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Insurrection at sea: violence, the slave trade, and the rhetoric of abolition

Lenora D. Warren*

This article explores the relationship between violence, in the form of shipboard and plantation insurrections, and the British abolitionist movement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Beginning with Thomas Clarkson’s *The Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave-trade Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the Year 1788* (1788), I will look at how Clarkson and Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano, the African* (1789) negotiate the relationship between violence and the slave trade. Clarkson and Equiano depict the slave trade itself as violent in order to persuade the white British public to turn against the trade politically. However, while their tactic rightly points to the dehumanizing nature of the practice of slavery, it creates at the outset of the abolitionist movement a rhetoric that privileges nonviolent approaches to ending slavery. The period between 1759 and 1771, Equiano’s time at sea, saw the highest incidence of insurrection, both by slaves in transit from Africa and by those who reached the plantations in the Americas. From the standpoint of captured Africans, antislavery demanded violent actions to free themselves from their captors. Yet, the work of Clarkson and Equiano thought otherwise, as indicated by the rhetoric of nonviolence they espoused. I argue that during this period, abolitionist rhetoric emerged that defined freeing slaves as abolition rather than as liberation. This early abolitionist rhetoric created representational and practical problems that would continue to plague later abolitionists.

**Keywords:** abolition; insurrection; slave trade; Atlantic; Clarkson; Equiano

Introduction

In his *Interesting Narrative*, Olaudah Equiano recalls as his earliest experience in the British Navy being forced to fight another boy for the amusement of the rest of the crew. It is his first time earning money, his first bloodying, and the first time he felt himself as part of the crew, as something other than a slave. He recalls:

> On the passage, one day for the diversion of those gentlemen, all the boys were called on the quarter-deck, and were paired proportionally [sic], and then made to fight; after which the gentleman gave the combatants from five to nine shillings each. This was the first time I ever fought with a white boy; and I never knew what it was to have a bloody nose before. This made me fight most desperately; I supposed considerably more than an hour; and at last, both of us being very weary, we were parted. I had a great deal of this kind of sport afterwards, in which the captain and the ship’s company used very much to encourage me.¹

In one register, the scene presents the community of the ship as one in which the markers of race matter less than physical prowess and the willingness to participate, a hazing ritual meant to induct Equiano into a community of equals. In another

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register, the fight stands out as a pantomime for shipboard insurrection. Equiano’s prowess at hand-to-hand combat becomes menacing and perhaps an element of his own unexplored potential for violence. The experience of his first bloody nose carries with it both the youthful revelation and a grim sense of satisfaction. But the scene passes without further comment as one of the many anecdotes of life at sea that characterize the text. This trace of violence is no more than that, a trace. As Vincent Carretta notes in his book *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-made Man*, whatever radical leanings Equiano may have possessed swiftly vanished as both his star rose and revolutions broke out in both France and San Domingo. Yet within the two interpretations of this trace of violence—fighting for liberation versus fighting to assimilate—lie the roots of how the early abolitionists negotiated the presence of slave insurrection during the mid-to-late eighteenth century.

In order to assess more fully the relationship between slave insurrection and the birth of the abolitionist movement, I approach this issue from three angles. First, I locate the origins of insurrection within the history of the transatlantic slave trade, thereby examining the way in which discussions of abolishing the slave trade engaged with the incidence of shipboard insurrection. Second, I reveal that the role of sailor testimony, specifically the testimony collected by Thomas Clarkson in *The Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave-trade Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the Year 1788* (1788), shaped abolitionist rhetoric with regard to the place of insurrection. Third, I show how the slave as a victim rather than as a freedom fighter became a more compelling trope for early abolitionists. In portraying the slave as a victim of the slave trade, the longer history of the shipboard insurrection is lost, and abolitionists would struggle with the place of insurrection within antislavery discourse well into the nineteenth century.

In 1781 Captain Luke Collingwood of the slaver *Zong* threw 132 slaves overboard, alleging disease and lack of water. Through the work of Olaudah Equiano, Thomas Clarkson, and others, the *Zong* case would come to epitomize the evils of the slave trade, dramatizing as it did the corrupt nature of slave-ship captains, the maltreatment of sailors, and of course the deplorable conditions for slaves. The slave as a victim would become a popular trope both in Great Britain and later in American abolitionist circles. Yet at the same time that slaves were being thrown overboard, beaten, and starved, they were also revolting on ships in great numbers, particularly during the mid-to-late eighteenth century.

