the morning, 8 November 1841.<sup>1</sup>

## 1

The slave ship *Creole* had left Hampton Roads, Virginia on 30 October 1841 with a cargo of 135 human beings and several hogsheads of tobacco bound for the market in New Orleans. There was nothing exceptional in the making of such a voyage. Following a provision in the Constitution, which allowed for such action (only) after 1807, Congress had banned the importation of slaves from Africa beginning in 1808, meaning that any expansion of slavery into the emerging states of the Southwest would take the form of a forced migration within the boundaries of the United States (or beneath its flag). In the years between 1820 and 1860, around one million people were relocated according to the needs of that changing economy, two-thirds of them by slave traders – one of the largest forced migrations in human history. By 1841 hundreds of vessels, their holds full of slaves, had made the same journey the *Creole* was making around the southeastern coast of North America, from Virginia, along the Gulf Coast, and on to New Orleans; as would, in succeeding years, hundreds more.<sup>2</sup>

Yet as axiomatic as was her journey to the political economy of slavery in the nineteenth-century United States, the *Creole* charted a course along the edge of a set of yawning contradictions: most basically, between the capacity to labor and the will to resist which could inhabit a human body; but also between the fixed spatial territorial logic of national sovereignty (in which a nation had boundaries that other nations respected) and the unruly spatial flows of mercantile capitalism; and, finally, between security (national and otherwise) and license – the barbarian privileges of slaveholding.<sup>3</sup>

The 1807 Congressional Act forbidding the further importation of African slaves after 1 January 1808 was the political expression of these underlying contradictions. By seeking to draw a line between the henceforth “domestic” economy of American slavery and the global economy in human beings, the Act attempted to balance the emerging concern that the importation of African slaves was rendering the United States insecure in the event of invasion with the imperatives of the ongoing dependence of a large section of the new nation on human property. By instituting an always-already-broken-down distinction between “slaveholding” and “slave trading” it sought to reconcile a supposed national commitment to “humanity” with its commitment to “property.” The act (along with the Embargo Act of 1807) represented the efforts of a new nation to align the limits of its economy with its polity, its slavery with its security, and its “property” with its “humanity:” it was an act of national self-definition. It asserted an emergent idea of “the nation” as the container of its own economy over and against the insatiable logic of an economy that could commodify anything – even a tiny child.<sup>4</sup> Over time, the underlying contradictions, imperfectly addressed by the closing of the African trade came to be expressed through a set of fights about the American flag.

At the outset, the United States Act of 1807 paralleled the British Act of 1807, which ended British involvement in the African trade. Rather than unfolding along the same course, the histories of the United States and Great Britain began shortly after to alternately interrupt and evade one another on the high seas. Following the precedents by which the competing imperatives of capitalism and sovereignty had been resolved at sea, the Slave Trade Act depended upon “convention” for its enforcement.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of any super-sovereign body, the nineteenth-century Atlantic was governed by treaties between nations (“contracts” in the contemporary usage, which bespoke the underlying mercantile logic of the situation); most notably for our purposes here laws against piracy which referred offenders to their “home” jurisdiction for trial and punishment, and by a set of treaties allowing the British a Right of Search in the Atlantic. In the years before

1841, Great Britain sealed such bi-lateral and multi-lateral treaties with Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, France, Holland, Spain, Brazil, Sardinia, and Naples,<sup>6</sup> but not with the United States.

Article Ten of the 1814 Treaty of Ghent (ending the War of 1812) jointly committed the United States and Great Britain to “use their best endeavours” to end the traffic in slaves. In following years, however, the United States refused to allow the Royal Navy to “visit-and-search” American ships at sea (the British boarding of American ships at sea and the “impressment” of supposed deserters had been one of the central grievances which led the United States into the War of 1812). Indeed, in the years leading up to the *Creole* revolt, those in the United States who wanted to close the trade were unable to sustain even modest proposals for “joint cruising” in the western hemisphere, which would have reduced the operational capacity of the greatest naval power in the world down to that of the handful of ships which made up the US “Navy.” At the time of the *Creole* revolt, the American commitment to closing the slave trade amounted to a single ship intermittently posted along the coast of West Africa and a dead-letter statute that defined the slave trade as a form of “piracy,” a capital crime. As fierce as that sounded, the federal delegation of responsibility for the punishment of traders and the disposition of the slaves they carried to the (slave-importing) states insured that no one would be put to death for trading African slaves into the United States until 1862.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Old Glory became the flag of convenience for slave traders worldwide. As more and more nations allowed the British the right to search their ships at sea or (at the very least) signed joint-cruising agreements, more and more slaves were shipped under the cover of United States sovereignty; whatever their port of origin or their destination, slavers kept an American flag aboard, running it up the mast whenever they encountered a British cruiser at sea. The American flag provided cover for the shipment of more than a million Africans, most of them to Cuba and Brazil, in the years between 1820 and 1860, DuBois estimated.<sup>8</sup> As the Governor of Liberia wrote in 1839, “[T]he chief obstacle to the very active measures pursued by the British government for the suppression of the slave-trade on the coast is the *American flag*. Never was the proud banner of freedom so extensively used by those pirates upon liberty and humanity, as at this season.” Or, in the words of the United States ambassador to Brazil, “It is a fact not too disguised or denied, that the slave trade is almost entirely carried on under our flag, in American-built vessels.”<sup>9</sup> The *Creole*, that is to say, sailed at a moment when the contradictory riddles of national sovereignty and global capitalism had been folded back upon themselves: the protective mantle of the American flag had been drawn around the mercantile imperatives of the global economy in human beings, which now gave promiscuous shape to its sovereign claims. Seen in this light (and in light of the fact that 30% of the Africans brought to the Americas were shipped after 1808), the “closing” of the slave trade we celebrate this year represents less any sort of ending to the global exploitation of Africans, but a neo-mercantilist re-distribution of the benefits of their exploitation and suffering – away from London and Liverpool and toward New York and Baltimore.<sup>10</sup>

The official illegality of the ongoing slave trade produced anomalous populations along the Gulf Coast and throughout the Caribbean – a human geography of mercantile cupidity scarcely covered by shell-game sovereignty. In the United States, illegally imported slaves were laundered into the “domestic” economy through sales that brought the states (and sometimes slave-trader-confederates acting as “informers”) a tidy profit. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, slave traders moved slaves from Africa, from Cuba, and from the British West Indies into the United States through Texas and Florida.<sup>11</sup> In Cuba (after 1817) and Brazil (after 1831), interdicted slaves were generally delegated to the state, which then

employed them as “apprentices” or rented them out.<sup>12</sup> Slaves interdicted by the British were relocated throughout the British West Indies (as well as to Sierra Leone). These “recaptives” were often bound to military service (the West India Regiments and Royal Navy) or “apprenticed” for terms of up to fourteen years (much less after the end of the post-emancipation period of compulsory “apprenticeship” in 1838).<sup>13</sup>

At the outer reaches of the interstate slave trade, where the splinter of US sovereignty represented by a slave ship plying the “domestic” trade encountered the aspiration of British super-sovereignty embedded in the Act of 1807, the contradictions roiling the Atlantic economy were literally papered-over. In the first instance, this paper came in the form of cargo manifests, which registered each and every slave shipped in the coast-wise “domestic” trade as having originated their journey in an American port. These manifests stabilized the slaves as “American” as they were shipped in much the same way the American flag did the ship that carried them. In the manifests, the status of these human beings as property and these slaves as “American” were made mutually definitive.

Neither flags nor bills of lading, however, provided slave traders plying the “domestic” trade with much protection from “incidents at sea;” for that, there was diplomatic correspondence. Over the course of the 1830s, after the abolition of slavery in the British colonies and amidst the rapid expansion of American slavery to the “Cotton Kingdom,” several such ships were shipwrecked in the British West Indies – the *Comet*, the *Encomium*, the *Enterprize*, and the aforementioned *Hermosa* – and the slaves aboard were liberated by the British. In these cases, as it would in the case of the *Creole*, the United States government took the part of the slave traders, successfully demanding reparations from the British government for the traders’ liberated property – a tacit apology for British interference in the “internal” affairs of the United States.<sup>14</sup>

By the time the *Creole* sailed out into the Atlantic, slave traders could buy insurance to protect them from such dangers; indeed, the slaves shipped on the *Creole* were covered by at least seven such policies. These insurance policies sorted and monetized the risks posed slave traders by the uncertainties of a “domestic” carrying trade carried out on the high seas. As well as against shipwreck and fire, they indemnified the traders in case of the interference of any “foreign prince,” though not, interestingly and importantly for our purpose here, in case of “mutiny.”<sup>15</sup> The policies were, that is to say, a way to refashion maritime into terrestrial space (indeed, national space) through the mechanism of an aleatory contract: through their agency, human property was secured from the risks of sea travel. The voyage of the *Creole* was steadied across the ocean and the logic of its own contradictions – human property, domestic slave trade, maritime sovereignty, each of these delicately balanced but structurally self-opposed phrases – by a ballast of commercial licenses, risk-stabilizing insurance policies, and diplomatic precedents.

