

Periphery As Center: Slavery, Print, and Identity in the British Atlantic, 1704-1763

Each day another installment of the old
Romance of Order brings to the breakfast table
The paper flowers of catastrophe.
One has this recurrent dream about the world.

Headlines declare the ambiguous oracles,
The comfortable old prophets mutter doom.
Man's greatest intellectual pleasure is
To repeat himself, yet somehow the daily globe

Rolls on

Howard Nemerov

There is nothing but tragedy in the realization that one was in the main path of events, and now is sidetracked and disregarded.

Perry Miller¹

In late April 1704, postmaster John Campbell published the first edition of the *Boston Newsletter*, thus establishing with little fanfare the first successful weekly newspaper in colonial British America. The *Newsletter* ultimately continued in publication until 1776, when its Loyalist slant and the British evacuation of revolutionary Boston ended a press run the longevity of which was surpassed by just one other New England newspaper in the eighteenth century. In time the social value of the commercial press became so obvious to New Englanders that it seemed self-evident. Upon starting the *Newport Mercury* in 1758, publisher James Franklin, Jr., wrote that it seemed “unnecessary, to say any Thing relating to the Advantage” that would “accrue” to “the trading Part of this Colony” from its inception. As Franklin asserted, and as historians of print and the public sphere have subsequently agreed, from small beginnings came great things. On the eve of the American Revolution, the mainland British colonies boasted thirty-eight weekly newspapers, including fifteen in New England. Boston supported five by itself. By 1789, New England newspapers numbered thirty-two, a figure that does not include dozens of failed startups in the years after independence, and that predates the explosion of the partisan press in the 1790s.² But in its early days, Campbell's

¹ “The Daily Globe” (1962), in *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (Chicago, 1977), 242; “Errand into the Wilderness,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 10 (Jan. 1953), 3-19 (quote 13).

² *Newport Mercury*, June 19, 1758; Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America, With a Biography of Printers and an Account of Newspapers*, ed. Marcus McCorison (2d ed., 1874; New York, 1970), 15; Carol Sue Humphrey, “This Popular Engine:” *New England Newspapers During the American Revolution, 1775-1789* (Newark, DE, 1992), 26, 150-56.

Newsletter was but a half-sheet of questionable staying power and dubious value, even to the establishment scions whose interests it sought to promote. Indeed, a previous attempt in Boston to publish “Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick” in 1690 had been aborted after one issue, suppressed amid the chaos of the Glorious Revolution’s aftermath by a Massachusetts governing council that deemed its unsanctioned commentaries on frontier war, diplomacy, and the precarious negotiations over the colony’s new charter too dangerous.³

Given the uncertainties involved, it is a matter of auspicious consequence that slaveowners and slave traders ranked among the first New Englanders to recognize the utility of the public press, and that they did so more often than not in the name of profits, not politics. The *Newsletter* was barely a month old when John Colman, a Boston merchant, advertised four slaves for sale in June 1704; on average, over the next sixteen years every second issue of the *Newsletter* featured a new slave-for-sale notice.⁴ However ambivalent many New Englanders felt at the time about this and other encouragements to slaveholding, no one raised a serious objection to this practice; that few paid it any mind at all indicates something of slavery’s favorable reception as the eighteenth century began. Even Samuel Sewall, the Puritan magistrate, Salem witchcraft judge, Atlantic merchant, and rare antislavery advocate who twice before 1710 publicly denounced the enslavement of Africans on practical and moral grounds, later placed eight ads offering seventeen slaves for sale in the *Newsletter* between 1714 and 1722.⁵ In many respects, including perhaps the calculated efficiency with which it helped broker the sales of more than five hundred slaves in and around Boston by 1720, the *Newsletter* may have been “very, very dull,” as its critics often charged. But at a time when no more than about 400 slaves and free people of color resided in the town’s vicinity, the human traffic

³ William David Sloan, “Chaos, Polemics, and America’s First Newspaper,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 70 (Autumn 1993), 666-81; Charles E. Clark, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665-1740* (New York, 1994), 72-73.

⁴ John J. McCusker, “The Demise of Distance: The Business Press and the Origins of the Information Revolution in the Early Modern Atlantic World,” *American Historical Review*, 110 (April 2005), 310-313; Robert E. Desrochers, Jr., “Slave-For-Sale Advertisements and Slavery in Massachusetts, 1704-1781,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 59 (July 2002), 623-664. A similar dynamic helped determine the early success of every early American newspaper. For instance, “the first three ads to appear in” Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1728 “were for land, a runaway servant, and the sale of a Negro man.” David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York, 2004), 23-24.

⁵ Sewall advertised slaves for sale in the *Boston Newsletter* on Sept. 13, 1714; Apr. 18, 1715; Apr. 9, June 18, Dec. 17, 1716; Sept. 2, 1717; May 25, 1719; and June 25, 1722. See Mark A. Peterson, “The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Antislavery, and the Protestant International, 1689-1733,” *Massachusetts Historical Review*, 4 (2002), 1-22; and Lawrence W. Towner, “The Sewall-Saffin Dialogue on Slavery,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 21 (Jan. 1964), 40-52; *Boston News-Letter*, June 10, 1706.

Campbell sponsored amounted to a lively trade indeed, and the revenue generated by slavery-related advertisements helped keep his fledgling operation afloat.⁶ In the half century after 1720, as more and more newspapers appeared on the scene, slave for sale ads appeared with such regularity in every New England weekly that they became, like slavery itself, less an innovation or an oddity than an utterly banal feature of everyday life.

What does it mean to observe that slavery and print grew up together in eighteenth-century New England? In the most obvious sense, market-oriented innovations such as for-sale ads and fugitive slave notices, the first of thousands of which likewise appeared within two months of the founding of the *Boston Newsletter*, clearly changed the business of slavery in Britain's far northern American colonies, underwriting its growth and enforcing its boundaries in the decades before the American Revolution.⁷ But how did print culture make slavery itself intelligible to eighteenth-century New Englanders who, as David D. Hall has observed, "lived easily" in a "world of print?" In his influential analysis of the origins of modern nationalistic practices and ideologies, Benedict Anderson has written that the emergence of "print-capitalism" made it possible for people in the eighteenth century to "think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways." Ian Steele, Charles Clark, and other scholars have similarly argued that the proliferation and wide dispersion of newspapers in colonial British America acted as a "growing force in the integration" of the British Atlantic in the eighteenth century, knitting together previously "isolated communities" in sectors and as constituent parts of new political, cultural, and ideological wholes.⁸ How did the print culture of slavery reflect and encourage new ways of thinking about slavery and collective identity among a subset of colonials who frequently expressed uneasiness about slavery's expansion and the social transformations it seemed to augur and encourage in their corner of the British Atlantic, but at

⁶ The economic importance of slavery-related advertisements to the success of early American newspapers is further suggested by the fact that these ads, which often repeated twice or more, routinely cost at least half as much as annual subscriptions that, if we are to believe the repeated pleas of printers doubling as bill collectors, patrons rarely seem to have paid for in any event. Waldstreicher, *Runaway America*, 24, estimates that "between one-fifth and one-quarter" of advertisements in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* "directly concerned unfree labor," which presumably includes sizable numbers of servants as well as slaves. I have made no attempt to quantify the practice in New England, though fewer slaves and servants probably translated into a somewhat lower proportion of overall advertising than in the mid-Atlantic.

⁷ *Boston Newsletter*, June 26, 1704.