The question of how insurrection got written out of the early abolitionist narrative matters because, in the first place, it highlights the way in which abolitionists were conscious of the problem of slave violence in the decades leading up to the San Domingo revolt. In the second place, writing insurrection out of the narrative also erases these early traces of black revolutionary activity. Erasing these early traces ignores a trend of resistance outside of those discourses of abolition couched either in Christian morality or in Enlightenment logic. Revisiting the role of shipboard insurrection in shaping abolitionist rhetoric not only allows us to explore the process through which one narrative prevails over another, but also how remnants of the alternative narrative remain.

My analysis both departs from and synthesizes the work of historians Robin Blackburn, David Brion Davis, Seymour Drescher, and Claudius Fergus, by arguing that shipboard insurrection significantly shaped the early rhetoric of the abolitionists. This approach provides insight into how slave violence affected economic
interests as well as the political world of Great Britain at that moment. I will also look specifically at the way Clarkson’s sailor testimonies explicitly engage the potential role of shipboard insurrection as a means of shaping an argument to present before Parliament against continuing the slave trade. Bringing Clarkson’s work into dialog with Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* reveals more explicitly the role Equiano’s maritime experiences had in shaping his own evolution as an abolitionist. Moreover, focusing on shipboard insurrection rather than plantation insurrection shows how insurrection, rather than being the result of the brutal conditions of bondage, is the immediate response to captivity. This distinction matters because it contradicts the eighteenth-century arguments that ameliorating slave conditions would reduce the number of slave revolts.

**Shipboard insurrection and the early abolitionist movement**

The difficulty of analyzing the role of slave insurrection in the abolitionist movement is that reaction to slave violence was always out of proportion to the actual incidence of large-scale revolts. Tacky’s Rebellion from 1760 to 1761 – in which a slave named Tacky led a widespread rebellion on the island of Jamaica, resulting in the deaths of nearly 60 whites and 400–500 blacks – does indeed stand out both for the length of time it took to put it down and for having resulted in the deaths of approximately 60 whites. In effect, the years immediately before and after Tacky’s Rebellion witnessed some of the bloodiest incidents in the history of shipboard insurrection. In the spring of 1750, a group of Africans succeeded in taking the *King David*, killing 14 crew members including the captain. The ship was eventually retaken off the coast of Guadalupe nearly two weeks later. In December 1764, immediately off the coast of Africa, captured slaves aboard another ship successfully revolted, killing the entire crew and escaping to freedom. Altogether, 69 shipboard insurrections were documented between 1760 and 1771.

But overall, slave rebellions became less frequent until the San Domingo revolt in 1791, in which the slaves succeeded in revolting and expelling the French. But, while the period of Tacky’s Rebellion would prove to be the exception rather than the rule, it would set the stage for a debate regarding how to deal with slave violence for the next three decades. Pro-slavery advocates such as Henry Long used it to argue that the Atlantic Slave Trade should be phased out in favor of augmenting the slave population by natural increase, pointing out that abolishing the slave trade could be seen as solving the problem of slave insurrection while safeguarding the institution. And, while anti-slavery advocates would point to the cruelty of slavery as the primary culprit behind insurrection, they too would cite the ending of slave violence as a primary benefit of the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

This disconnect between the actual incidence of large-scale slave revolts and the response to insurrection might merely seem to be evidence of the rising hysteria of a planter population seriously outnumbered by their slaves. However, while large-scale revolts were indeed rare, smaller revolts and thwarted revolts combined with an expanding maroon population to create some reality behind the hysteria. Furthermore, shipboard insurrections, as I am arguing, may have played a larger role than previously supposed in debates about abolition. It is perhaps due to the fact that most of these insurrections occurred on the coast of Africa that we do not think about them within the context of the Middle Passage. Yet, despite the fact that at
the time that both Clarkson and Equiano were writing and compiling evidence, instances of both shipboard and plantation were in decline, it is clear that early British abolitionists could not help but be aware of the prevalence of insurrection in the Middle Passage. But the rising concerns regarding San Domingo would necessarily force both Clarkson and Equiano to contextualize shipboard insurrection carefully in order to dissociate slave violence with full-scale revolution. How abolitionists used evidence of insurrection in their own printed materials reveals the way in which telling the story of the Middle Passage became a process of garnering sympathy, coping with the absence of the slave’s voice, and ultimately of choosing to highlight the slave as victim rather than the slave as revolutionary.