Another sort of license prevailed on board the ship itself. The main concern of the traders and the crews in the days after the *Creole* shipped from Hampton Roads seems to have been with keeping the men and women among their slaves separate from one another – a common practice in the trade, for pregnancy could lower the value of slaves in the market. The ship’s mate described the spatial order – the spatial resolution of the contradiction of human property – aboard the *Creole*: “After putting to sea, the Negro women were put in the afterhold of the vessel, and the men in the forehold, between these were stored the cargo of boxes of manufactured tobacco. [...] The men were allowed to come on deck day and night if they wished, but it was the rule to whip the Negro men if they went in the hold with the women.”<sup>16</sup>

The practice aboard the *Creole* ran counter to the custom of both the Atlantic and coastal slave trade, which, viewing men as a greater threat of rebellion than women, was to

keep them locked in the hold at night.<sup>17</sup> Aboard the *Creole* the calculus of property and security was apparently reckoned differently. By locking the women in the hold and keeping them there, the traders claimed the enslaved women's sexuality as theirs to control, allocate, and, in the case of the six women who were kept in the cabin along with the whites, if the history of the slave trade is any guide, to take.<sup>18</sup> If it is correct to read the disciplinary arrangements aboard the *Creole* as an account of the way that the traders balanced their concern for security with their license as slaveholders, then it also is correct to say that theirs was a miscalculation that came very close to the cost of their own lives.

Perhaps the most unexpected aspect of the racial and sexual order aboard the brig was that Captain Robert Ensor had brought his wife, his 15-month-old daughter, and his 15-year-old niece along for the journey. Likewise, Thomas McCargo, the Virginia slave trader who held title to many of the slaves in the hold, had shipped his young son, Theophilus, along with his slaves, apparently as a way for him to get to know the business.<sup>19</sup> The presence of these white women and children aboard the *Creole* represents a final expression of the contradictory imperatives of slaveholding and security aboard the boat. For what else to call the oblivious confidence with which a man like Ensor brought a 15-month old child aboard a slave ship than an aspect of the property he held in his own slave-produced whiteness: a certainty born of history that events would break in his favor, that all would be well.<sup>20</sup> This was perhaps the most intimate aspect of the fractal geography that was collapsing around the Captain, as, grievously wounded, he climbed up into the maintop to die.

## 2

At about five in the morning on 8 November one of the slaves spotted the ship's mate, Zephaniah Gifford, in maintop. He was there with Captain Ensor, who was still alive but drifting in and out of consciousness and Gifford had tied the Captain to the mast so that he would not fall. Washington and Blacksmith ordered Gifford to come down, threatening to shoot him if he did not, and he did. Blacksmith put a gun to his breast and told him "if you do not land us at Abaco, we will put you overboard."<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after Gifford was discovered in the maintop, the rising sun caught Lucius Stevens in the fore royal yard. He had fought his way out of the cabin shortly after Hewell had died, and listened from above as the slaves on the deck searched for him. "The captain, mate, and Hewell are dead," he had heard them say; "now we will have that long, tall son-of-a-bitch the second mate." From the mast he saw the slaves below throw Hewell's body into the sea. When they discovered him up there, Elijah Morris, came forward and yelled, "Come down you damned son-of-a-bitch and receive your message." Stevens began to climb slowly down. From the foretop, he yelled down, asking, "what they wanted to kill him for." Morris yelled back, "Damn you, the best thing for you is to come down and receive your message." When he reached the deck, Stevens asked for five minutes to plead for his life, and promised that he would "take them to an English island in three days." Later, Stevens discovered Gifford and Merritt were alive, and they received permission to rig a sling to lower the Captain to the deck. Stevens was then locked in the forehold with Ensor, his family, the rest of the crew, (save Merritt and Gifford) and one hundred and fifteen or so of the slaves who had apparently had no role in the revolt.<sup>22</sup>

That night Stevens was called onto the deck to aid Gifford in "taking the sun." While he was above, Ben Blacksmith told him "You had better go below and stay there, or you will be thrown overboard, as there are a number of bad Negroes on board." Shortly after Stevens had done that, Elijah Morris came to the grating over the hold and told him,

“Stevens I do not want to see you get hurt, but they talk strong of heaving you overboard to-night.” Soon after, some of the others ordered him on deck to go about his duties. Later, after dark, as he walked along on the quarterdeck, someone fired a shot at his head. Gifford immediately came out of the cabin and ordered him “to go aloft and see if he could discover the Abaco light.”<sup>23</sup>

It is worth asking, as we begin to reconstruct the history of the *Creole*: why listen to men like Merritt, Gifford, or Stevens? Seamen and slave traders, they were by definition spinners of yarns and tellers of lies. Moreover they were white men who were (at least at the beginning of the journey) on the deck of a ship with a hundred and thirty-five slaves in the hold: they were men whose words were shaped by the framing parameters of their world – black slavery, white supremacy – before they were even spoken. Surely, they covered for themselves: after Washington said he wanted to go to Liberia, was it really Ben Blacksmith who remembered the wrecked *Hermosa*, and suggested that they go to the Bahamas, or was that something that Merritt himself suggested? Did Lucius Stevens really fight his way out of the cabin or did he just run for his life? Did these white men beg their erstwhile slaves for their lives? Did they get down on their knees and yammer and mewl to save themselves? Were they cowards? These things they would not tell us, and so we cannot know, and must proceed with caution.

Yet their straightforward depositional language seems to reveal the presumptions we might expect to frame their statements in an advanced stage of decomposition. A single goal – survival – organizes their initial accounts of the revolt. The only words spoken are between white men and black men, and they are direct and intimate. There are no secrets here, no levels of discourse or hidden agendas. These are words spoken on the edge of death. They convey a sense of the world reduced down to elementary forms: force, noise, darkness, and fear. It is from this state of elemental vulnerability and weakness that their stories must be understood to have begun; not from a place that was prior to ideology, but from one where ideology had been driven off and wrecked, made meaningless. Everything they said from that moment, the words, indeed, which we must use to understand and represent that moment, was part of the process of rebuilding the world as they had thought it was and should be – part of the process of raising story of “the mutiny on board the brig *Creole*, and the liberation of the slaves who were passengers in the said vessel” as an assimilable historical event out of the wreckage of the real thing.<sup>24</sup>

That rebuilding occurred in several episodes. The surviving slave traders and sailors aboard the *Creole* were deposed about the revolt on 9 and 10 November, after the ship had reached Nassau. They were deposed again beginning 13 November about what had happened during the days the ship spent in the harbor there. They told their story again in the first week of December 1841, this time in the form of a formal “Protest” registered with a Notary Public in New Orleans (common practice in the case of ship’s delayed at sea, and a way of protecting their Captain and crew against commercial liability). Yet again in depositions taken in 1844, supporting the lawsuits their slave-trader employers had filed in Louisiana against the companies that had insured the slaves aboard the *Creole*. Finally, their stories were re-told in the diplomatic correspondence between the United States Consul in Nassau, John Bacon, the State Department in Washington, the United States Embassy in London, and the British Government.

At stake in both the insurance cases and the larger diplomatic dispute was the question of whether or not the British government had been responsible for the liberation of these “American” slaves. Taken together, these sources, produced around the axis of this single contested question, constitute the archive of “the *Creole* revolt”: they contain the only primary accounts we have of what happened aboard the ship on the night of 7 November



1841 and in the weeks after. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the stories told by those who had been aboard became more coherent as they got further from the actual events aboard the ship. The process by which the meaning of ‘the *Creole* revolt’, over time, was stabilized – the process by which the disorganization and terror evident in the first accounts was re-rendered in dominant ideologies of American slavery (and, we will see, British anti-slavery) – is outlined below. That process is interpreted according to the idea of “overdetermination”, the idea that the tide of structural contradictions upon which the *Creole* sailed (as outlined above) were expressed in the laws, institutions, ideology, practice, and, finally, the archive through which they were fitfully resolved.<sup>25</sup>

### 3

Gifford ran the ship to Nassau. The 19 blacks and the remaining whites took their meals together in the cabin, where they also slept. The whites were forbidden to speak to one another without one of the blacks being present. Ensor and his family were brought out of the hold and allowed back into their stateroom. Theophilus McCargo was also brought out of the hold, and he stayed locked away in his room, watched over, he remembered, by an elderly slave named Lewis who belonged to his father.<sup>26</sup>

They sighted Nassau on the morning of 9 November. Merritt told one of the sailors to hoist “the Jack” to signal a pilot to come out and guide them into port. The signal flag, he later remembered telling the man, should be raised to half-mast to let those on shore know there was a mutiny on board. Seeing the flag at half-mast, one of the rebels, Doc Ruffin, told the sailor to raise the flag to the top of the mast, which the sailor did. However, the order to raise “the Jack,” according to Merritt, was the last order given by any of the nineteen rebels. As the pilot came out, the rebels flung their weapons into the sea, left the positions they had taken up on the deck, and began to try to mingle with the other blacks on board. The whites on board began to talk openly with one another. While the 19, as Merritt remembered it, seemed anxious, “the other Negroes were laughing and looking on and appeared much animated as they would had there been no mutiny.” As the *Creole* sailed into Nassau, “the Jack” on her mast was replaced by the American flag; none of the nineteen who had recently commanded the ship, Merritt was later careful to point out, made any “objection thereto.”<sup>27</sup>

The pilot guided the brig into the harbor, and Gifford returned to shore with him to inform the American consul of what had happened on board the boat. The consul, John Bacon, later described his actions in the following terms: “Being apprehensive the slaves would soon all get ashore; and knowing that, in that case, it would be deemed here, that, in regard to their freedom, no one would have a right to molest them, I immediately repaired, with the mate, to the Government-house and obtained an interview with his Excellency the Governor, stated the circumstances, and requested him to take measures to prevent the slaves from escaping on shore and have the murderers secured . . . I then directed the mate to go on board and keep the American colors set.” As he walked between the consulate and the Government House, the agitated Bacon noticed in the streets of Nassau “a number of females as well as males [. . .] with spy glasses directed toward the Brig.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps at that moment he realized he was in over his head.