⁸ David D. Hall, "The World of Print and Collective Mentality in Seventeenth-Century New England," in John Higham and Paul K. Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979), 173-75; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. ed., London, 1991), esp. 1-65, 187-206 (quote 36); Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York, 1986), esp. 132-67, 251-52, and 273-78; Clark, *The Public Prints*.

the same time felt anxious to prove that “really counted for something” in the “larger imperial scheme” of things?⁹

Placing a regional variation of New World slavery within the larger systems and social-psychological imperatives of empire, this chapter considers how a broadly national understanding of slavery’s experiential contours came to be framed rhetorically through print, a particularized and in some sense mythologized vision of shared events and encounters that overlooked or downplayed local peculiarities to the extent that they set New England apart from the material culture of success in the larger British Atlantic world. Part neurotic fantasy, part fable of abundance, slavery’s discursive existence in eighteenth-century New England and the specific forms that it took thus emerges as itself a series of transactions framed by the demands of the Atlantic marketplace: a running account of the costs and benefits of slaveholding that, for all its exaggerations and omissions, ranks as just one among the many tolerable falsehoods that fine-upholstered the mental furniture of citizenship in the British Atlantic. Framed by the cultural practices of identity formation in an era of general economic expansion, increasing consumerism, and British patriotism, this imperial consensus no sooner coalesced than it began to unravel, a casualty of its own overstated homogeneity, of Revolutionary challenges, and of the interposition of new national imperatives brought about by independence. Before any of that happened, however, slavery became symbolically central to the project of locating New England within the slaveholding mainstream of the colonial British Atlantic world. And, it will be argued, print more than any other salient factor made that possible.¹⁰

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⁹ T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York, 2004), 96. In addition to Breen, my thinking about consumerism, Anglicization, and identity has been most influenced by Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, IN, 1982); Hancock, *Citizens of the World*; and Phyllis Whitman Hunter, *Purchasing Identity in the Atlantic World: Massachusetts Merchants, 1670-1780* (Ithaca, 2001).

¹⁰ John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985); Michael Rowlands, “The Material Culture of Success: Ideals and Life Cycles in Cameroon,” in Jonathan Friedman, ed., *Consumption and Identity* (Chur, Switzerland, 1994), 147-166; Anthony Appiah, “Tolerable Falshoods,” in Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson, eds., *Consequences of Theory* (Baltimore, 1991), 63-90; Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill, 2006); Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Creation of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago, 1999), 123; Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, NC, 1998), esp. ch. 1. I agree with David Waldstreicher that whatever “social grounding and local reality” early American nationalism enjoyed owed not to “any truly lasting political or ideological consensus,” but rather to its practices, including print. *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 51.

Fresh from London, William Brooker had just ousted John Campbell as postmaster when he began the rival *Boston Gazette* in late-1719, announcing his intention to incorporate “people that live remote from hence” into an orbit of information that from the start included a wide array of material related to slaves and slavery. Quantitatively, including slave-for-sale advertisements and fugitive slave notices, it amounted by 1784 to more than 3,300 references in the *Gazette* alone. Mundane burial figures appeared alongside sensationalized accounts of slave insurgencies, real and imagined; expressions of consternation over slaves’ behavior mingled with slave trade boosterism; poetic ruminations on the consequences of slave girls courting “fair” young men gave way to celebrated instances of reproductive “Prolifickness.” Long before the crisis of the 1760s, slaves stood at the center of many of British imperialism’s most noted accomplishments, abject failures, and intractable problems. Duplicitous or loyal slaves aided or averted French, Spanish, and Indian intrigues at the edge of settlement. Hanoverian proclamations and assembly battles over governors’ salaries shared space with accounts of black pirates and murderous slaves who turned tidy conceptions of ordered English liberty upside down. Shipping news weighed the successes of the coastal and African slave trades in the breach of misfortune: more and more slaves imported every year, but only at the cost of ships, crews, and cargoes lost to wreck, coastal disease, shipboard revolts, and other “melancholy Disaster[s].” Currency crises and economic downturns raised questions of slave oversight, as prophets of declension chastised masters and idle slaves, whose unemployment and lack of proper supervision allegedly encouraged thefts, assaults, arsons, shootings, and constant cabals. Even grievances with Parliament implicated slaves, for instance in early 1736, when rumor had it a “Negro Man Servant” had been the one who turned over two hogsheads of molasses to customs officials. Crown agents had prosecuted the owners of the cargo for smuggling under the three-year old Molasses Act of 1733.¹¹

In many respects, this was a world made by slaveholders and their ideological allies: “upper-class, cultivated, ethnocentric, fiercely patriotic, and doggedly Protestant” men who possessed or aspired to commercial wealth, who craved respectability and recognition in their communities and in

¹¹ *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1719; Feb. 10, 1735; *Newport Mercury*, Dec. 31, 1764, Nov. 22, 1762; *Boston Newsletter*, Feb. 5, 1736.

the British Atlantic, and who realized both that slavery signified “healthy, wealthy empires and viable colonies,” and that slaveholding inflated the individual value of colonial subjects on a wide stage.¹²

The resident of Hartford, Connecticut, who put “a genteel CHARIOT” up for sale in July 1778 made it clear that he did not intend to relinquish claims to status, simultaneously announcing his desire to buy a “Negro boy,” provided he came “well bred.” For aspirant provincials promoting slavery was above all a way to promote themselves. Their carefully crafted assertions of social standing achieved utmost effectiveness only insofar as they came to be acknowledged by others. In December 1705, William Pepperell of Kittery, Maine, advertised the flight of a twenty-year-old “Man-Slave” named Peter, who went off wearing what his master described as a pair of fashionable “French fall shoes.” If Pepperell’s language perhaps revealed something of Peter’s personal style, it said as much if not more about his own social pretensions, which his slave’s footwear all but announced, and which helps explain why the New Englander’s notice caught the faraway eye of Sir Nathaniel Johnson, the proprietary governor of South Carolina. Recognizing the image of a fellow slaveholding gentleman when he saw one, Johnson responded the following April: he had not only seen Pepperell’s ad, by virtue of it “coming (in the News Letter) to South Carolina,” but had also seen and “secured” Peter himself.¹³

As it proclaimed a politics of mutual recognition across the miles, this remarkable exchange from just the second year in the history of the first (and at the time only) American newspaper transformed one New Englander’s attempt to recoup a missing slave into the gold standard of early American comity and civility. It also nicely demonstrates that, from the start, the production and dissemination of knowledge about slavery in print was also the production of space and extra-local identity in the British Atlantic.¹⁴ And finally, it serves as a reminder that the print culture of slavery

¹² Clark, *The Public Prints*, 221; David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 14, 320; Waldstreicher, *Runaway America*, 18.

¹³ [Hartford] *Connecticut Courant*, July 28, 1778; *Boston Newsletter*, Dec. 10, 17, 31, 1705; April 22, 1706. On Johnson’s slaveholdings, see Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), 47.

¹⁴ Bruce McLeod, *The Geography of Empire in English Literature, 1580-1745* (New York, 1999). In addition to works already cited, my thinking about communication and community has been influenced by James W. Carey, *Communications as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York, 1992); David Cressy, *Coming Over: Migration and Communication Between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), esp. 213-62; Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York, 1989); Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black In the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago, 1991); and Harold A. Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto, 1972). Modern scholarship on the print public sphere traces its genealogy back eventually to

arose out of and intersected at various points with languages of gentility, consumption, and trade; the rise of all three brought “white Kendal Cottons, or Negro Cloathing, low priz’ d” to New England in the same ships that reduced human beings to “parcels” and delivered them to market alongside smuggled molasses, fine French shoes, and the news. In short, the language of the market and of commodification impinged upon the print culture of slavery at every turn. Recounting a fire that nearly burned Boston’s warehouse district to the ground in January 1738, Thomas Fleet of the *Boston Evening Post* claimed that the blaze had been started in the middle of the night by local slaves who gathered illicitly “to make merry” on Wentworth’s Wharf. Employing a phrase commonly used to describe newly imported slaves, Fleet called the alleged perpetrators “a parcel of Negroes.” Except on those occasions when slaves forced masters to reckon with their individuality and personal identities by running away – that is, when the specter of lost property interrupted what one scholar has called the “eternal index” of “white superiority” – in print slaves almost always appeared anonymously. Only two of the roughly 2,500 slaves advertised for sale in the *Boston Gazette* in the eighteenth century were mentioned by name. One of the two, a woman named Chloe, boldly disputed the legality of her attempted sale in 1778, forcing Enoch Brown to defend his prerogative and his good name by publishing the sworn depositions of three witnesses, each of whom testified that she had been born a “slave for life” more than twenty years ago on the island of St. Christopher.¹⁵

On one hand, the circumstances surrounding Chloe’s unprecedented challenge reflected the rapid inroads of abolitionism in revolutionary Massachusetts. After dwindling for years, and after sponsoring a total of roughly 2,400 advertisements over eight decades that facilitated the sale of some 2,500 slaves, slave trading in the *Gazette* ended for good three years later, a direct casualty of the contradiction created by yelping for liberty (after 1765, the *Gazette* effectively functioned as the mouthpiece of Boston’s Sons of Liberty) while profiting from slavery. But Enoch Brown’s claim that Chloe “never thought of making” her “bare Declaration” of freedom until she “met” Perez Morton, a

Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (1962; reprint Cambridge, MA, 1989). For the best application of Habermasian ideas to early American contexts, see especially two works by Michael Warner: *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); and the essay collection, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

¹⁵ *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 4, 1758; *Boston Evening Post*, Jan. 16, 1738; Dana D. Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading ‘Race’ in American Literature, 1638-1867* (New York, 1993), 27; Desrochers, “Slave For Sale Ads,” *Boston Gazette*, May 4, 1778.

rising lawyer and patriot who pressed Chloe's case and that of at least one other Boston slave in the late 1770s, sounded an entirely familiar note of frustration with the imperfect workings of slavery and the market. Particularly in Boston and other port towns where slavery was most pronounced, a simmering tension always existed between those New Englanders who employed slaves about their business and those whose lack of vigilance or, conversely, overzealousness worked against masters' intentions. The latter appears to have created rather than solved a problem for master and slave alike in October 1732, when a watchful Bostonian offered to return to its rightful owner a monographed silver spoon taken from a "New Negro" near the South Battery. It seems likely that this recently arrived slave did not speak English well or did not know his way around town, perhaps not even back to his master's house, and had been given the spoon by an owner who had learned to appropriate an inanimate consumer good to signify ownership of an animate other.¹⁶

Even slaves who understood New England ways found it only slightly less difficult to navigate the vagaries of trust and suspicion. In September 1729 the Massachusetts Superior Court acquitted "A Negro" for burglarizing a warehouse, "it not appearing" upon trial that he went inside "to Commit Felony." But the supposition of guilt lay heavy upon slaves' best attempts to discharge their duties and maintain dignity, for instance in September 1744 when John Parkman "stopt" a five-pound note "offer'd by a Negro," having assumed that the man, though on an errand for his master, must have gotten it by criminal means. Of course, the masters who frequently grumbled that whites took advantage of slaves acting as their economic surrogates used print to register their own sense of personal and collective grievance, not that of their slaves. In April 1718, for example, sea captain Arthur Savage requested that those interested in seeing the African lion, on display for the first time to an American public at his home near Boston's Brattle Street Church, pay "the Negro at the Gate" six pence apiece. This was to be done in part to prevent "disputes" with the slave attendant, but more so that Savage might enjoy agitation free profits. Accusations that whites connived at clandestine economies by hiring, harboring, and otherwise encouraging runaways (often with promises of subsequent purchase), by operating as fences who encouraged slaves to steal and forget their work, or by cheaply purchasing for their own use the items slaves sold, were a common refrain. In January

¹⁶ *New England Weekly Journal*, Oct. 9, 1732.

1764, a contributor the *New Hampshire Gazette* called it “*high time*” to discourage whites from sponsoring cabals and riotous entertainments with local “*Negroes*, who have of late behaved very insolently.” Portsmouth lacked neither “good Laws” nor “proper Gentlemen” to enforce them; rather, it needed only to expose those who made “their Dwellings Nurseries for thieving *Negroes*, encouraging them to steal Liquors, Provisions, &c. from their Masters Cellars,” and “let such People know, that the next Time they ever entertain or keep these Negro Servants, a number of their Masters will prosecute and bring them to publick Punishment.”¹⁷

Masters half-expected less than full compliance with their wishes from slaves; that they anticipated greater cooperation from the white community at large – and often failed to get it – is evidenced by perennial complaints about those whose lack of scruples threatened to undermine the project of slavery itself. In the eighteenth century, fretful discoveries of whites and blacks found “Dancing and Singing all Night” in violation of curfews and proper decorum emanated from every seaport town in New England, exposing class divisions and interracial solidarities that lay just below the placid surface of slavery in the region. Slaveowners not infrequently found themselves on the defensive against those who would attempt to question their privileges as masters. In April 1723, William Greenleaf bought space in the *Boston Gazette* to deny that he had “last Week Murder’d a Negro Servant” belonging to his household; in an ironic twist on the bounties offered in fugitive ads, Greenleaf offered a five-pound reward “for the better Discovery” of the “ill minded Person or Persons” whose “Malice & Envy” caused them to spread a “false & groundless report” that, if allowed to go unchecked, threatened to run away with his good name. Many New Englanders agreed with masters at least that slave discipline was too serious a matter to lay at the sole discretion of those who, “instead of detecting and punishing” slaves “for their Villany,” often paid each other hefty sums in order to screen their guilty property “from the Hands of Justice.” A report from July 1740 mocked the absurdity and ineffectiveness of soft corrections administered at the behest of the better sort. Playing off British and American associations of polite culture with effeminacy in the Age of Walpole, it noted that three slaves convicted of breaking into a Boston sugar manufactory had recently been

¹⁷ *New England Weekly Journal*, Sept. 1, 1729; *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 18, 1744; *Boston Newsletter*, Apr. 7, 1718; *New Hampshire Gazette*, Jan. 27, 1764.

“tickled” at the whipping post “in a very easy and genteel Manner, to the Praise of the polite Executioner, and Encouragement of other Negroes to deserve the like Honour.” The implication was clear enough: such a corruption of manners, whether undertaken under the guise of benevolence or exposed for the selfishness that it really was, endangered the good order of the entire society and could not be suffered to continue.¹⁸

For every claim that slaves “would not be so open in their Villainies” if “the Individuals of a Community” showed “an avowed Determination to expose and prosecute Offenders,” the counterargument went that masters had only themselves and their own pretensions to blame for slave problems that seemed to mount with each passing year. Did not those who laid the lash so lightly encourage slaves to put on airs of gentility? Who, then, should assume responsible for the death of “a Negro Child” whose calico swaddling caught fire in December 1740? Did the source really trace back no further than to the “Pride, Folly, and Obstinacy” of slave mothers “who would doubtless be thought *tender*,” and who could not “be prevailed upon to dress their Children in any thing less susceptible to Fire . . . lest it should not appear quite so gay?” And in imitation of which “Pretenders to Honour” did four slaves get the idea to stage a duel broken up on Boston Common in March of 1742? By the time the press noted these events, the lax oversight of “imprudent Masters” had led “several sober and substantial Housekeepers” in Boston to initiate a nightly patrol in July 1740, in an effort to prevent “Disorders committed by Negroes.”¹⁹

Writing on behalf of the Salem town meeting at the outset of the Seven Years’ War in September 1755, an anonymous contributor to the *Boston Evening Post* summarized a view that only gained in popularity over time: that contrary to the claims of the elite, the “common people who have no Slaves” did in fact act as “a continual Safeguard” for “Gentlemen’s Slaves,” and “they know it.” If “every Family [had] Slaves,” the piece argued, Massachusetts would “be in as much or more Danger” from them “than we are from the *French*,” who never would dare “trouble us” in the first place if “all the Slaves in . . . *America* were instead free Men.” Clearly it was “a pleasant Thing, as well as profitable,” the essay’s author granted, “to have Slaves to do our Labour without Wages,” and “many

¹⁸ *Boston Gazette*, Apr. 15, 1723; *The Weekly Rehearsal* [Boston], Sept. 23, 1734; *Boston Evening Post*, July 28, 1740.