In 1786, Clarkson, upon founding the Society for Abolition of the Slave Trade along with Sharp and William Dillwyn, thought of turning the tide of public opinion against the transatlantic trade by collecting testimonies from sailors who had served aboard slave ships in order to reveal the true nature of slave trading. Accordingly, Clarkson published his findings in The Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons on the Slave-trade Collected in the Course of a Tour Made in the Autumn of the Year 1788 (1788). This collection revealed not only a clear pattern of abuse and depredations, but also confirmed that shipboard insurrection was a common occurrence aboard slave ships. Clarkson collected testimony from 22 former sailors who reported 14 instances of insurrection. This pattern of shipboard slave revolt would prove both useful and problematic for the burgeoning abolitionist movement. While evidence of insurrection was proof of the intolerability of bondage, it also provided fodder for British pro-slavery factions who claimed that abolition would lead to massive uprisings against the former slaveholders in the colonies.

In gathering testimonies from sailors who had served aboard slave ships, Clarkson shifted the focus from the practice of slavery in the colonies, and the questions and potential obstacles surrounding the wholesale abolition of the institution of slavery, to the space of the slave ship. The dysfunctional culture aboard the slave ship provided Clarkson and his colleagues with a microcosm of the practice of slavery in the Atlantic world. The space of the ship, forcing, as it did, slaves, sailors, and captains into close contact with each other, threw the tensions inherent in slavery into sharp relief in a way the diffuse plantation system did not. Clarkson, in gathering these testimonies, was able to draw a bright line beneath the abuses suffered by slaves and sailors by presenting such abuse as a common feature aboard many ships. In one account the sailor first describes the treatment of the slaves upon being kidnapped:

The slaves that are brought on board have their arms generally pinioned behind their backs with grass ropes. They are made to lie down in the bottom frequently, of a wet canoe, and if they stir, get only hard blows from the rowers or the guard.

Later, in the same account he describes similar treatment of the sailors. “The seamen are used worse in point of corporal punishment, in this than in any other trade. They are beaten on every trivial occasion. Mr. _____ has seen them knocked down with handspikes and stamped upon until the strength and passion of their tyrants has been exhausted.” Presenting the brutality acted on the slave, and then again on the sailor, Clarkson presents the slave ship – and thus the whole of the Atlantic Slave Trade – as steeped in violence. In the wake of the Zong massacre, the
depiction of slave ships as lawless vessels was essential to building a case against the slave trade. The violence visited upon sailors and slaves, as well as the shipboard insurrections, became bound up in the myriad evils of slavery, so that a view of violence as dehumanizing both slave and enslaver became one of the cornerstones of moral suasionist arguments against slavery in the USA.

Writing over 20 years later in *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (1808), Clarkson would say that the committee’s approach divided the problem of slavery into two evils: the Atlantic Trade and the practice of slavery in the colonies. Clarkson writes that after some deliberation:

> it appeared soon to be the sense of the committee, that to aim at the removal of both would be to aim at too much, and that by doing this we might lose all... For, by aiming at the abolition of the Slave Trade, they [the committee] were laying the axe at the very root.15

In 1787, the committee decided that the best way to begin their campaign against the slave trade was for “some one of their members [to] visit the ports of Bristol and Liverpool; that he should reside there for a season, and that he should obtain such undeniable documents, as might appear necessary for the furtherance of their design.”16 Clarkson, in particular, was bent on the collection of evidence in clandestine fashion as “the merchants and planters had not then taken the alarm, nor entertained the smallest suspicion that so extensive, and, as was then judged, so important a trade be shaken.”17 In the interest of keeping things relatively quiet and also ensuring that the testimonies he collected would be seen in the best possible light should a parliamentary inquiry ensue as a result of his work, Clarkson interviewed only those sailors whose service aboard slavers was long past and who were currently serving in the British navy with sterling records.18