The Governor complied with Bacon’s request by sending a company of the Second West India Regiment to secure the *Creole*. Apart from their captain, the soldiers were Africans. Like many of the inhabitants of Nassau, they had been shipped from West Africa as slaves, interdicted by the British, and landed in the British West Indies. In the three decades before 1841, as many as 5,000 such “recaptives” had been landed in the Bahamas,

the majority of them on New Providence Island, which had a total population (in 1845) of about 8000.<sup>29</sup> As these one-time-slave-soldiers took control of the ship, they separated those identified by the whites as having been most active the revolt – Madison Washington, Doc Ruffin, Elijah Morris, and Ben Blacksmith – from the other slaves and tied them down in a long boat. The other blacks aboard, the soldiers locked in the hold. The Attorney General of the Bahamas and the United States Consul came out to the boat and began to take depositions from the slave traders and the crew.<sup>30</sup>

In the depositions taken in the first days the ship lay at anchor in the harbor at Nassau, the revolt began to take fitful narrative shape. When the slave traders and sailors, who had not been allowed to talk to one another while under the dominion of the rebels, finally began to talk, their stories were idiosyncratic and nonsynchronous. Although they each described the same set of events, their stories intersected only at certain points – the point where the wounded Captain climbed up to find Gifford already in the maintop, or where Merritt discovered that he was not the only white man who had survived the revolt. Indeed, even “the Protest” apparently based upon a shared telling of the story that occurred in a New Orleans notary’s office months later, seems to jump and splice according to who ever was talking: it represents the revolt less a single strand of events than as a series of events cut-up and scattered on top of one another.

Yet even in those first depositions, one can see the stories these white men told begin to bend to the pull of their larger purpose. As they told and re-told their stories, they developed a common account of what had happened, an account that reflected a reworking and ideological resolution of the underlying contradictions, which characterized the voyage of the *Creole* as it, had departed Hampton Roads: human property, domestic slave trade, extra-territorial sovereignty. Telling their stories, they rebuilt the ideological parameters of the world that had collapsed upon them.

These men were well versed in the cultural canon of black slavery, and from the first, their accounts trimmed toward its imagery. Toward the imagery of Haiti: “Kill every white person on board; don’t save one,” Gifford remembered hearing one of the rebels say. Of minstrelsy: the rebels called for whisky, wine, apples and bread, remembered Jacob Leitener, and then they rifled through the white’s belongings, stealing their clothes and “putting on their stockings, leaving old ones in their places.” Of slaveholding sentimentality: “Jim inquired if it was ‘he.’ Deponent replied ‘yes.’ Jim then turned round and said ‘Boys do not hurt him,’” recalled Theophilus McCargo. Later his father’s faithful slave Lewis led him out of the hold into a stateroom and “remained with him all the next day.” Of mastery, even *in extremis*: “After the slaves had discovered the captain and the mates were aloft, they said they should be killed, but Deponent persuaded them to save their lives,” testified William Merritt.<sup>31</sup> All or none of these things might have actually happened; apart from the status as bare facts, however, their telling re-asserted the set of terms that had characterized these white men’s views of slavery before the revolt.

As the depositions were taken in Nassau, these familiar images were put to specific purposes. In the first instance, they were used to rebalance the conflicting imperatives of property and security in light of the accomplished revolt. As much as they surely wanted to see Washington, Ruffin, Blacksmith, Morris and the others who had taken over the ship put to death, these men also had a stake in providing a sharply bounded account of the conspiracy, for the people who had revolted were also property, and their execution might well occasion a substantial monetary loss.<sup>32</sup> Their accounts pivot upon hard-and-fast distinctions between the nineteen they would eventually identify as conspirators and the rest of the slaves. Their first depositions “exonerated” specific slaves. Lucius Stevens, for instance, who said that he did not “mean to include any of the cabin servants or females in

his deposition as engaged in the mutiny or murder” and McCargo, who insisted the his faithful slave Lewis had been at his side for every minute of the revolt, were quite clear about where they thought the line between property and security should be redrawn. Such exculpatory stories were also embedded in the details of the revolt remembered by the sailors. Blinn Curtis, for example, had heard Madison Washington in the forehold yelling at the men to turn out: “God damn you, if you don’t come on deck, and assist in navigating the vessel, I will shoot you and fling you overboard;” only “some of them” had obeyed, he noted.<sup>33</sup>

By the time they reached New Orleans and registered their protest, this loose collection of property-saving images would be collected into a hard-and-fast accounting:

None of the other Negroes had knives out or took any part with the 19. The other Negroes all remained at their regular stations, where they had been placed at the commencement of the voyage. . . . None but the 19 went into the cabin. The 19 ate in the cabin; the others ate on the deck, as they had done the whole voyage. The 19 were frequently closely engaged in secret conversation but the others took no part in it, and appeared not to share in their confidence. The others were quiet, and did not associate with the nineteen. . . . The 19 drank liquor in the cabin and invited the whites, but did not the other Negroes, to drink with them. . . . The 19 said all they had done was for their freedom: the others said nothing about the affair; they scarcely dared to say anything about it, they were so afraid of the 19.<sup>34</sup>

In this telling – the elaborated product of a process of meaning-stabilization that, began almost as soon as the *Creole* entered the harbor – the revolt seems almost isolated from the regular running of the ship, where things continued to go on as they had from the beginning of the voyage: where property prevailed, fearful, perhaps, but ultimately unshaken.

Whatever else these faithful slave stories were – accurate representations, special pleading, calculated risks – their telling was made relevant by the social and political context: by the underlying economics of slavery and the specific political and legal problem of how to assign responsibility for the murder of Hewell and the “mutiny” aboard the boat. Which sort of stories were worth telling, which sort of stories were relevant, which sort of stories would come to frame the archive of the *Creole* was determined by the structured context of their telling: human property, legal responsibility, national sovereignty.

There was nothing mystical or occult about this process of “overdetermination.” The protocols of “flag-switching” which characterized Atlantic commerce insured that any seamen would have known the rough rules of the game if not the law of the seas itself: the American flag itself instructed these sailors how to behave and tell their stories.<sup>35</sup> But, in case any of them had missed the point, there was the American Consul there to give them directions. Remember the advice he gave to Gifford at the first meeting, only hours after the *Creole* had lain by in Nassau Harbor. He told him to keep the slaves on board the ship and to keep “the American colors set.” He reasserted the mutually defining character of human property and national sovereignty, and he redefined the situation in doing so: he realigned the imperatives of economy and diplomacy and made certain they were manifested aboard the ship sitting in the harbor. His actions, and the larger structure of politics and ideology they instantiated, shaped – determined – everything that happened afterwards: what actions were taken and what records were made of them, what it was meaningful to say and possible to find out, from that moment down to this one. As if that was not enough, also present in Nassau and advising the slave traders and sailors of the *Creole*, though appearing only once at the margin of the historical record he helped to produce, was “Mr Stark, agent of the Boston insurance companies.”<sup>36</sup>

## 4

The process of taking the depositions took several days. During that time the American Consul arranged with the Captain of another American ship lying in the harbor at Nassau to attempt to re-take the *Creole* (from the British Army) by force and run her to Indian Key, where they would put themselves under the protection of the United States Navy, have the 19 supposed conspirators tried and executed, and, presumably, the rest sold. These white conspirators, these patriots, made every effort to purchase arms from the dealers in Nassau, “but they all refused to sell.” Still, they persisted, rowing out early on the morning of the 12th with the muskets and cutlasses they had been able to gather from the other American ships in the harbor (including the *Congress*), stowed in the bottom of the boat, wrapped in an American flag to dampen their rattle. As they approached the *Creole*, however, they became aware that they had been seen by “a Negro in a boat . . . who gave the alarm to the British officer in command on board the *Creole*.” Reaching the slave ship, they were faced-down by the 24 soldiers aboard, muskets loaded and bayonets fixed.<sup>37</sup> Later that morning, Merritt noticed that a flotilla of small boats “filled with blacks . . . armed with clubs” was gathering around the *Creole*. By noontime, there were 50 or more of them, and a crowd that Merritt later estimated at two thousand had begun to gather on shore across from where the brig was anchored.<sup>38</sup>

What happened next was subject to considerable disagreement in the months (and years) that followed. Again, the American Consul had provided specific instructions: remain on the boat “and protest against every action of the Attorney general or his party which should liberate the slaves.”<sup>39</sup> This imperative clearly framed the stories that were afterward told by the slave traders and soldiers; indeed, it might be said, this single instruction – representing and codifying, as it did, the larger structural and political imperatives of property and sovereignty – magnetized the entire archive of the *Creole* revolt around the question of how, exactly, the slaves became free.