¹⁹ *New Hampshire Gazette*, Jan. 27, 1764; *Boston Evening Post*, Dec. 29, 1740; *Boston Newsletter*, Mar. 18, 1742; *Boston Evening Post*, July 14, 1740.

that have been used” to employing slaves “won’t like to have a Stop put to” their importation. But the further conclusion, that perhaps “we had better be without” slaves “than to be exposed to Danger and fill’d with Terror by Reason of them,” struck a particularly chilling note at a time when two local slaves named Mark and Phillis were locked up awaiting execution for the poisoning death of their master, following an investigation and trial that implicated at least six other local slaves. At the very least, “the many Male Slaves” who did not shoulder arms for Massachusetts might be assigned to road work six to eight days out of the year in order to encourage military enlistments among the King’s “good subjects.” Soon, gangs of slaves and free blacks were in fact assigned to public works, and over the course of the Seven Years’ War thousands of men and boys in Massachusetts picked up their guns in the name of George II. Two weeks later, on 18 September, an otherwise forgettable Thursday afternoon, “the greatest Number of Spectators ever known on such an Occasion” gathered outside the county court in Cambridge to watch Mark and Phillis die.²⁰

Though Massachusetts courts prosecuted a number of New England slaves for killing their masters before 1755, Mark and Phillis became the only two people in the entire history of the colony ever convicted for the additional common law crime of petit treason. Perhaps before the mid-1750s it had never occurred to provincial lawyers, judges, and magistrates, most of whom owned slaves, to equate themselves so explicitly with miniature kings. By that time, and especially on the eve of war, the trappings and symbolic attractions of monarchical culture to aspiring and proud colonial British subjects had made obvious inroads upon New England society. But if the legal demands of the state and the puffed up egoism of slaveowners suggested one course of action, it seems community justice in this case advised an additional one. As reported in the local newspapers, on execution day Phillis was “burnt to Death” in accordance with the capital penalty for women. Pursuant to the letter of his death sentence, as printed in the *Boston Gazette* that August, Mark was hanged until dead on a gallows just thirty feet away. After he expired, however, the crowd took down the body and conveyed it to Charlestown Common, some thirteen miles away but closer to the scene of the alleged crime. As the *Boston Evening Post* noted with typical brevity and grim austerity, there what remained of Mark was dangled in chains on a “Gibbet” built and “erected” precisely “for that Purpose.”

²⁰ *Boston Evening Post*, Sept. 8, 1755; *Boston Gazette*, Sept. 22, 1755.

Thomas Fleet, the publisher of the *Evening Post* and a man who, as one contemporary critic observed, made a habit of being “very *free* and severe” in railing “against Things” that he and his “Friends” adjudged “great *Disorders* and of evil Tendency,” also issued a broadside poem commemorating the event. It reminded slaves that they could avoid a similar fate by remaining “in their own Place” and serving their masters “with Fear.”²¹ For decades afterward, the ghoulish display of Mark’s slowly mummifying corpse bore a more grisly reminder of white vengeance, spiritual terrorism, and territorial power to everyone who passed along the roads that connected Charlestown to Boston via ferry.²² As Vincent Brown has written about Jamaica, “[p]lacing the bodies of the condemned along well-traveled paths served to haunt those places with memories and narratives of crime and punishment.” On his famous ride to alert patriot leaders about the movements of British regulars in April 1775, Paul Revere rendezvoused with other alarm riders at the spot “opposite where *Mark was* [still] *hung in chains.*” As it was in the West Indies, so was it also in Massachusetts.²³

Before the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s, whatever hard feelings and misgivings about slavery white New Englanders entertained were effectively tempered not only by brutal recriminatory practices that they shared with (and to some extent, no doubt learned from) slave regimes throughout the British Atlantic, but in a more tantalizing fashion by opportunities to transform support of slavery into social, cultural, and political capital. Fleet and other newsmen might lampoon the application of genteel standards to the corporal punishment of slaves, but they never objected to slavery itself. To the contrary, Fleet employed slaves in his printing business and as a means to bolster his social standing, even from the grave. Reporting the drowning of two slaves out fishing in a canoe shortly after Fleet’s death in July 1758, the *Evening Post* noted that one of the deceased had joined his master, “the late Publisher of this Paper.” No combination of greed, racist

²¹ Abner Cheney Goodell, Jr., “The Trial and Execution, for Petit Treason, of Mark and Phillis, Slaves of Capt. John Codman, Who Murdered Their Master at Charlestown, Mass., in 1755; for which the Man was Hanged and Gibbeted, and the Woman was Burned to Death, Including, also, Some Account of Other Punishments by Burning in Massachusetts (Cambridge, MA, 1883), reprinted in Paul Finkelman, ed., *Slavery, Race, and the American Legal System, 1700-1872, Vol. 1: Free Blacks, Slaves, and Slave-owners in Civil and Criminal Courts* (New York and London, 1988), 3-39; McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*; Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*; *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 25, 1755; *Boston Evening Post*, Sept. 11, 22, 1755; *A Few Lines on Occasion of the Untimely End of Mark and Phillis* . . . (broadside, Boston, 1755).

²² In June 1758 Caleb Rea, a local surgeon passing through Charlestown on his way to a military post at Ticonderoga, examined the body, still hanging where it had been left. According to Dr. Rea, Mark’s “skin was but very little broken, although it had hung there near three or four years.” Goodell, “Trial and Execution of Mark and Phillis,” 30.

²³ Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 136; Goodell, “Trial and Execution of Mark and Phillis,” 30. On concerns about black crime and black behavior in the 1750s, see also *Acts and Resolves of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay* (Boston, 1869-86), III, 648, 997-98.

resentment, abidance to top-down authority, and periodic bloodletting fully explains New Englanders' wide accommodation to slavery and its practices. In the end, an ambitious opportunism borne out of the jostling for respect and position that occurred every day at the local level, but that ultimately connected to the larger concerns of emergent empire, provided a crucial additional impetus. In March 1746, an anonymous Bostonian offered to return to its rightful owner a brass pot "offered to Sale" by a slave who "left it and went off" rather than answer where he got it. To be sure, actions such as these held out prospects of immediate compensation in the form of cash rewards. In a more important sense, they also provided New Englanders with dynamic occasions for asserting a shared sense of personal honor. As the most systematically dishonored members of New England society, such pragmatic opportunities were not lost even on slaves themselves. Boston's inability to eradicate a notorious theft ring involving slaves and other "vile persons" probably accounts for an unusual and in all likelihood satirical piece from September 1738, in which "an Honest Negro" offered to return a gold ring "pick'd up" on Boston Common – provided the owner came forward with "a suitable Reward" and paid for the newspaper ad. But the possibility, however remarkable, that a slave or free person of color actually placed this ad cannot be readily dismissed. In a face to face world of negotiated authorities, white and black New Englanders understood that identifying and pressing the levers of patronage and power often opened doors to personal advantage and advancement, even at the considerable cost of betraying one's social equals. Like so many accused slaves, Mark and Phillis had been given over to the authorities by a third slave named Phebe who gave "Evidence in Behalf of the KING." How much more innocuous it must have seemed, then, to the slave who informed on "a notorious Thief" named John Thomson. When Thomson offered to buy pilfered "Brass or Pewter" from him in July 1739, the man went along with the scheme just long enough to acquaint his master and help catch Thomson in a snare.²⁴

Most often, though, final responsibility for regulating local slave economies – if usually not most of the heavy lifting involved – fell precisely and disproportionately where it should have, on the

²⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, July 24, 1758; *Boston Newsletter*, Mar. 14, 1746; *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 27, 1736, Sept. 18, 1738; *The Last & Dying Words of Mark, Aged About 30 Years, a Negro Man Who Belonged to the Late Captain John Codman . . .* (Boston, 1755); *New England Weekly Journal*, July 3, 1739. Thanks to John Wood Sweet for sharing Mark's dying speech with me.

shoulders of those who benefited most from slavery in both material and psychological terms. In August 1734, tucked directly below an ad offering “a parcel of fine Negroes, Boys & Girls, lately imported” for sale, the *Boston Gazette* ran a piece in which the owner of “A Gentleman’s Negro” announced that his slave, like the “Honest Negro” mentioned above, had also “pickt up” a “Gold Ring” in the streets of Boston. In this instance, though, it was the master himself who garnered prestige by offering to return the ring, pending positive identification of its distinguishing marks. Similarly, the dispossessed owner of a great coat and blue velvet cape, “supposed to be found by a Negro,” pledged that the gentleman who returned it – not the slave – would be rewarded for taking it up. In May 1738, the *New York Weekly Journal* offered its readers a primer in slaveholding best practices in the urban north, courtesy of “several” very conscientious “Gentlemen” from Boston. During a street confrontation with a “Negro Man” who asked *them* too many questions, the white men demanded to know what master allowed such impertinence. “*My Master is a Man,*” the slave replied before adding from a distance, but loud enough to be heard, that “*if it was Night, and I had a good Cudgel in my hand, how would I make them Rascals run.*” It is not clear whether the initial taunt or the subsequent threat did the trick, but eventually one of the offended gentlemen came up behind the slave (“unperceiv’d” of course), “took him by the Shoulder” to the justice of the peace, and accompanied the man straightaway to Bridewell jail. There, all the gentlemen witnessed “the Discipline of the House . . . faithfully performed.” This accomplished, the gentlemen then conveyed the man directly to his master, “who thank’d them . . . for their Kindness . . . and desired they would be so good as to use” his slave “in the same manner, whenever they found him impudent.”²⁵