The first seaman he met in the port of Bristol, through the aid of an unnamed informant, was a free black sailor called John Dean, who Clarkson had reason to believe would help his case:

> The report was, that for a trifling circumstance, for which he [Dean] was in no-wise to blame, the captain had fastened him with his belly to the deck, and that, in this situation, he had poured hot pitch upon his back, and made incisions in it with hot tongs.19

Further investigation including an interview with Dean, who showed him the scars on his back, and corroboration by other sailors and the attorney representing Dean in the case against his former captain revealed the account to be true and set Clarkson on the track of uncovering more accounts of sailor abuse aboard slave ships.

Each interview has roughly the same structure; the sailor describes the ways in which slaves are acquired in Africa, then goes on to describe the conditions for the slaves aboard the ship. The testimony is written in the third person, implying a degree of interpretative impartiality on the part of the recorder – Clarkson himself. This third-person reportage makes *The Substance of the Evidence of Sundry Persons* less of a collection of first-person accounts than a co-authored document in which Clarkson constructs a distinct narrative of the Atlantic Trade. The narrative begins with the
illegal acquisition of slaves, who, once on board, attempt to revolt and are severely punished for their actions. The Middle Passage manifests itself in a series of abuses toward the sailors and slaves. Upon reaching the West Indian colonies, the slaves arrive ill and their numbers greatly reduced, while the sailors are often cheated of their wages and left to die. By constructing a narrative in such a way, Clarkson puts sailors and slaves on equal footing. Combating the assertion that the slave trade provided useful early training for British sailors in the empire’s race for maritime dominance over the French, Clarkson pursued these stories to reveal explicitly how this so-called “nursery for British seamen” was, in fact, their grave.

“It appeared that more seamen died in that trade in one year than in the whole remaining trade of the country in two,” he writes:

Out of nine hundred and ten sailors in it, two hundred and sixteen died in the year, while upon a fair average of the same number employed in the trades to the East and West Indies, Petersburgh [sic], Newfoundland, and Greenland, no more than eighty-seven died.22

The difference in numbers of sailor deaths in the slave trade versus other trades served to draw attention to the distinct and brutal character of the slave trade.

The testimonies also suggest that Clarkson specifically addressed the issue of shipboard insurrection in his questions. The witnesses more often than not attested to the high incidence of revolt or attempted revolt. According to one informant:

Many of them [slaves] are unable to bear the loss of liberty, and try every means to regain it on the day before the ____ arrived at Barbados, the slaves by means of a hacked knife and the bar of the men’s gratings, had freed themselves from their irons and, just before day light in the morning, forced themselves upon the deck... These insurrections are not unfrequent [sic].23

Responses of this sort, which indicate the sailors’ experience with shipboard insurrections, point to Clarkson’s awareness of the possibility of using the high incidence of violence aboard slave ships as a political tool. The Substance of Evidence does not spell out where slave violence fits into the plans of Clarkson and his colleagues. But what seems clear is that Clarkson was looking at violence in the slave trade as something ever-present and not simply a result of harsh treatment by overseers on the Caribbean plantations. By focusing on the trade rather than the practice of slavery in the colonies, Clarkson could point to these shipboard insurrections as evidence that the brutality of slavery began at the moment of kidnapping and was not something that could be ameliorated by implementing legislation on the care and treatment of slaves. Moreover, by drawing the treatment of sailors into the discussion, Clarkson could also claim that he was not just looking at slavery as a moral wrong but taking a holistic view of the slave trade and the mistreatment of sailors, revealing a symbiotic relationship between British seamen and African slaves.