The slave trader William Merritt remembered the crucial event in the following terms. During the days that the depositions had been taken, the soldiers – “they all being colored men,” he added – were in constant contact with “the slaves.” When he went to complain to their commanding officer, he found the latter man “conversing with a colored female with his cloak around her.” At about three o’clock in the afternoon of the 12th, the Attorney General came out to the boat, and ordered the company of soldiers to remove the nineteen accused of involvement in the revolt to the shore. Then, Merritt remembered, the Attorney General addressed the rest of those who had been shipped aboard the *Creole*, telling them “that they were at liberty to go where they pleased, and were free.” Merritt asked him to announce that “those who “desired to continue their voyage,” could do so, which the Attorney General refused to do, “saying he should not have anything to do with that part of it.”<sup>40</sup>

Though he never wavered from this basic version of events, as time went by, Merritt did add some details to his account. The Attorney General, he testified upon his return to New Orleans (and in connection with the insurance claim brought by his employer), rowed a short distance out into the harbor, as another British official, John Burnsid, motioned for the surrounding boats to come alongside the *Creole*. Merritt had heard it said that the Attorney General, sitting in his own boat, had signaled the blacks in the boats to approach by waving his handkerchief at them, and though he had not seen this himself, he was pretty sure that it could have happened, “it was the act of a moment and might have been done without him seeing it.” Burnsid, still by Merritt’s account, choreographed the disembarkation of the remaining blacks from the brig. He instructed those in the boats

not to come on board, and he conducted those aboard over the side and into the rowboats. "Some of the women attempted to get over the side," Merritt remembered in 1844, "and he called them to the steps and assisted them over saying 'here is a better place,' or something like that."<sup>41</sup> Every turn in the story delivered an image of British control.

As the first set of depositions were being taken, Merritt later remembered, he had been busy trying to persuade the blacks not to go to shore, and he was certain that many of them "had not the least inclination to do so" until the Attorney General came on board. And even after the Attorney General had said whatever he had said, Merritt did not believe "the Negroes could have understood any of the language the Attorney General used." By his account, they had been unwittingly herded off the boat by overzealous British officials. He spent a week or so in Nassau trying to make contact with as many of the erstwhile slaves as he could. Finding many who were eager to continue on to New Orleans and the slave market, he agreed to smuggle them back aboard the slave ship, and waited for them one night behind an old army barracks below the harbor, but they never came. Later, he testified, they told him that they "had been threatened the night before that if they went on board they would sink her. They cried and expressed a wish to go onboard. Many asked witness to write a letter to Mr McCargo which witness declined doing. They told witness that they would come to New Orleans by the first opportunity." Merritt remained certain that if the British had not interfered, the American slave traders and sailors collected in Nassau could have easily re-taken the ship and sailed to New Orleans. "They were a brave, firm set of men," he remembered, "Captain Woodside is as brave and firm a man as witness ever saw." They were, he added, "ready to defend the American flag."<sup>42</sup>

Zephaniah Gifford told roughly the same story, though in terms that were, if anything, more perfervid than Merritt's tale of slaves struggling to be sold and patriots fighting-ready to defend the flag by selling them. The Attorney General addressed the slaves as "friends" and "men," and then he and his officers "shook hands with the Negroes, congratulating them on their liberation." One of the English officers "on the deck (with his arms round a mulatto girl)," told "the Negroes that they were fools not to have killed all the hands when they had a chance." As he walked through the street in the days after the slaves gained their freedom, the inhabitants of the city, both black and white, shouted at him in the streets, saying, "there goes one of those damned pirates and slavers." He encountered many of the former slaves from the *Creole*, who "wanted to continue to New Orleans, but stated they were afraid of the inhabitants of the island."<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, Merritt, Gifford and several other members of the crew had come close to reconstituting their cargo and completing their journey, they assured the notary in New Orleans. "The nineteen rebels had thrown overboard and burnt all their weapons before their arrival at Nassau," they noted, "and the aid thus offered of American soldiers and arms was amply sufficient for the management and safety on her voyage." In this telling, the history of the *Creole* was re-written in the conditional. Without the interference of the British, the traders and sailors (along with Captain Woodside and his patriots) would have been able independently to re-take the ship and "the slaves might have been safely brought to New Orleans."<sup>44</sup> Had events been allowed to follow their natural course, they were arguing, it would have become apparent that the white passengers and crew of the *Creole* had not been defeated at sea; they had simply suffered a setback, easily righted once another American flag came into view.

The history recorded by these slavers represented the actions of their British antagonists as a breach in the natural order of events. They represented this breach in terms of racial and sexual disorder: Burnsides gently steering the women to the stairs, patronizing them as if they were ladies; a mulatto woman in the arms of a British officer as

he talked loosely about how the slaves should have risen and killed all the whites; the British Attorney General fluttering his hankie at boat-loads of club-wielding blacks. Contrast these images of befuddled, bedazzled, and enervated British men to the firm, steadfast, purposeful, flag-pumping American men that run through their accounts. Taken together, these images represent a gendered and sexualized account of social decadence in the post-Emancipation West Indies: a telling in which black women's sexuality exercised a power over white men and in which the black men displaced by these inter-racial romances re-appeared as false-fronted soldiers or club-wielding savages, hirelings paid to provide the vigor so evidently missing from the actions of their colonial masters. Indeed, the lawyers representing the slave traders implied in a courtroom in Louisiana, that perhaps Burnsid's was actually a black man passing for white.<sup>45</sup> The traders portrayed the Bahamas as a sick inversion of the-way-things-ought-to-be, also known as the sexual and social order on board the *Creole*, where white men exercised authority over the sexuality of black women, and apparently were, at least until the night of 7 November, willfully indifferent to the presence of the black men to whom they gave the run of the boat.

John Burnsid's, the British official whom we saw in Merritt's account helping the women over the sides of the *Creole*, gave a different version of events of the afternoon of 12 November. Burnsid's had been there when all of the blacks aboard were brought on to the deck, and the nineteen thought to be involved in the revolt were singled out, handed over to the military guard, and taken to jail. Moreover, he was there when, as he remembered it, the Attorney General addressed those left on board in the following terms: "It has been deemed necessary by authorities of the Island to place the whole of your persons under restraint until the perpetrators of this horrible murder committed on board could be identified and this being now done, you are no longer under restraint by these authorities." Contrary to Merritt, he thought that the person who had told the slaves that they "were free and at liberty to go on shore or wherever they pleased" was one of the white "passengers." Shortly after that, as he told it, the blacks who remained aboard the *Creole* were taken to shore "by means of certain boats which were alongside and in the immediate vicinity." Although he did not know the names of any who had manned the boats, he did remember that they were "chiefly black."<sup>46</sup>

William Dalzell, a Sergeant of the British Police in Nassau, remembered events similarly. The British authorities, he said, took possession of the ship "in consequence of the dreadful circumstance of the murder of one of the passengers, and an attempt on the lives of the rest of the passengers, and the officers and crew having taken place." When those responsible had been singled out, the British authorities announced that they had no further claim upon the ship or those aboard it. It had been the slave trader William Merritt himself, Dalzell remembered, who told the blacks aboard the *Creole* "you are free, you can go on shore or stay on board as you please." As for the story of the boats, the handkerchief, and the secret signal, Dalzell stated, "the magistrates did not either directly or indirectly interfere with the boats coming alongside, nor did they give any commands, or assist the colored persons aforesaid to disembark from said vessel. When the officers left the Brig, accompanied by the Attorney General, they did not even then have a communication with the persons aforesaid, but proceeded directly to the shore."<sup>47</sup> As Dalzell told it, the boats carrying the British officers toward shore and those rowing out toward the *Creole* to pick up the hundred or so blacks who remained on board were simply ships passing in the night.

The history of the *Creole* revolt as the British official Burnsid's and Dalzell related it was fairly straightforward. Its terms were apparently set in a meeting of the Governor with his Council on the morning the *Creole* arrived in port. The British government averred that

it had no jurisdiction over the alleged offense (murder); given the seriousness of the offense, however, the British would investigate; all those not implicated in the alleged offenses, at the conclusion of the investigation, must “be released from further restraint.”<sup>48</sup>

Dalzell and Burnside thus boarded the *Creole*, they insisted, to investigate a “murder” not a slave revolt or even a mutiny at sea – a crime rather than an act of war or politics. They referred to all of those – black or white – who had arrived in Nassau from Norfolk as the ship’s “passengers,” who had been under attack by nineteen “criminals.” The “relative rights of master and slave,” had no bearing upon the crime they were investigating, and they “could proceed to adjudicate the case . . . without entering into the question of slavery.” Indeed, even the story of how it was that over a hundred people who had been shipped out of Norfolk bound for the slave market in New Orleans had come to be free in the British West Indies could be told without reference to the politics of slavery: “Slavery having been abolished throughout the colonies, it is not necessary that the authorities of this place should interfere to prevent the existence of slavery.” Apart from the nineteen, Burnside testified, the hundred or so blacks who had made their way ashore in the rowboats were “*ipso facto* free.” As far as his own views of slavery or race, Burnside refused to comment upon them: his own feelings, like his own actions, were seemingly meaningless in light of the ineffable freedom that had overtaken the *Creole*.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, according to both Burnside and Dalzell, the history that happened in the harbor at Nassau not only occurred after both slavery as an historical and legal institution had ceased to characterize, respectively, British history and the situation of the black “passengers,” but after the racial categories which had characterized slavery in the West Indies had exhausted their descriptive utility. For Burnside, the fact that the British soldiers who took possession of the *Creole* were twenty-four African “re-captives” led by a white officer was less a profoundly ironic than perfectly incidental. He was, he insisted utterly “unaware” of the distinctions of color being recognized in the British military, nor of any direct connection between the actions taken by the British officers on deck and the presence of boatloads of “chiefly” – i.e. accidentally rather than essentially – black Bahamians “in the neighborhood of said Brig.”<sup>50</sup>

The analogy, which occurred to the British officers who were deposed about the *Creole* revolt was the case of a slave ship driven ashore by a storm. As Burnside explained, that had happened several times in recent years, and the slaves aboard those ships had become free without any intervention at all from the British authorities. As he told it, the *Creole* affair occurred in a space outside of politics – a space where a thunderstorm and a slave revolt might be seen as equivalent phenomena. Whether it was the terms of British Law, Natural Law, or Natural History that were used to characterize the situation of *Creole* seemed less to the point than the baseline assumption of their historical coincidence: Freedom was in the air.