Despite this object lesson in communal policing (and perhaps wishful thinking), overall the belief that whites routinely conspired with slaves against masters’ authority was pervasive enough that, to take just the most obvious example, nearly every fugitive ad in the eighteenth century concluded with a warning against such traitorous alliances backed by the risk of legal prosecution. As a practical strategy for regulating slavery, however, the sort of direct appeals to personal honor, respectability, and blatant self-interest highlighted above probably proved more effective in the long run than either haughty lectures or vague threats. If civility suggested that “any Gentleman” who

²⁵ *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 5, 1734; *New England Weekly Journal*, Mar. 17, 1741; *New York Weekly Journal*, May 22, 1738.

observed a “Negro” in possession of a fine broadcloth coat of blue with “broad Buttons of silk and hair” would turn it over to the printer as requested in March 1744, the additional promise of a five-pound reward provided a necessary further goad for any “Vendue-Master or Taylor” to whom it might be offered for sale. Money talked, and masters shrewdly calculated that for those whose livelihoods depended on their good name, the risk of wide exposure provided perhaps the most powerful incentive of all for encouraging fair dealing with slaves. In October 1748, the owner of “a Negro Man” sent to buy butter of “a Country Man, who is well known in this Town,” took out an ad in the *Boston Newsletter* to notify the seller – and more importantly the public at large – that he had shortchanged the slave by forty shillings, which amount he should remit to the printer immediately, “as he has a regard to his own Reputation.” As a means of negotiating social authority and securing the viability of slave labor, the specter of having one’s character sullied before an impartial public had, at least in some instances, begun to produce the desired results by the early 1740s if not sooner. After “a Lad took a Five Pound Bill of Negro Boy, instead of five shilling” on Harvard’s commencement day in January 1743, an anonymous person notified “the right Owner” that he or she might recover the bill by “telling the Marks of it.” Not five months later “a Market Man” admitted to overcharging “a Negro Fellow . . . (thro’ Mistake) at the Market House for Meat.” Provided the slave’s master paid “the Charge of this Advertisement,” the anonymous vendor offered to make amends by paying him whatever difference remained. The next year, in September 1744, Boston watchmaker Edmond Lewis, compelled by the hint of scandal, took out an ad to deny a “malicious Report” that he had ever “bought a Watch of” or “sold one to” any Slave “whatsoever.”²⁶

Like the group of Bostonians described above, who proved their own collective manhood by enacting the emasculation of one enslaved man who dared challenge it, those slaveholding New Englanders who fancied themselves gentlemen understood better than anyone the paramount value and fragile nature of reputation. It was to be defended at all costs. In August 1734, Boston merchant and occasional slave trader Peter Luce placed an ad “publicly” challenging “insinuations” that he was concealing a runaway slave named London, wanted on a rape charge. Expressing “abhorance” for “the Crime imputed to his said Slave,” Luce offered a five pound reward for London’s capture. A

²⁶*Boston Newsletter*, Mar. 22, 1744, Oct. 20, 1748; *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 25, 1743; *Boston Evening Post*, Sept. 17, 1744.

half-century later, Enoch Brown bought space in the *Boston Gazette* in 1778 as much to deny the “infamous” charge that he had conspired “to *cheat*” the would-be Chloe into bondage as he did to uphold his rights in the slave marketplace. As they enlisted the support of the largely non-slaveholding public at large as best they could through a mixture of rewards, incentives, and threats, men like Brown, Luce, and countless others willingly overlooked their own myriad differences in order to safeguard both slavery and their good names. In the end, the one in fact implied and depended upon the other.²⁷

In addition to runaways and the occasional rebel such as Chloe, whose master railed in print against her “clamorous tongue” but denied her the ability to speak, slaves who stood accused of criminality represented the only other exception to the rule of imposed anonymity and the near-universal silencing of black voices.²⁸ On one level, then, to read accounts of one unidentified slave after another falling from a ropewalk to an untimely death, burning up in a still tub, jumping overboard from a slave ship, and so on, is to peer into the self-abnegating process of slave-making in New England. That there was absolutely nothing peculiar about this form of psychological terrorism indicates just how squarely within the racial currents of the larger British Atlantic eighteenth-century New England really was. Indeed, nameless reiterations of slave deaths in print merely reenacted a systematic assault on black subjectivity that began on the African coast, continued aboard the merchant vessels that transported disoriented Africans to American shores, and first entered the highly selective written archive in logbooks such as that of the *Ranger*, a Liverpool slaver bound for Jamaica, whose captain kept a close account of a human cargo acquired over the course of five months anchored off the Gold Coast at Anamaboe. The captain of the *Ranger* recorded no names for any of the slaves entered aboard his ship; as part of their initiation into Atlantic slavery, they were instead reduced to ciphers in what Ian Baucom has poignantly called “the calculus of profit and risk,” the careful balancing act of speculation, finance capital, and perilous negotiation that drove the

²⁷ *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 19, 1734; May 4, 1778.

²⁸ In an analysis of non-periodical literature published before 1800, historian Richard Slotkin found that for nearly seventy percent (32 out of 46) of the pieces in which blacks figured as “individuated human beings,” they appeared in criminal roles. “Narratives of Negro Crime in New England, 1675-1800,” *American Quarterly*, 25 (Mar. 1973), 4, 16.

transoceanic slave trade, and that turned human beings into both chattel property and a species of money.²⁹

Not much about this exchange nexus changed on the other side of the middle passage. Perhaps without intending to, the New Englander who reported his leather pocket case missing in January 1739 alluded to a meaningful convergence between ready cash and an increasingly valuable form of speculative money, noting that the mislaid satchel contained nearly fifty pounds worth of Rhode Island and Massachusetts bills and “one or two printed Advertisements after a Runaway Negro Man.” With the rewards they offered, the ads constituted a form of paper currency all their own. Moreover, when times got tough, for instance in the late 1740s and 1750s, New England masters eagerly offered to trade slaves for ready cash, and as we will see below print culture itself functioned in a manner of speaking as the circulating currency of Atlantic slavery within the region.³⁰ We began this discussion by observing that the print culture of slavery was a world the slaveholders made. Thus, when a boat carrying seven slaves back to Boston from “a Frolick” on Spectacle Island overset in a gale in July 1741, the *Boston Gazette* noted only that two slaves “belonging to Mr. Barrat Dyer . . . Coopers,” a third slave “belonging to Capt. *Compson*, who has been us’d to the Lightering Business many Years,” and a fourth “belonging to Mr. *Bongardin*,” all drowned. As we come to know the deceased at all mainly through their masters and the varieties of work they did, we learn even less about the three survivors who “were taken up” by a passing “Vessel” and presumably related the unhappy fate of their friends. To put the matter in terms borrowed from Patricia Williams, the slaves whose lives were remembered here in order to be forgotten remained “trapped in the pornography of living out other people’s fantasies.” Heard of but not from, socially and figuratively dead even when

²⁹ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC, 2005), 11-14 (quote 11); Alex Bontemps, *The Punished Self: Surviving Slavery in the Colonial South* (Ithaca, 2001).

³⁰ It might be observed further that very little if any substantive difference existed in this regard between press and pen or between public business records and personal accounts that imposed the invisibility of namelessness upon black subjects in a manner that can only be described as obsessive compulsion. For forty years, the Jamaican planter Thomas Thistlewood kept a diary that ran to twenty thousand pages, and focused to a great extent on his exploitation of slaves; in it Thistlewood reproduced only a single sentence of slave speech. Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Natalie Zacek, “Voices and Silences: The Problem of Slave Testimony in the English West Indian Law Court,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 24 (December 2003), 24-39.

not literally so, they existed primarily to endorse discrete categories of value that were not of their making, and as affirmations of the ties that bound.³¹

* * *

Interrogations of slavery’s significance in eighteenth-century New England have attracted surprisingly little interest among historians who, until very recently, have instead tended to wonder why, lacking any “compelling economic” rationale such as staple crop agriculture, an institution as “weakly rooted” as slavery in New England “existed at all.” While this line of inquiry, which Winthrop Jordan pioneered many years ago, has proven extremely useful in drawing attention to the clusters of racial attitudes that informed the initial decision to introduce black slavery in the land of the Puritans in the mid-seventeenth century, it has neither facilitated broad understanding of slavery’s overall social and cultural resonance in late-colonial New England, nor for that matter really answered its own question.³² When they attempt to explain it at all, structural analyses usually glide over slavery’s vitality in New England right down to the American Revolution. While it is true that enslaved people of African descent never amounted to more than about three percent of New England’s total population in the 1700s (an era of overall demographic growth), the region’s slave population actually grew at a proportionately faster rate than its free white European counterpart in seven out of eight decades from 1690 to 1770. By about 1750, roughly 555,000 people of African descent lived in the global geography known as the British Empire. Afro-New Englanders accounted for just 11,000 of this total, or roughly the same number of blacks that lived in Britain itself. But slaves comprised between ten to twenty percent of the population in the largest New England towns by mid-century. Well established along the seacoast, by the eve of the American Revolution slavery was growing fastest in interior towns, where farm families and small time entrepreneurs in the

³¹ *Boston Gazette*, July 20, 1741; Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (London, 1993), 177; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).

³² Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968; reprint New York, 1977), 66. Taking their cues from scholars such as Ira Berlin, and also from the emergence in recent years of post-colonial studies, cultural historians especially have begun to reverse this trend. See for instance John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore, 2003); and Wendy Anne Warren, “‘The Cause of Her Grief’: The Rape of a Slave in Early New England,” *Journal of American History*, 93 (March 2007), 1031-1048.

Connecticut River Valley and beyond were joining ministers and wealthy river gods in a common desire to own and employ slaves.³³

For increasing numbers of white New Englanders, familiarity with slavery thus grew as a direct result of increased opportunities for interaction with slaves in town, at church and barn-raising, in their own and in their neighbors' fields and homes. Especially for those New Englanders who did not own slaves, or whose engagement with slavery for various reasons remained as often textual as social, familiarity grew as well out of increased opportunities to read about it. In New England, where nearly universal white male literacy (defined as the ability to read) had been achieved by mid-century, the "open communion" of newspaper readership always extended beyond any social elite, even as authorship itself remained a mostly genteel pursuit. By the end of the colonial period, even second-tier weeklies like the *Essex Gazette* of Newbury, Massachusetts, "regularly supplied" readers with the "most material" happenings in "Portsmouth, Salem, Boston, Connecticut, Rhode-Island, New-York, Philadelphia, Maryland, South Carolina, and Quebec." In 1763, the publisher of the *Connecticut Courant* wrote that the "Rise of NEWSPAPERS" had made "the People" not only "more curious" but also more "capable of judging" what they read. Newspapers had "given People a Taste for Reading," and thus made possible the formation of an imagined community the interconnectedness of which looked metaphorically less, perhaps, like a sphere than it did the thick tangle of criss-crossing poles and wires that epitomized the early telephone system: central and peripheral points and people connected by print.³⁴

While a conservative estimate of circulation figures suggests that some 6,600 papers flew from New England's eleven newspaper presses every week by 1765, promiscuous circulation patterns meant that a bare minimum of three people read each paper published in the region. Encouraged by printers who urged potential customers to split costs by sharing subscriptions, exchange occurred as a

³³ Population figures from Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (1942; New York, 1968); William D. Piersen, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, MA, 1988), appendix, tables 7 and 8; Edgar McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, 1973); Robert K. Fitts, *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise: Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth-Century Narragansett, Rhode Island* (New York, 1998), 83; and Philip D. Morgan, "Black Experience in the British Empire, 1680-1810," in Philip D. Morgan and Sean Hawkins, eds., *The Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series: Black Experience and the Empire* (New York, 2004), 88.

³⁴ *Essex Journal and Merrimack Packet: Or, the Massachusetts and New Hampshire General Advertiser*, Mar. 1, 1775; Clark, *The Public Prints*, 11; *Connecticut Courant*, Jan. 23, 1763. Compare Sacvan Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York, 1993).

matter of course and took a variety of forms. Samuel Sewall gave copies of the *Boston News-Letter* to the string of widows he courted in the 1720s. Sewall also routinely sent copies of the paper to distant friends such as Edward Taylor, the longtime minister and secret poet of Westfield, a Connecticut River Valley town located about one hundred miles from Boston.³⁵ Something of slavery's important role in this process of bridging distances between town and country, and between colonies, can be gleaned from the fact that masters who resided outside a given newspaper's colony of publication placed nearly a quarter of all runaway slave notices in eighteenth-century New England newspapers.

For Bostonians like Samuel Sewall and the Congregationalist minister Mather Byles, both of whom annotated and bound local newspapers for future reference in the 1720s and 1730s, print served a public record keeping role that, like Sunday sermons, preserved elements of the community's collective experience.³⁶ Those who could not or did not read the news often heard it repeated in the convivial atmosphere of taverns and coffeehouses, in bustling storefronts and along waterfronts, under roofs where talked politics, and even at their hearthsides, where entire families sometimes gathered to hear newspapers read aloud. In March 1762, the *Newport Mercury* reported that an aged patriarch from Wethersfield, Connecticut, "expired in an instant" while "reading a Newspaper to his Family." One wonders how many times the family had shared stories like two that appeared on the same page of the same newspaper that broadcast this man's untimely demise. The first anecdote noted the apparent suicide of a "Negro Fellow" from Hartford who reportedly "put the Muzzle" of a loaded gun into his mouth and blew his "Head to Pieces." In the second, a slave named Fortune received sentence of execution from Rhode Island's Superior Court for "setting Fire to a Warehouse on the Long Wharf." Resistance confirmed, control reaffirmed, tragedy catalogued, horror and death made routine: the repetition over time of these and other kinds of voyeuristic accounts made slavery a constant companion, and helped make slavery's various plotlines a family affair.³⁷

³⁵ Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, 38; Clark, *The Public Prints*, 300fn47; Timothy M. Barnes, "The Loyalist Press in the American Revolution, 1765-1781" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1970), 3-4.

³⁶ William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville, TN, 1993), 382. Thomas Prince, minister of Boston's Old South Church from 1718 to 1758, also maintained a personal archive of the *Boston Newsletter*, which he used to supplement his personal writing and as a way to substantiate his record of events.

³⁷ Hall, "The World of Print and Collective Mentality in Seventeenth-Century New England," in Higham and Conkin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History, 173-75*; Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, 38; Clark, *The Public Prints*, 300fn47; Timothy M. Barnes, "The Loyalist Press in the American Revolution, 1765-1781" (Ph.D. diss., University of New

When it came to slavery, print capitalists were anything but “meer mechanics.” The “typographical fraternity” aided, abetted, and encouraged the commodification of the unfree in all its guises, first and foremost, in order to promote its own entrepreneurial endeavors. As historian David Waldstreicher has observed, eighteenth-century printers “stood to gain” monetarily as well as socially if people took greater interest in extralocal affairs; they articulated a “buoyant commercial nationalism” that readily encompassed slavery in part because it paid, and in part because as a group printers were more steeped in the affairs of the British Atlantic’s “cult of commerce,” and more involved in brokering slavery, than most anyone. Like Thomas Fleet, many owned and employed slaves. They all literally opened their doors to slave trading, directing the vast majority of respondents to slave-for-sale ads to “inquire of the printer.” As a courtesy shown to a valued clientele, this practice protected sellers’ anonymity and kept knowledge of imminent sale from local slaves. It also transformed printing offices into slave marts.³⁸

As information gatherers, and more particularly as assistant promoters of regional slave interests, printers became more deeply familiar with slavery’s inner workings and more aware of its broad contours than most other free white New Englanders ever did. But even the vast majority of New Englanders whose ties to the institution were never as extensive as printers’ recognized slavery’s increasing importance; they too needed to make sense of what they learned about the institution in the course of their daily lives. Thus did stories of slaves who coughed up giant worms, dropped dead of apoplectic fits, and became objects of nervous curiosity in rare instances when their skin “turned white,” do more than satisfy a promise to deliver the “most Remarkable Occurrences Foreign & Domestick.” The public archive of New England slavery ultimately came to rest upon these and other stories of slaves who saved drowning children, captive Africans who leaped to watery deaths rather than endure what awaited on American shores, slaves who later killed themselves in hopes that they might “return to their country” in the afterlife. The consumption of stories about local slaves at burial ceremonies, in taverns after dark, at frolics and fiddling contests, announced the institution’s existence

Mexico, 1970), 3-4; *Newport Mercury*, March 16, 1762.