Each interview concludes with a description of the conditions for sailors aboard each slave ship. Sailors are typically lured away from the ports of Bristol and Liverpool with a drink and promises of wealth, made to endure near-starvation, exposure, and physical abuse at the hands of their captains, and left destitute once they arrive in the West Indies.
Mr. _____ has frequently seen in the island of Jamaica the sailors of Guinea-men in great distress, from their having been imprudently discharged or obliged to desert in so bad a state of health that no other vessel would take them in. He has seen them lying about the wharfs at Kingston in a dying state. They are generally distinguished by the name of wharfingers. They appear to be ulcerated all over, but particularly in their legs, and their ulcers are covered with musquitoes [sic]. In this dreadful situation they are left to perish, for no merchantman will take them in and no King's ships will receive them for fear of infection. Mr. _____ when he has been attending a negro holiday at Spring Path which is the cemetery of the negroes, has often seen the bodies of these wharfingers brought there, and interred in an adjoining spot. 24

The image of sick sailors abandoned to die in the Caribbean ports appears calculated to disabuse the public that the slave trade was anything resembling a “nursery” for British seamen, with the final image of their bodies interred next to a Negro cemetery meant to blur the line between the fate of the sailors and the slaves. However, the blurring of this line, designed to use the plight of the sailors to also incite sympathy for the slaves, in this particular context is limited. What comes through is not the full horror of the trade as it affected both sailors and slaves, but the indignity of white Britons, mistreated and abandoned, to be buried among blacks. Sympathy for the sailors in this instance takes over at the expense of any kind of sympathy for the slave. 25

Clarkson also illustrates the limited nature of first-hand accounts in his methods. On the one hand, he prized them as the most direct means to turn the public against the slave trade. On the other hand, he was aware that first-hand accounts were, in their own way, suspect. As I mentioned earlier, Clarkson was at some pains to vet the characters of his witnesses so as preemptively to deflect criticism as to the veracity of their statements. Faulty or inaccurate evidence could potentially compromise his project, inviting questions regarding bias and personal grievance. The act of witnessing becomes as essential as experience in the rhetoric of abolition, creating a dual-voiced approach of “I am” and “I saw.” In the Clarkson project, however, the voice of the slave, despite this method, remains absent.

The consequence of Clarkson’s methodology and the use to which his collected testimonies were put is that abolitionists came to view violence as simply further evidence of the evil of slavery rather than as organized activity among the enslaved to liberate themselves from their oppression. In highlighting the violence and brutality of the trade, Clarkson begins a process that later becomes a defining feature of the abolitionist rhetoric, namely insisting that the chief sin of the slave trade was the perpetuation of violence. Yet, in doing this, Clarkson and his colleagues also place violence firmly outside the framework of abolition. Slave violence, rather than being seen as a form of viable resistance, becomes merely reactive. Interpreting slave violence as just the consequence of the violence of slavery casts enslaved Africans as passive actors within the theater of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The slave trade becomes what defines liberty for enslaved Africans, as though a concept of liberty does not exist without slavery to define it as its opposite.

What makes this process of interpretation notable is that Clarkson, like many other players in the slave trade, was intimately acquainted with slave violence. Most of Clarkson’s testimonies contain accounts of shipboard revolts indicating a specific interest on his part in the role that slave violence played in the slave trade itself; and while it is true that plantation insurrection during this period was at a low point, the
number of shipboard revolts, as I have already stated, was at the highest it had been in the history of the trade. Whatever the reason, the rise in shipboard revolts coincides precisely with both Equiano’s career as a sailor, and the time when Clarkson’s sailor witnesses would have been most likely to serve aboard slave ships.26

The danger of presenting slave insurrection as in any way positive was that those who opposed the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade cited insurrection as the consequence of abolition. “The abolition it was said would produce insurrections among the slaves,” Clarkson wrote. “But insurrections would produce the massacre of their masters; and, if any of these should happily escape their butchery, they would be reserved only for ruin.”27 Additionally, according to the planters, the laws passed to ensure the ethical care of slaves in Jamaica and Grenada made abolition unnecessary.28 For the collected testimonies to be effective, the perception of slave violence necessarily had to characterize it as a consequence of slavery rather than a product of African savagery. As for the slaves, it would not be evidence of their desire for freedom that would be the most effective means of arousing the British public against the slave trade, but rather evidence of the brutality acted against them. The circulation of the broadside “Plan and Sections of a Slave Ship” and its shockingly mundane approach to packing people into the ship would arguably become the most iconic image of the Atlantic Slave Trade.29