Interestingly, the storm-at-sea analogy was ultimately (up to a point) embraced by both the American slave traders, who wanted “their” money back if they could not get their slaves, and the American diplomats who wished to vindicate the honor of the American flag. The Americans came finally to rest their case upon the doctrine of international “comity” – the obligation of one sovereign nation not to interfere in the affairs of the other (the terms which Bacon, the American Consul, had actively imposed on the situation from the beginning). Edward Everett (having worked out the position in advance with Secretary of State Webster) argued that a ship run aground in another country or colony was a floating fragment of the sovereign power from which it had embarked, and thus should simply be set back upon its course. Indeed, slavery or not, he argued, the captain of such a ship, exercised “a kind of despotic power” aboard his ship. He may, Everett continued, in

terms that refashioned the law of slavery in the terms of the law of the seas, “enforce that power by stripes and imprisonment and even put to death the persons who with force of arms attempts to subvert it.”<sup>51</sup> Call them “slaves;” call them “passengers:” it was still up to the Captain to decide what to do with them.

Having thus at a single legalistic stroke lowered the beleaguered Captain Ensor from the mast, revived him on the deck, and restored to him a “despotic” power over the ship, Everett attempted to restore the *Creole* to its course: “It would have been no more than just to consider the vessel as still on her voyage, and entitled to the succor due other cases of distress, whether arising from accident or outrage.”<sup>52</sup> Thus was the *Creole* refloated: the Anglo-American Claims Commission, which ultimately adjudicated the case, declared that a slave revolt was, in fact, “an uncontrollable occurrence” (or in another, perhaps more subversive formulation, an “unavoidable necessity”). Thus in 1853 was “the *Creole* affair” finally closed out with the slave traders being indemnified by the British government in the amount of \$110,300, just as had been those in the precedent-setting cases of the ships that had been driven to shore by storm.<sup>53</sup>

By that time, those shipped aboard the *Creole* had disappeared from history (or at least from its archive). Within days of reaching shore in the Bahamas, many of those who had (or had not) been released by the Attorney General boarded boats for Jamaica. The 19 rebels were held for six months before being themselves released, the Attorney General having confirmed his opinion that he had no jurisdiction to try them for crimes at sea and no obligation to extradite them to the United States. These actions were delicately balanced by a set of British promises aimed at healing the diplomatic breach the *Creole* revolt had occasioned: the government instructed all of its colonial officers not to interfere in the affairs of ships brought into their ports by “accident” or “violence”; and the Webster-Ashburton Treaty (1842), which was negotiated around the as-yet unresolved question of the *Creole*, was re-written to include a provision for the extradition from the British colonies to the United States of those accused of crimes like murder, piracy, arson, robbery, or forgery (though, not, interestingly, mutiny).<sup>54</sup>

The resolution of the *Creole* story – the repair of the breach these slaves had occasioned in the histories of slavery and international relations – depended upon a set of tacit refusals to acknowledge black political action as a motive force of history.<sup>55</sup> The stories told by the slave traders and sailors coalesced around the idea that they had theoretically been in control of the ship the entire time that it lay in the harbor in Nassau, and that they would have been practically in control as well if not for the intervention of the British. The British officials told a different set of stories to a similar effect. According to them, the politics of slavery and race – the politics that were so materially manifest aboard the *Creole* – had little or nothing to do with the ultimate disposition of the case; that was determined by an imperial rule so magisterial that it could apparently effectuate itself with little or no concrete enforcement in the colonies: the slaves were *ipso facto* free.

## 5

It should perhaps come as no surprise that a series of depositions drawn from court cases pitched around the question of which of the white parties to a commercial contract were going to have to pay for what these black slaves had done and a from the testimony of the parties to an international incident between the United States and Great Britain should be told according to the dominant spatial and temporal terms which governed the Atlantic World in the nineteenth century. The archive of the *Creole* was pitched around the questions of whether what was happening in the port was properly understood as



American or British history – whether it was to be understood as part of the unfolding history of slavery or “freedom.”

Rather than a simple matter of common sense, however, I have argued that these tellings – the tellings that comprise the archive of the *Creole* revolt – were shaped by the events themselves: by the framing contradictions of chattel slavery, the politics of slavery and sovereignty in the Atlantic circa 1841, and the active efforts of both American and British governmental authorities in Nassau to interpellate the situation of the *Creole* in the terms of these sub-tending structures. The history the *Creole* revolt as we encounter it in the depositions and diplomatic correspondence that followed it – that is, in the only primary sources we have in order to understand what happened in the week of 7 November 1841 – remains subject to the gravitational pull of those events: to the claims the past exercises over the its own future though what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called “archival power.”<sup>56</sup>

To explore this problem, it is perhaps worth returning to the moment upon which the archive of the *Creole* revolt came to focus; the moment in the middle which the stories came to anticipate in their accounts of what came first and descend from in their accounts of what came after: the moment when the Attorney General rowed out to the *Creole* and told the blacks aboard that they were free to go ashore (or not). We might ask: what else was he to say? There were two thousand people on the shore willing him forward. There were 50 boats full of armed men keeping watch over his actions. There were 24 British soldiers who had themselves been liberated from slavery in scenes much like the one he was there being forced to play out.

Indeed, he must have considered other courses. The British government had recently agreed to indemnify the owners of slaves who had been wrecked in the Bahamas and liberated by the British – cases in which it was much easier to sustain an argument about the condition of “freedom” in the British West Indies than it was standing on a fully rigged ship flying the American flag from its mast. The American Consul, indeed, had offered the Governor a list of face-saving compromises, notably that the British soldiers would simply stand down and the *Creole* turned over to its original crew and a supplementary guard of American bandit-patriots.<sup>57</sup> All of these options, however, were gainsaid by the situation in Nassau; Freedom was not in the air; it was on the deck and in the harbor.

And what were Gifford and Merritt and the rest of them to do about it? They were out-gunned and out-manned. They had been routed at sea and on shore. The small collection of fiercely willing but lightly armed Americans in Nassau stood no chance against the company of Africans on the deck, the hundreds of blacks in the boats, and the early warning system on the shore that had already foiled them once. It would have taken a lot more than Captain Woodside and his patriots to set them back on course. Indeed, even as they continued to argue that the British officials who had come on board the *Creole* had orchestrated the situation, they admitted that they had feared what would happen to them if the British soldiers left the boat and the blacks in the harbor came aboard. Gifford even admitted that it was possible that “under these fears and the agitation of the moment he might have said ‘Let them go,’ though he has no recollection of using the expression.”<sup>58</sup>

The story of the *Creole* is a story of the revolutionary Black Atlantic. Of 19 African-American slaves from Virginia, 24 African soldiers of the Second West Indian Regiment, and several hundred freed Africans and Afro-Caribbeans whose collected force determined the actions of the American and British whites there in the harbor. The power of this Black Atlantic history was dispositive – nothing else could have happened; it capsized whatever versions of history and right represented by the slave traders, the sailors, and even the British officials who stood there together on the deck as the boats carried the newly free

people away toward the shore. Yet, again predictably but remarkably, none of the white people – none of the Americans, nor any of the British officials – in Nassau told story that way. Indeed, the more they told their conflicting stories of what had happened on board the *Creole*, the more those stories arced away from the seemingly obvious. The history of the *Creole* was gradually submerged in its own over-determined archive.

The resources for re-reading the story of the *Creole* as an aspect of the history of the Black Atlantic (rather than – or, really, in addition to – the histories of American Slavery and British Freedom), begin with information in that archive that was not fully exhausted by their framing imperatives.<sup>59</sup> One might begin with the ship's manifests. These manifests listed and described the slaves shipped from Richmond, and, as such, they served a dual purpose we have noted: they conveyed the slaves as property listed in the serial order of commodities laid out for comparison and sale; and they asserted these slaves status as "domestic" property being shipped from one part of the United States to the other; that is to say, they condensed the contradictions of human property and domestic slavery. They were, indeed, the essence of what was under dispute in the months and years after the revolt: they provided the list of slaves upon which all claims of indemnity and redress rested. Although the information contained therein that Doc Ruffin was five feet, six inches tall, 25 years old and described as "brown," or that Madison Washington was five feet nine inches tall, 22 years old and described as "black," played no role in the disputes which framed the way the history of the *Creole* was recorded, it might have been of substantial interest to Frederick Douglass when he sat down to write his own account of the revolt, to which we will return.