³⁸ Stephen Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’ and an Open Press: The Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers,” *Perspectives in American History*, 9 (1975), 127-225; Arthur S. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (New York, 1957), 55; Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 89; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992), 56; Desrochers, “Slave For Sale Advertisements.”

in ways that encouraged New Englanders whether they owned slaves or not to perceive their shared stake in the system, and to think and act accordingly.³⁹

Printers took their hortatory role as slavery's watchdogs very seriously. Peddlers with a conscience, they readily assumed the somewhat contradictory role of staging slavery while simultaneously bemoaning its excesses and beating the drum of constant oversight. In February 1718, when the *Boston Newsletter* reported the attempted rape of a white woman from western Connecticut that ended in her alleged assailant's castration, John Campbell noted parenthetically that he printed the story "as a caveat" to dissuade "all Negroes" from "meddling with any White Women, lest they fare with the like Treatment." Especially in the years immediately following an increase in slave importing in the late 1720s and early 1730s, printers in Boston urged strong action where they found local responses to slave malefaction lacking. In April 1734, a young Thomas Fleet wrote that he could not "but think" that by publishing a long account of a slave conspiracy discovered near Burlington, East Jersey, he had rendered a "great Service to the Country in general," and "especially" to the residents of Boston. If "wise enough take the Hints," perhaps the town might "in Time" avert such a "horrid Undertaking." John Boydell of the *Boston Gazette* sounded a similar note of warning in July of the same year. Reporting that authorities in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, had apprehended a "Gang of Negroes" suspected of organizing a theft ring, Boydell added that he hoped public examples would be made out of the guilty. Perhaps that, he wrote, might deter those "of the black Tribe which now pour in upon us from the like Crimes."⁴⁰

A certain amount of danger always inhered in such publicity. According to historian David Copeland, "news of slave activity in South Carolina or almost any other place in the New World" all but disappeared from the *South Carolina Gazette* after the Stono Rebellion in September 1739. Clearly, slavery had not suddenly become less newsworthy to white South Carolinians. Rather, this gag rule, which also precluded any mention in print of the revolt itself, assuaged white fears that potentially rebellious slaves might gain encouragement from stories of West Indian slaves in revolt, or of copycat conspiracies (mostly figments of jolted white imaginations) elsewhere on the mainland.

³⁹ *New England Weekly Journal*, Apr. 8, 1734.

⁴⁰ *Boston Newsletter*, Feb. 24, 1718; *New England Weekly Rehearsal*, Apr. 8, 1734; *Boston Gazette*, July 1, 1734.

Like the South Carolinians, white New Englanders suspected that slave plots, specifically including the near-miss in East Jersey reported in 1734, might be “occasioned” by accounts of similar schemes published in the newspapers. But printers in New England stopped short of imposing the kind of information blockade that followed Stono in Carolina, whose residents were already beginning to understand what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he quipped a century later that slavery “does not love the newspaper.” When it came to slavery, New Englanders’ more open publishing practices and the frequent reprinting of external news they encouraged nourished and exaggerated a sense of syncopated and synchronous community on the slaveholding periphery of the British Atlantic. When a slave from Kittery, Maine, threw his master’s child down a well “where it perished” in August 1755, the news traveled south from Boston to newspapers in New Haven and eventually New York, Philadelphia, and Annapolis within three weeks. It took roughly the same amount of time in 1750 for news from Curaçao to appear in New England newspapers, informing readers that the island’s Dutch residents had racked and executed a group of slave rebels by having “their hearts taken out and dash’d in their faces.”⁴¹

As white South Carolinians recognized, it proved difficult to regulate an audience for print that in any event did not always seek to exclude slaves. After Scipio ran away in August 1757, James Dwyer, a truckman from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, took out an ad in the *Boston Gazette* in which he directly informed the slave, who had been “born and bro’t up among the English,” that if he returned “of his own Accord” and without putting Dwyer to the charge of a reward, he would “be kindly received” and “forgiven.” Here, Dwyer seems to have expected Scipio to read his own fugitive advertisement. In the example of the attempted rape cited above, John Campbell did not explain how he expected local slaves to gain knowledge of the story he printed; like Dwyer, however, he clearly thought and hoped they would, if only in order that they might glean from it a proper understanding of the price to pay for challenging the racial status quo. If anything, however, constricting the message in so narrow a fashion presented an even thornier problem. One wonders if Sylvanus Conant grasped

⁴¹ David A. Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers: Character and Content* (Newark, DE, 1997), 139-40, 147; *New England Weekly Rehearsal*, Apr. 8, 1734; Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Emancipation Day in the British West Indies,” in *Miscellanies* (Boston, 1878); *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 11, 1755; *New York Gazette*, Aug. 6, 1750; *Boston Evening-Post*, Aug. 13, 1750; *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, Aug. 13, 1750; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Aug. 9, 1750; *Pennsylvania Journal, or Weekly Advertiser*, Aug. 9, 1750; *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis), Sept. 5, 1750.

the irony of the gallows sermon, later published, he delivered at the execution of a slave named Bristol in Taunton, Massachusetts, in 1763. What did the hundreds of slaves gathered to witness Bristol's death think, when Conant declared that "the grand Source of all the Evils" concocted by slaves owed in the first place to "their companying together?" As they scanned the crowd of black faces, Conant's white listeners might have taken less solace from such a statement than did the slaves who had been assembled to be frightened.⁴² Even when it did not inspire further unrest, media exposure that almost always ended in reaffirmations of white control still might backfire horribly. When a five year old boy hanged himself in 1738 some four years after the discovery of the East Jersey plot, two New England papers declared that the "abundance of Discourse" had "fill'd his Mind," even infiltrating his dreams at night, and "put him on imitating what he had heard was done" to the convicted slave conspirators.⁴³

Like the symbolic expressions of power that dramatized the ritual of execution day, the printed texts that punctuated the fate of those condemned to death provided readers with an ambivalent mix of consolation and consternation. Criminal narratives and dying confession speeches, which literary historian Daniel A. Cohen has aptly called "the literature of social insurgency," documented with an empirical precision exactly the types of behavior whites most wanted to prevent. Before a Massachusetts slave named Arthur lost his life for the alleged rape of a white widow in 1765, a fairly typical *Life and Dying Speech* appeared in Boston under his hand. It narrated a downward spiral of drunkenness, interracial sex, and thievery that indicated a life of crime, contravention, and total defiance of established authority that rivaled New England's worst miscreants. Before his final capture, Arthur had already busted out of jail on numerous occasions, including once in Worcester, Massachusetts, with Isaac Frasier, the most infamous burglar in New England. As Arthur's *Dying Speech* justified the execution of a dangerous transgressor to a community the patience of which he had exhausted, it also undermined confidence in that community's ability to control indomitable slaves. In the long run neither slave executions nor the printed accounts that accompanied them did

⁴² *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 8, 1757; Sylvanus Conant, *The Blood of Abel, and the Blood of Jesus Considered and Improved, in a Sermon Delivered at Taunton, December the First, 1763. Upon the Day of the Execution of Bristol, a Negro Boy of about Sixteen Years Old, for the Murder of Miss Elizabeth McKinstry* (Boston, 1764), 33. A newspaper account of Bristol's execution in the *Boston Evening Post* (June 13, 1763) also noted "the bad Effects of Negroes too freely consorting together."