Assessing the impact of the San Domingo uprising on the British Abolitionist movement also reveals the ways in which it became possible to use slave insurrection as evidence of the brutality of slavery, rather than as evidence of the slaves’ right to revolt. While events in San Domingo were very much on the minds of both British pro- and anti-slavery factions, according to Clarkson’s writings (as well as Blackburn’s), it seems as though the British viewed events in Haiti less as a revolution in itself than as an outgrowth of the French Revolution.30 That this kind of thinking prevailed reveals how deep the assumptions of the absence of slave autonomy ran even within the sympathetic circles of the abolitionists. Furthermore, the continued decline of slave insurrection in the British colonies would prove a boon to abolitionists who would point to this in the decisive 1807 debate that would outlaw that Atlantic Slave Trade.31 And finally, as David Brion Davis and Seymour Drescher have observed, slaves in subsequent insurrections took the initiative themselves to control the level of violence they perpetuated.32 The legacy of San Domingo appears ironically to have discredited the efficacy of armed response to slavery even as it resulted in the only successful black revolt on record and the establishment of the first black republic.

Clarkson’s testimonies, appearing as they do in the aftermath of the height of shipboard and plantation insurrections and on the eve of the San Domingo rebellion, needed the evidence of violence in order to frame it as a reason for abolition. But the testimonies themselves are problematic because they reveal the slave as more autonomous actor rather than innocent victim. In pointing to the past sins of the Atlantic Slave trade, Clarkson risked reigniting fears of insurrection. Yet, the testimonies, in sympathetically representing shipboard insurrection, present a possible alternative to the trope of slave as victim, namely the slave as revolutionary. This momentary recognition of the natural right to revolt would not be seen again within abolitionist rhetoric until the Amistad case in the nineteenth century.

It is within this context that Equiano’s Interesting Narrative was conceived, written, and received. If Clarkson’s testimonies established the sailor as a surrogate
for the slave, Equiano’s biography fuses the two personae into one. In doing so, he appears to be reclaiming autonomy from white abolitionists by adding his apparently first-hand account of the slave’s experience in the Middle Passage. Most intriguing is the way in which Equiano uses his experiences as a sailor to construct his own identity as British, specifically his years in the British navy during the Seven Years’ War.

Equiano the sailor

Olaudah Equiano published the first edition of his autobiography The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano, the African one year after the publication of Clarkson’s testimonies. While Equiano himself does not address directly the role of slave insurrection in the Middle Passage, his text takes up where accounts like Clarkson’s leave off. Ostensibly, Equiano’s narrative adds a first-hand account of the Middle Passage, bolstering second-hand testimonies from Clarkson’s sailors. But Interesting Narrative reveals Equiano to be more the sailor than the slave with regard to his experience at sea. Moreover, when he does address slave insurrection directly, his language echoes the sentiments of those such as Long who saw ending the slave trade as a means of controlling slave violence.

During the Seven Years’ War, Equiano was both a witness to, and potential victim of, the British Navy’s draconian impressment practices. At this moment in his youth, we see a different Equiano from the sailor-merchant of his post-war years, diligently earning enough money to buy his freedom, and from the Christian abolitionist, making political connections and writing anti-slavery tracts under a pseudonym. This Equiano celebrates naval victories alongside his masters and participates in the social world of the ship. For Equiano, this experience constitutes the first part of his transformation into an Englishman. He represents himself at this moment as a burgeoning patriot, but also as a brutalized crew member alongside white sailors. This plays into Clarkson’s campaign of turning public sympathy against the slave trade through the testimony of sailors. This early part of the text is Equiano’s own testimony, if not on the slave trade, then on the undeserved treatment of sailors who, in turn, also serve their country.

Rather than retelling the story of the Middle Passage strictly from the hold of the slave ship, the text focuses on the experience of the sailor. In telling the story primarily from the perspective of the sailor, Equiano creates a dual narrative. The outrages visited upon Equiano as a slave blend with those afflicting him as a sailor, making the argument about the treatment of slaves synonymous with the treatment of sailors. In doing this, he is able to negotiate the terms of evoking his readers’ sympathies, at one time directing them to imagine the trauma of kidnapping, at another appealing to their sense of fair play in terms of his being cheated of rightly earned wages.