More to the point at the moment is the fact that on the afternoon of November 8<sup>th</sup>, the revolt hours old and the *Creole* still at sea, the slaves who had taken over the ship demanded to see the manifests, "which demand," the first mate Gifford remembered, "he complied with under fear for his life."<sup>60</sup> As Gifford handed them over, the ship's manifests changed their meaning. No longer did they express the logic of slavery and sovereignty, but of Black Atlantic politics. The manifests allowed the leaders of the conspiracy an overview of the slaves aboard the ship: it provided them with a tool of governance, according to which labor aboard the boat could be organized, perhaps, or by which they could make an accounting of who had stood with them and who had remained in the hold. The number "nineteen" hung over almost every deposition given in the aftermath of the revolt, and it was therein deployed according to the obvious imperatives of property and criminality: where would the line between the punishable and the (still) saleable be drawn? For the conspirators, the divisions concealed beneath the seeming seriality of the manifest, likewise ran between life and death, but by way of another logic.

According to the manifests, the four men ultimately identified as taking the leading role in the revolt came aboard the *Creole* in four different lots of slaves. They came, that is to say, from different parts of Virginia, different communities, and different families: they had no way of knowing one another when they were sold into the slave trade. Yet, somehow, in the weeks they spent in the slave trade, these men came to know one another well enough to trust one another with their lives: to say words to one another, to share thoughts, to take actions, for which they could have easily been killed had they been betrayed. Having done so, they were apparently able to convince 15 other men, themselves belonging to five different lots of slaves, to do the same. They were apparently able to reach some sort of understanding with the others aboard the *Creole*, at least some of whom must have known the nineteen were up to *something* and nevertheless remained silent.<sup>61</sup>

To say so is to gesture at the intellectual history of the revolt. Owing to their success, because they liberated themselves and more than 100 others, the conspirators' own

accounts of how they planned the revolt make up no part of the *Creole* archive – not even the tortured ventriloquism of white fear, which provides a shattered record of the planning of failed revolts like those of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, or Nat Turner exists in this case. Yet there on the manifest we have the bare evidence of their names: Madison Washington, Doc Ruffin, Elijah Morris, Ben Blacksmith, names which serially and metaphorically register the intellectual parameters of the black revolt, its republicanism, its conjuration, its prophetic Christianity, its commonality in labor. As they came to know one another, trust one another, and plan their revolt, the conspirators had at their disposal the shared idioms of Black Atlantic culture.<sup>62</sup>

The dialectic of shared culture and mistrust which frames this reading of the *Creole* manifests is, of course, evident at several other points in the archive: in Madison Washington's threat that he would kill those who did not turn out and take part in the rebellion; in the stories of the intercessory faithful slaves Lewis and Mary; in the giddy laughter of those who had not participated as the ship sailed into Nassau; in the fact that four of the slaves on board continued with the crew from Nassau to New Orleans; in the bare fact that all of the conspirators were said to have been men. These images of political differences (and betrayal) among the *Creole* blacks had obvious value to the white slave traders and sailors as they sought to protect their property and rebalance their ideology; it was according to that value that they were deployed in the archive and due to it that they have been all but ignored (when they are not simply dismissed) by subsequent historians of the revolt. Their meaning was so over-determined by the circumstances under which they entered the historical record as to be finally inaccessible today. Yet it is in these images of division and betrayal that the difficulty of the revolt is recorded: far from an "uncontrollable occurrence" or an "unavoidable necessity" – the imperative logic which frames so many of our histories of slavery in which it is assumed that every slave at every moment must have dreamed of "freedom" and revolution – in these images black revolt is represented as political organization practiced along a razor's edge of mistrust, betrayal, and mortal vulnerability. Finally, there is the striking suggestion of the existence Black Atlantic "grapevine" apparently sensitive enough to transmit information about the fate of a single shipment of slaves grounded in the Bahamas a year earlier backward through the trade to slaves aboard the *Creole*.<sup>63</sup>

Alongside these images of black revolt as cultural practice and political organization, might be placed a set of images of the decomposition of whiteness. There was the Frenchman, Jacques Lacombe, who stayed at the ship's wheel throughout the revolt and the Prussian cook Jacob Lietener, who served the slaves food and drink in the cabin on the first night.<sup>64</sup> There was Merritt and then Gifford and then Stevens, serially offering themselves to run these slaves to freedom on the basis of knowledge about the history of the *Hermosa* they later insisted had come from the rebels themselves (and whose idea was it to go to Nassau rather than Abaco?). There were the meals these men, white and black, took together, the work they did together aboard the ship, the nights they spent sleeping alongside one another in the cabin, and even the days they spent together in the harbor at Nassau, waiting to see how fate would finally sort them. There are the "faithful slaves" to whom Theophilus McCargo and William Merritt apparently owed their lives, and the life-saving warnings given Stevens by the "leaders" of the revolt who were apparently less in control than they were later said to have been. In addition, there is the fact that so many of these white men lived to tell their own story, that the questions of who should live and who should die aboard the *Creole* were decided according to a politics of practicality and escape rather than of race war and revenge.<sup>65</sup> Again, there is no way finally to peel back these images and find the True History of the *Creole* Revolt underneath. These are moments of

white collusion, inter-racial cooperation, and black mercy – of the intimacy of surrender – that distort the black and white order of the archive as if someone had splashed its surface with seawater.

As well as attempting to see through the *Creole* archive to imagine the history that lies behind it, we can look around it. In 1853, the year that the breached logic of human property and inter-national diplomacy was finally covered over with the reparations paid by the British government to American slave traders, Frederick Douglass re-told the story of the *Creole* revolt according to a set of political imperatives and narrative parameters radically divergent from those prevailing in New Orleans or even Nassau. “The Heroic Slave,” was, as Douglass put it, built out of “marks, traces, possibles, and probabilities” – out of the leftover pieces and un-utilized possibilities of the standard tellings. Douglass’s story focuses upon the actions of Madison Washington, and it begins in 1835, long before the events aboard the *Creole*. The bulk of the story is organized around a peculiar narrative device by which the reader follows a white abolitionist from Ohio through a series of chance encounters with Washington – overhearing Washington deploring his slavery and longing for escape in a Virginia forest, aiding Washington as he escapes to Canada years later, seeing Washington once more, this time being driven in a slave coffle *en route* to Richmond and the *Creole* after having returned to Virginia to help his wife escape – each of which provides an occasion for the review of what has happened between that meeting and the last. The story thus formally recapitulates the biographical sharing out by which slave-strangers made themselves known to one another in the trade.

The last section of the story is headed by an epigram from Byron’s *Childe Harold* – “Who would be free, *themselves* must strike the blow” – beneath which Douglass introduces a new set of voices to tell the story of what happened on board the ship: Jack Williams, “a regular old salt” conversing with Tom Grant “a trim, compact, manly looking person,” who turns out to have been the mate aboard the *Creole*. Perhaps Douglass thought that an account of a slave revolt told from the perspective of its participants would be too much – too pornographic – for his mostly white, mostly middle-class audience, though for our purposes here it is enough to note that “The Heroic Slave,” like all of the renderings we have encountered so far, develops a story about the actions of black people out of a conversation between whites. A conversation which, again interestingly for our purposes here, opens with some talk about the weather. Says Williams, “I say shipmate, you had rough weather on your last passage to New Orleans?” “Foul play, as well as foul weather,” Grant returns.<sup>66</sup>

Williams responds by saying that he believes that the affair aboard the *Creole* was handled “miserably” and “disgracefully,” and that a half dozen “*resolute* white men” could have had the slaves in irons in under 10 minutes, precisely the sort of inexorable whitemanism-in-the-conditional-voice which underlay the legal resolution of the actual dispute. Grant replies by clarifying the condition of white dominance: “it is one thing to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation and quite another to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty.” Isolated from its terrestrial predicates, slavery – property and sovereignty – cannot be said to exist outside the immediate encounter of trader and slave. Indeed, the ocean here is represented less as a setting than as an active participant in the history of the *Creole*, a space which itself works to negate the terrestrial claims extended over it.<sup>67</sup>

Williams, not satisfied, focuses in on the fact that it was Grant himself who charted the rebels’ course to Nassau. Grant’s response is to detail the heroic outline of Madison Washington’s presence – his personal bearing, the lucidity of his speech, and the controlled fury with which he knocked the mate senseless with the insurrection’s first blow. When he

came to, he found the captain and one of the crewmen lying dead on the deck, and the rest of the whites aloft in the rigging; Washington stood at the helm. Grant raised himself from the deck and rushed at Washington, calling him a murderer and a villain, to which Washington, stepping out of the way of the charging mate responded, "God is my witness that *LIBERTY* not *malice* is the motive for this night's work." Washington then stood over the exhausted Grant and ordered him to chart a course for the Bahamas. When Grant refused, Washington threatened him in the following terms: "I have saved your life twice within the last twenty minutes – for when you lay helpless on the deck, my men were about to kill you. I held them in check. And if you now . . . persist in your resistance to my authority, I give you fair warning *YOU SHALL DIE*."<sup>68</sup>

Douglass's account is framed by the dominant terms of the Anglo-American discussion of the *Creole* revolt, the contrast between American slavery and British "liberty," or what Douglass referred to as the contrast between the protective "mane" and "mighty paw" of the British lion and the "talons and the beak of the American Eagle." Yet within these hegemonic terms, another set is visible. Washington's statement that he had saved Grant's life and therefore the white man had to accept his authority ran parallel to nineteenth-century accounts of the original cause of enslavement.<sup>69</sup> The life Washington had spared had become his own to direct: Merritt had become his slave. In contrast to the dominant terms of the discussion, Douglass's Washington invoked a set of terms which might be seen as either the residual terms of African slavery, where mastery rather than freedom was the opposite of slavery, or the emergent terms of the Black Atlantic, in which white men might one day be the slaves of black ones. In either case, black mercy is here portrayed as an aspect of black mastery rather than slavish faithfulness (or even misguided pragmatism).