In the eighteenth century, a small but significant number of British ships made use of slaves as sailors, and during both the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution, the British navy impressed black sailors alongside white sailors into service. Historian Charles Foy’s recently assembled Colored Mariners’ Database:

demonstrates that eighteenth-century colored mariners shared many of Equiano’s experiences. Almost all were young healthy men. Like Equiano, scores of colored
mariners traveled across the Atlantic. And those who did not travel long distances still often worked on a variety of different vessels. However, although mobile, relatively few colored mariners appear to have had as extended a maritime career as did Equiano. 

Small numbers notwithstanding, a common feature shared by some of these mariners is that those who eventually found their way to Britain and freedom also became active within the abolitionist community. Equiano’s friend and fellow black abolitionist Ottobah Cugoano had also served in the British Navy and changed his name from John Mill. Given the spotty records, it is difficult to argue definitively that the story of black sailors during the Middle Passage holds the same kind of significance as the story of slaves in the holds of slave ships, on plantations, and engaged in insurrections in both locales. Yet the story of black sailors, specifically as it applies to the abolitionist movement, is significant to understanding how the movement evolved.

Equiano’s own rhetoric regarding the horrors of the slave trade and the abuse he experiences as a sailor who is also a slave centers on the moral outrage of violence rather than on a view of slave violence as reflecting political agency on the part of the slaves. Throughout the narrative he frames his experience of slavery through the abuses he both witnesses and experiences. Moreover, he takes up Clarkson’s work in exposing how that savagery lands on the backs of white sailors as well as slaves. Early on in the narrative he witnesses the flogging of a white sailor who dies of his injuries and whose body is thrown overboard. The tossing of a sailor overboard evokes images of slaves drowning, and was particularly poignant at a moment when the Zong atrocities were becoming more widely known. Equiano, who brought the case of the Zong to the attention of Sharp, would no doubt be aware of resonances of this image. Tying that image to the abuse of the sailor completes the image of the level of dysfunction in the slave trade from top to bottom. Scenes such as this, coupled with the fact that Equiano never fully experiences the brutality of Caribbean slavery, make it difficult to mine the text for evidence of latent radical tendencies.

However, these strategies for distancing are also notable in their possible intent. Having been on the island of Montserrat from approximately 1763 to 1767, Equiano would have no doubt been privy to the news of Tacky’s Rebellion in Jamaica. Likewise, the foiled St. Patrick’s Day revolt on Montserrat in 1768 the year after his departure would, in all likelihood, have reached his ears. We can only speculate why Equiano chose not to remark on these events, but what he chooses to document and how his position as a sailor influenced those choices reveal the degree of politicking in his moves.

Is it therefore impossible to locate any trace of the insurrectionist impulse in Interesting Narrative? In his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of the text, Vincent Carretta points to the few moments of revolutionary potential within Equiano as evidence of a more complex abolitionist than otherwise supposed. Carretta places evidence of Equiano’s receptiveness to violence alongside other modes of resistance, such as Equiano’s support of interracial marriage and his marriage to a white British woman. The lines from Milton, coming at the end of a catalog of abuses witnessed while in Montserrat, explicitly cite insurrection as a possible outcome of abuse. Equiano asks, rhetorically:

Why do you use those instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another? And are ye not struck with shame and mortification, to see the
partakers of your nature reduced so low? But above all, are there no dangers attending this mode of treatment? Are you not hourly in dread of insurrection? Nor would it be surprising; for when

...No peace is given
To us enslav’d, but custody severe;
And stripes and arbitrary punishment
InflictedWhat peace can we return?
But to our power, hostility and hate;
Untam’d reluctance, and revenge, tho’ slow,
Yet ever plotting how the conqueror least
May reap this conquest, and may least rejoice
In doing what we most in suff’ring feel.

But, by changing your conduct, and treating your slaves as men, every cause of fear would be banished. They would be faithful, honest, intelligent and vigorous; and peace, prosperity, and happiness would attend you. ³⁶

The first part and the Milton quotation appear to cast Equiano in a radical light, citing brutality as inciting retaliatory violence. The Milton quote is particularly ominous in that it doesn’t merely speak of violence but of festering “hostility and hate.” Through Milton, Equiano uncannily predicts the equal measure of brutality that the participants in the San Domingo uprising visited upon their former masters. But the final suggestion that in changing their conduct slave owners might avoid violence – that the absence of brutality would lead to the wholesale transformation of the slave from a vengeful insurrectionist to a peaceful and productive member of society – implies a less radical, less resistant ideology at work and something more ameliorative and conservative. To view violent slaves as only violent when incited by ill treatment indicates a certain essential goodness within Africans, something Equiano is at great pains to emphasize. But the use of the Milton quote recalls the reader to Paradise Lost and the compelling nature of Satan the speaker. Insurrection remains alluring even as Equiano appears to disavow it.