The story ends shortly thereafter. Sixty miles out, the *Creole* was hit by a furious storm. The bodies of the dead whites were swept from the deck. However, Washington "stood firmly at the helm," his resolute hand guiding the ship to shore and its cargo to freedom: foul play as well as foul weather.<sup>70</sup> With Grant as witness, black soldiers, who roll their eyes at the idea of slavery and a "multitude of sympathizing spectators," who cheer the liberated slaves onto shore, greet Washington in the harbor. Grant, that is to say, becomes the historical register of the actions Washington has taken, thus inverting both the standard terms of the master-slave dialectic, in which slaves serve as witness to the actions of their master, and of the *Creole* archive, in which the results of black action are recorded in the terms of white agency.

Like "The Heroic Slave," Martin Delany's *Blake* is the story of black revolt and the slave trade. *Blake* begins with the hero's separation from his wife, who is sold away for resisting the advances of her master (who, it is later revealed, is also her father). Shortly after, Blake hears from others in the neighborhood that he, too, is to be sold, and he leaves Natchez on a journey that takes him across the South, to Cuba, West Africa, and back to Cuba, where, as the story ends (it was published in serial form and apparently never completed) he is preparing to lead a slave revolt that will stretch from the Caribbean across the Southern United States. The details of the plot are never revealed, a seemingly tactical silence that, together with various footnotes in which Delany intervenes in the text to note that he himself witnessed incidents described in connection with Blake's journey across the South, frames the book as the completion of a circuit between past experience, present description, and future action: as a fictional account of a future still seeking to bring itself into being.

*Blake* is generally read as an early iteration of the idea that would come to be identified as "Black Nationalism," which, indeed, it is. However, it is also a book about the operational complexity of organizing a slave revolt. The first half of the book describes

Blake's journey throughout the South, describing in detail both the route he took as it might be described across the face of a map, and the on-the-road experience of the landscape, the embodied experience of traveling through hostile territory. Most important for our purposes here, is the question of political organization, of getting slaves across the South to recognize their collective strength and "induce them to a general rising." Blake's response to this problem of collective action is yet another reconfiguration of the master-slave dialectic: "Every blow you receive from the oppressor," he tells one of his recruits, "impresses the organization [of the totality of the revolt] upon your mind." In practice, Blake's plan is to identify one man or woman on a plantation who might serve as a local agent, recruiting others, until knowledge of the plan had been spread "like smallpox" across the South.<sup>71</sup>

Much of the first half of the book is devoted to the serial recounting of the conversations by which Blake identifies those in whom he will confide. These conversations typically begin with a gambit such as "Don't they treat you well, aunty?" and often go on for several pages of teases, feints, and equivocations as the speakers, Blake on the one hand and his prospective ally on the other, establish the level of trust necessary to come to the conversation, which it finally becomes obvious they have been having all along.<sup>72</sup> In one such conversation after he reaches Cuba, Blake begins by giving a false name "that no trace of his rambling be detected should he fall in with treacherous blacks disposed to betray him." "Where are you from, and where do you live," his mark asks him. "I cannot tell you that," Blake replies. A couple of other avenues of inquiry are likewise foreclosed before the potential rebel finally comes to the resolution of the meta-conversation: "My friend, I think I understand you; come with me."<sup>73</sup> These conversations, that is, resolve moments of suspicion (the suspicion upon which the rebellion depends for its success) into recognition of anterior commonality: they resolve the dialectic of mistrust and commonality into collective action.

While Delany's rendition of white violence is harrowing – *Blake* contains images of extraordinary sadism – Blake's violence (the murders of a white overseer and a black driver and the killing of some dogs and horses used to aid whites in the pursuit of escaping slaves) occurs almost entirely off-stage. Far from the contingent material choreography described by the whites aboard the *Creole*, the black violence in *Blake* seems almost inexorable: invisible and automatic.

Indeed, for Delany, white fear (rather than black) was the defining feature of slavery:

Few people lead such a life as the white inhabitants of Cuba, and those of the South now comprising the "Southern Confederacy of America." A dreamy existence of the most fearful apprehensions of dread, horror and dismay; suspicion and distrust, jealousy and envy continually pervade the community; and Havana, New Orleans, Charleston, or Richmond may be thrown into consternation by an idle expression of the most trifling or ordinary ignorant black. A sleeping wake or waking sleep, a living death or tormented life is that of the Cuban and American slaveholder. For them there is no safety.<sup>74</sup>

Delany was developing an account of Cuba shared by both pro- and anti-slavery extremists in the 1850s into a description of the institution of slavery as a whole. The shorthand among Southern slaveholders for the fears Delany described was "Africanization" the process by which the hypertrophic importation of slaves and the brutality of the regime had turned Cuba into a "tinderbox" from which a circum-Caribbean slave revolt might be ignited.<sup>75</sup>

The spark was to be a ship of slaves. Blake ships out as sailing-master on a Spanish ship (the *Vulture*) bound for coast of West Africa. His plan is to take the ship at sea and use "the powerful force" of its slaves as the advance guard of the revolt. Also aboard are

several “supernumerary” American seamen, put aboard in case the British stopped the ship at sea, but blacks, Delany notes, ran the *Vulture*, – by their labor and ultimately by their purpose. Indeed, as the *Vulture* travels toward Africa, it becomes clear that Blake guides not only the ship, but that its crew is “governed entirely by the apparent feelings of its head on board, upon whom they invariably cast a look at every incident.” Even as they went about their business, “the Negroes fully understood themselves.”<sup>76</sup> Even as the ship tracks a course charted by the slave trade, it rides the currents of the Black Atlantic.

As the *Vulture* is loaded and launched upon its return journey, the reader is exposed to the horrors of the Middle Passage: The slaves in the stinking holds are hosed down with salt water, the slaves are manacled, beaten, and mocked by the white mate, the dead and the dying are thrown overboard to allow the ship to gain speed in a race with a British cruiser, “thus escaping capture by the speed of a superior Baltimore-built slaver, rigged and fitted out in New York for the trade.” As Blake walks among them, his gaze meets that of a man, Mendi, and a woman, Abyssa, who whispers to him as he passes, “Arm of the Lord, awake!” As the *Vulture* nears Cuba, she is pursued by another British ship, and overtaken by a terrible storm. In the hold, the slaves begin to rise. “The black and frowning skies and raging hurricane above; the black and frowning slaves with raging passions below, rendered it dreadful without, fearful within, and terrible all around.”<sup>77</sup>

The storm passes, the British fall away, and the slaves subside. Blake has remained “strangely passive” throughout the night, fixed in place at the wheel, guiding the ship, though he is suspected by the Americans of instigating the revolt. As the ship lands at Matanzas, he disappears into the crowd gathered at the quay, and in his wake rumors, that there had been a rebellion on board begins to spread through the city. The value of the slaves is thus substantially diminished, and Blake’s hidden confederates in the crowd buy many of them, including Mendi and Abyssa. They will be among those who are preparing to rise as the story’s end, “the great scheme through this medium being much enhanced, though the mutiny was unsuccessful.”<sup>78</sup> Here, in Delany’s image of rebellion spread from Africa to Cuba to the United States through the medium of the slave trade, in the image of a slave ship as revolutionary reinforcement, is the contradiction of human property in the era of domestic slavery resolved into its antithesis.

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### Notes on contributor

Walter Johnson teaches history and African American Studies at Harvard University. He is the author of *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* as well as several articles on historical theory, including “Slavery, Reparations, and the Mythic March of Freedom” in the Autumn 2007 issue of *Raritan*. He is at work on a book about slavery, capitalism, and imperialism in the Mississippi Valley.

### Notes

1. “Message from the President of the United States, communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate, copies of correspondence in relation to the mutiny on board the brig

- Creole*, and the liberation of the slaves who were passengers in the said vessel. 20 January 1842,” 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 24–25, 37–40 (Merritt’s deposition taken at the United States Consulate in Nassau, 9 November 1841 and “Protest” registered with W.Y. Lewis, Notary Public, New Orleans, 7 December 1841). On the *Creole* revolt see: Johnson, “The *Creole* Affair”; Jones, “The Peculiar Institution and the National Honor:,” 33–47; Jervey and Huber, “The *Creole* Affair,” 196–211; Jones and Rakestraw, *Prelude to Manifest Destiny*; Sale, *Slumbering Volcano*; George Hendrick and Wilene Hendrick, *The Creole Mutiny*, and Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market,” 203–33.
2. Bancroft, *Slave-Trading in the Old South*; Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*; Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce*; Johnson, *The Chattel Principle*; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*.
  3. The notion of “contradiction” framing my account is drawn from Louis Althusser “Contradiction and Overdetermination” in his *For Marx*, in which he argues that the concrete social relations of capitalism are expressed through other aspects of a society: its politics, its laws, its theories of human agency, etc. (Althusser, *For Marx*, 87–128.)
  4. DuBois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, 39, 44; Rothman, *Slave Country*, 1–36; Rothman, “The Domestication of the Slave Trade in the United States,” 32–54; DuBois, *The Suppression*, 117–33; Johnson, “Racism, Capitalism, and Imperialism”.
  5. See Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, 68–109; Rubin, *The Law of Piracy*, 122–291; Benton, “Legal Spaces of Empire, 700–24. See also Casarino, *Modernity at Sea*; James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*.
  6. DuBois, *The Suppression*, 92–7; see also Brown, *Moral Capital*.
  7. DuBois, *The Suppression*, 67–91, 97–98, 106–16. Soulsby, *The Right of Search*; Jones and Rakestraw, *Prologue to Manifest Destiny*, 72–81; Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic*, 89–204.
  8. DuBois, *The Suppression*, 98; Horne, *The Deepest South*, 53–65.
  9. Quoted in DuBois, *The Suppression*, 112; quoted in Horne, *The Deepest South*, 59.
  10. See Foner, *Business and Slavery*, 164–68.
  11. DuBois, *The Suppression*, 76–9.
  12. Conrad, “Neither Slave nor Free, 50–70; Murray, *Odious Commerce*.
  13. Adderley, “*New Negroes from Africa*”. See also Johnson, *The Bahamas in Slavery and Freedom*, 30–55; Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 3–31.
  14. Everett to the Earl of Aberdeen.
  15. *McCargo v. The Merchant’s Insurance Company of New Orleans*; *McCargo v. New Orleans Insurance Company*; *Andrews and Hatcher v. Ocean Insurance Company*; *Lockett v. Firemans’ Insurance Company*; *Johnson v. Ocean Insurance Company*; *Lockett v. Merchants Insurance Company*. Slaves in the interstate trade were sometimes also covered by life insurance policies. See Policy for Caesar Rivers; Thomas Finney Letter to William Finney. See also Savitt, “Slave Life Insurance in Virginia and North Carolina,” 583–600; Genovese, “The Medical and Insurance Costs of Slaveholding in the Cotton Belt,” 141–55; Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, 103–4, 164–5.
  16. *McCargo v. The Merchant’s Insurance Company of New Orleans*; testimony of Zephaniah Gifford.
  17. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 61.
  18. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 63; Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘one-eyed Men,’” 165–202.
  19. Theophilus McCargo, one might guess, was named for the notorious New Orleans slave trader and McCargo partner Theophilus Freeman rather than the Athenian poet or the Alexandrian Patriarch.
  20. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1709–91.
  21. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 20–1 (Gifford’s Deposition taken at Nassau, 9 November 1841).
  22. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 22–3 (Stevens’s Deposition taken at Nassau, 10 November 1841).
  23. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 23 (Stevens’s Deposition taken at Nassau, 10 November 1841).
  24. On the *post hoc* refiguration of violence into meaning, see Scarry, *The Body in Pain*; and Feldman, *Formations of Violence*.



25. Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination", in *For Marx*, 87–128. However, see also Williams, *Marxism and Literature*; and Sewell, Jr, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," 1–29.
26. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc 51, 26 (Deposition of Theophilus McCargo, 19 November 1841).
27. *Andrews and Hatcher v. Ocean Insurance Company*. Of all of the uncertainties that characterize the history of the *Creole*, the presence of a Union Jack aboard the ship is perhaps the most confounding – one would imagine that the last thing that *any* slave ship in 1841 would have any use for would be a Union Jack. I can only hazard a guess about this: was "the Jack" a means to avoid duties on other, inter-island journeys? Alternatively, even further out on a limb: was it the best protection for a ship (on another journey) to evade American patrols as it, say, carried slaves from Cuba to the United States?
28. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 2–3 (John Bacon to Daniel Webster, 30 November 1841).
29. Adderley, "New Negroes from Africa," 59; Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 56; Johnson, *The Bahamas in Slavery and Freedom*, 19.
30. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 42 ("Protest" registered with W.Y. Lewis, Notary Public, New Orleans, 7 December 1841).
31. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 20 27, 26, 25 (Depositions of Zephaniah Gifford, 9 November 1841, Jacob Lietner, 15 November 1841, Theophilus McCargo, 10 November 1841, and William Merritt, 9 November 1841).
32. See Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano*, 126–9.
33. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 23, 26, 24 (Depositions of Lucius Stevens, 10 November 1841, Theophilus McCargo, 10 November 1841, and Blinn Curtis, 10 November 1841).
34. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 41 ("Protest" registered with W.Y. Lewis, Notary Public, New Orleans, 7 December 1841).
35. For the way that the material expressions of a given social structure serve as vehicles of ideology see Sewell, "A Theory of Structure," 1–29.
36. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 44 ("Protest" registered with W.Y. Lewis, Notary Public, New Orleans, 7 December 1841).
37. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 45 ("Protest" registered with W.Y. Lewis, Notary Public, New Orleans, December 7, 1841).
38. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 13–4 (Deposition of William Merritt, 13 November 1841).
39. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 3 (Consul John Bacon to Secretary of State Daniel Webster, 30 November 1841). It is difficult in this connection to avoid referring to the Consul as an "ideological state apparatchik."
40. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 13–4 (Deposition of William Merritt, 13 November 1841).
41. *Andrews and Hatcher v. Ocean Insurance Company*.
42. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 13 (Deposition of William Merritt, 13 November 1841); *Andrews and Hatcher v. Ocean Insurance Company*, 25–6.
43. *McCargo v. New Orleans Insurance Company*; testimony of Gifford, UNO; 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 13–14 (Deposition of Zephaniah Gifford, 13 November 1841).
44. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 45 ("Protest" registered with W.Y. Lewis, Notary Public, New Orleans, 7 December 1841).
45. *Lockett v. Firemans' Insurance Company*, (declaration that "he is not connected by descent with the African race" must have been occasioned by such a question).
46. *Lockett v. Firemans' Insurance Company*.
47. *Lockett v. Firemans' Insurance Company*. See also 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 10 (Attorney General G.C. Anderson to Governor Francis Cockburn, 13 November 1841).
48. See also 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 6 (Colonial Secretary C.R. Nesbitt to American Consul John Bacon, 9 November 1841).
49. *Lockett v. Firemans' Insurance Company*.
50. For the moment in the history of the British West Indies when it was possible for British officials to say such things (and for the underlying historical process which eventually re-racialized the dominant terms of the discussion about "freedom") see Holt, "The Essence of Contract", 33–60; for the Bahamas, in particular, see Craton and Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream*, 19–26.
51. Everett, "Letter".

52. Everett, "Letter".
53. Jones, "The Peculiar Institution," 33–7, 44–7; see also Jones and Rakestraw, *Prelude to Manifest Destiny*, 90–6.
54. Jones, "The Peculiar Institution," 33–7, 44–7; see also Jones and Rakestraw, *Prelude to Manifest Destiny*, 90–6.
55. On this point, see Sale, *Slumbering Volcano*, 131–3.
56. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*. See also Sale, *Slumbering Volcano*. Both Trouillot and Sale frame this issue as one of "discourse," where I am attempting to frame it as a question of "overdetermination:" the process by which underlying contradictions are extruded through institutional and ideological forms.
57. Everett, "Letter"; 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 44 ("Protest" registered with W.Y. Lewis, Notary Public, New Orleans, 7 December 1841).
58. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 13–14 (Deposition of Zephaniah Gifford, 13 November 1841).
59. In an example of such a reading, Phillip Troutman has recently suggested that the "geographical literacy" represented by the conspirators request to be taken first to Liberia and then to the island of Abaco was likely a product of the time they had spent together in the Richmond slave pen from whence the earlier, fated journey of the slaves freed from the *Hermosa* had begun. Troutman, "The Grapevine and the Slave Market," 203–33.
60. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 21 (Deposition of Zephaniah Gifford, 9 November 1841). Interestingly, Gifford noted that as he testified on 9 November, he had the manifests in front of him, "which have this day been returned by some of the slaves to the officer commanding the guard."
61. *Andrews and Hatcher v. Ocean Insurance Company*, 32; *Lockett v. Firemans' Insurance Company*, 4.
62. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 45–77; "Time and Revolution in African America," 148–67.
63. Troutman, "The Grapevine and the Slave Market," 203–33.
64. 27th Congress, 2nd Session, S. Doc. 51, 27, 39 (Deposition of Jacob Lietener, 15 November 1841, "Protest" registered with W.Y. Lewis, Notary Public, New Orleans, 7 December 1841).
65. For mercy as a defining feature of slave revolts see Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168.
66. Douglass, "The Heroic Slave," 499.
67. Douglass, "The Heroic Slave," 499–500.
68. Douglass, "The Heroic Slave," 501–2.
69. See, e.g. Delany, *Blake, or, The Huts of America*, 87.
70. Douglass, "The Heroic Slave," 504.
71. Delany, *Blake*, 40–1, 114.
72. Delany, *Blake*, 70–3, see also 75–9, 102, 112–8.
73. Delany, *Blake*, 177. Slave narratives are likewise full of these sorts of meta-conversations; see Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 63–77.
74. Delany, *Blake*, 305.
75. Walker, "Cuba and the South," 520–4. See also, Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*.
76. Delany, *Blake*, 198, 204–5.
77. Delany, *Blake*, 224, 231, 236.
78. Delany, *Blake*, 237, 238.

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