By the end of the narrative, Equiano reiterates the savagery of the slave trade as being one of its primary features.

Tortures, murder, and every other imaginable barbarity and iniquity are practiced upon the poor slaves with impunity. I hope the slave trade will be abolished. I pray it may be an event at hand. The great body of manufacturers, uniting in the cause will considerably facilitate it and expedite it.³⁷

In referring to the “poor slaves,” Equiano separates his current free British self from the plight of those still in bondage. This reflects the way that Equiano’s experience has separated him entirely from the kind of slave experience that creates an insurrectionist. In becoming British he has also eradicated any early traces of insurrectionist impulse.

Any revolutionary possibility evoked in the fight scene aboard the Namur vanishes. By characterizing the slaves as victims of a brutal trade – and characterizing slave violence as a product of the slave trade – Clarkson and Equiano were instrumental in creating a discourse that disavowed insurrection as a viable means of emancipation. Slave violence would remain a conundrum for the abolitionists by displaying evidence of the slaves’ innate savagery, and bolstering
proslavery arguments against emancipation. But in reexamining the works within the context of shipboard insurrection, a more complete picture of the slave resistance emerges, one in which the slave’s position on the slave ship transforms from mere victim to actor. The space of the ocean makes these acts of rebellion more elusive than plantation insurrection and therefore more easily elided. Recovering the history of shipboard insurrection not only complicates our understanding of how the history of the Middle Passage gets narrated, but also brings to light the ocean as a site for slave resistance.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. Equiano, The Interesting Narrative, 70.
4. Davis, Inhuman Bondage; The Problem of Slavery. See also, Drescher, Abolition; Fergus, “Dread of Insurrection.”
5. Taylor, If We must Die, 41–42.
6. Ibid., 197.
7. Trouillot, Silencing the Past, 83.
9. Clarkson, History, 158.
12. Insurrections in the colonies were fairly sporadic through the latter half of the eighteenth century. As Robin Blackburn notes: “From the mid-1760s slave rebellions became far rarer in Jamaica as the colony embarked on rapid growth. Colonies that were growing and prosperous attracted settlers and could afford the upkeep of patrols, militia units and garrisons” (57). For this reason, including the high incidence of shipboard insurrection provides a more complete picture of the status of slave revolt in this period.
16. Clarkson, Evidence, iii.
17. Ibid.,
18. Ibid., iv.
20. One of Clarkson’s aims was to show that English slave traders were not just buying slaves from African slavers but kidnapping free Africans either by going inland themselves or luring them aboard the ships under some pretence. It was commonly believed that the Africans were just as avid participants in the trade as were the British and other Europeans. In gathering accounts of kidnapping, Clarkson was also trying to prove that British rapaciousness was more of a key feature than previously known. Clarkson, History, vol. 1, 56, 57.
22. Ibid.,
24. Ibid., 9.
25. Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 242–245. Linebaugh and Rediker credit the initial alliance between sailors and slaves with sowing the seeds for anti-slavery sentiment that took hold in Great Britain, but they also point to its ultimate failure due to the “panic and racism” that spread following the San Domingo revolt (352).


28. Ibid.,

29. Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 310, 311; Clarkson, *History*, vol. 3, 200. This broadside featured the diagram for the plan of the slave ship the Brooks, graphically illustrating how slaves were stowed. Clarkson said that this image “made up the deficiency of language” regarding the horrors of the Middle Passage.


31. Lord Howick opened this debate by saying:

   Look at the state of [our] islands for the last 20 years and say, is it not notorious that there never were so few insurrections among the negroes, as at the very time they knew that such an abolition of this infamous traffic was under discussion? (Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates VIII (1806–07), col. 952)


35. Ibid., xxv; Carretta, 344–349.


37. Ibid., 234.

References