⁴³ *Boston Gazette*, *Boston Evening Post*, June 26, 1738.

much either to ease racial tensions or quell apprehensions about slaves.⁴⁴

Even when accounts made no explicit attempt to shape what readers thought about slave news, print elevated slavery into an often anxious bellwether of normative values and collective memory in British America everywhere from Kittery, Maine, to Port Royal, Jamaica. New Englanders knew that two slaves nearly drowned in October 1726 when their canoe overset near Oliver’s Wharf in chilly Boston harbor; they knew that “several” slaves died in an earthquake on Martinique in October 1727; they knew that a “Negro Man” from Philadelphia dropped dead after drinking “Cold Water” in June 1731. But they also knew that the County Court of Annapolis, Maryland, imposed sentence of death on a “Negro Man” convicted of horse stealing in March 1754, just as they knew that a year later two slaves from Charlestown, Massachusetts, met swift execution for poisoning their master.⁴⁵ And New Englanders knew quite a lot about the alleged slave conspiracy that kept white New Yorkers frenzied throughout the spring and summer of 1741. The New York plot commanded space in New England’s public press for no less than six months that year, from April through October. In late-July the *Boston Gazette* observed that the New Yorkers had already executed seventeen slaves, “ordered for Transportation” out of the colony forty-two more, and jailed another hundred or so. A “further Account from New York” that appeared in the same issue of the *Gazette* observed that a slave “call’d Willmos” had been the latest to burn “for being one of the Conspirators in the Plot.” At the stake Willmos, or Will as he was more commonly known, claimed involvement in two previous slave revolts in the West Indies: one on St. John in 1734, where he owned killing “several White People with his own Hands;” and another at Antigua, “found out just before it came to a head” in 1736.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (New York, 1993), esp. 115-63; *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur, a Negro Man, Who was Executed at Worcester, October 20, 1768, for a Rape, committed on the Body of one Deborah Metcalfe* (Boston, 1768); T. H. Breen, “Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” in Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Frederika J. Teute, ed., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 67-95. The discussion here incorporates aspects of Joseph Roach’s discussion of race, rituals of death, and genealogical performance in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996).

⁴⁵ *Boston Gazette*, Oct. 10, 1726; Jan. 8, 1728; July 12, 1731; Apr. 16, 1754; July 7, Aug. 11, 25, 1755.

⁴⁶ *Boston Gazette*, July 20, 1741. For newspaper coverage of the New York conspiracy, see: *Boston Gazette*, Apr. 20; June 8, 22, 29; July 6, 13, 20, 27; and Aug. 10, 1741; *Boston News-Letter*, Apr. 9; May 7; June 4, 18; July 2, 16, 23; Aug. 6, 27; Sept. 3; Oct. 8, 1741. For recent studies of the New York plot, see Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York, 2005); and Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Great New York Conspiracy of 1741: Slavery, Crime, and Colonial Law* (Lawrence, KS, 2003).

Nervous retellings of this Antiguan plot, by all accounts one of the most far-reaching discovered in the eighteenth century, had itself filled New England newspapers in late 1736 and early 1737. The *Boston Gazette* printed a list of the names and manners of death of all sixty-four slaves executed as conspirators, along with the names of their masters. White Antiguans nevertheless continued to expect “an Attack every Moment,” and, according to one correspondent, would “continue to do so for some Time.” Now, in New York, Will’s last words laid bare the reality of diasporic slave resistance, and confirmed suspicions that its winds had blown into the urban north. As natural reproduction, “Spanish Negroes” taken as prizes of war, and slaves imported from both the West Indies and, increasingly, direct from Africa continued to boost New England’s black population, the possibility of a similar disaster struck Bostonians in particular as more real than scholars have allowed. Frequent sale, mobile work patterns, and communal life – the funerals, frolics, and further gatherings, clandestine and otherwise, that brought the black community together – all provided opportunities for blacks to coordinate bloody revenge; or so white New Englanders were encouraged to dread. Indeed, it might have seemed that the official printed explanation of the Antiguan conspiracy, which cited slaves who worked in the handicraft trades, as “Hawkers & Pedlars,” as “Sailors,” and who worked “out for themselves” as its main instigators, was a warning aimed directly at New Englanders. At the very least, it hardly could have failed to occur to many that a similar set of work and labor arrangements typified the loosely supervised daily lives of many New England slaves.⁴⁷

Guarding against these contingencies, New Englanders frequently reacted to events that transpired elsewhere by tightening legislation, enforcing curfews, resuscitating moribund slave patrols, and by engaging in paranoid acts of preemptive violence. Suspected Indian involvement in a previous insurrection scare in New York in 1712, duly reported at the time in the *Boston Newsletter*, had helped convince Massachusetts lawmakers to prohibit the further “importation or bringing into this province [of] any Indian servants or slaves.” In fact, the legislation that emerged openly admitted having been motivated to act by “divers conspiracies, insurrections, rapes, thefts, and other execrable

⁴⁷ *Boston Gazette*, Nov. 29, 1736, Mar. 7 and 28, 1737. On the Antigua conspiracy, see David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua, With Implications for Colonial British America* (Baltimore, 1985).

crimes” committed, “especially of late,” within “several of the majesties’ plantations in America. Lax enforcement sapped the effectiveness of this and other legislation, which many felt was too weak to begin with. As news of the New York conspiracy flooded into New England in the summer of 1741, admiralty judge Robert Auchmuty implored the Massachusetts legislature to adopt “some further Act” to “correct the Licentious Behaviour” of Boston’s “black Crew.” Auchmuty, himself the exasperated owner of a slave named Cesar, whose multiple stays in the House of Correction seemed to leave him “in a more confirmed wicked Disposition than at first,” also urged Bostonians to ship off their unruly slaves. For his part, Auchmuty had already decided to part with Cesar on “reasonable Terms, provided he [was] transported to North Carolina and there sold” again. Perhaps if more slaveowners followed his example, Auchmuty concluded in a familiar refrain, Boston might yet “avert what a neighbouring Government providentially escaped.”⁴⁸

Year in and year out, narratives like these constituted a running dialogue on slavery in the British Atlantic, a cultural anthology that, as it located New England slavery within a transcolonial continuum of resistance, made even the slightest signs of unrest cause for alarm, and helped guarantee that eternal vigilance remained the price of slavery throughout colonial British America. Animated by these anxieties, print set about making the new social psychology that marked slavery’s expansion in the middle decades of the eighteenth century “vivid and legible” to New Englanders who were adjusting to empire and still haunted by ghosts from the Puritan past.⁴⁹ As wider engagement with and knowledge of the world clarified New England’s position within the eighteenth-century British Atlantic, it tended also to intensify unease over being considered what Oliver Cromwell once called “a poor, cold, and useless place,” a commercial and cultural backwater that still did not quite measure up. Even the wealthiest southern planters felt the curse of provincialism, the sting of sensing that the imperial eyes of the British public looked upon them as contemptible outsiders, not equal partners. Compared with most of the rest of British America, however, in New England this familiar dynamic merged with a generally less prosperous economy and a nagging consciousness of inferiority – the

⁴⁸ *Boston News-Letter*, Apr. 14, 21, 1712; Kenneth Scott, “The Slave Insurrection in New York in 1712,” *New York Historical Society Quarterly*, 45 (1961), 46; *Boston Newsletter*, July 16, 1741.

⁴⁹ The discussion here follows George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1990), 42; and Cora Kaplan, “Imagining Empire: History, Fantasy, and Literature,” in Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006), (quote 191).

ineluctable Puritan hangover – to produce an especially acute if not chronic sense of failure. Less oriented inwardly, less inclined to compare themselves unfavorably to the greater and greatest generations that had preceded them, New Englanders of what might be called the imperial generation could still look around the British Atlantic and well assume their efforts at cultural reorientation were all for naught. They had settled a wilderness “amidst an Infinity of Hardships” and without outside assistance; they had more recently supported five “expensive” military expeditions against Nova Scotia and Canada; they had always given the “strongest Proofs” of loyalty and steady attachment to the King. Near the end of King George’s War, a contributor to the *Boston Evening Post* posed the question: did New Englanders not deserve “the Reward of the Mother Country” for all they had done? Too often, it seemed, the answer seemed as ever mainly to involve the heaping of calumnies, as when dissenting minister Daniel Neal wrote in 1729 that the “Body of the English Nation [had] no real affection for New England.” The alternative, barely preferable, was little attention at all paid to the land of steady habits, thin soil, and “that old *English* spirit.”⁵⁰

It is perhaps in this last sense that the print culture of slavery reveals itself as a discourse that connected local concerns to the imperatives that empire imposed on New Englanders. This is not to suggest that men like Hugh Hall and Jacob Royal, each of whom advertised dozens of slaves for sale in local prints in the 1720s and 1730s, considered slave trading an obligation as much as an opportunity. It does mean that, as a descriptive and prescriptive means of manufacturing consent to commercial empire, ultimately it may matter less that these “scenes of subjection” reflected some

⁵⁰ Cromwell quoted in Mark A. Peterson, “Life on the Margins: Boston’s Anxieties of Influence in the Atlantic World,” in Wim Klooster and Alfred Padula, eds., *The Atlantic World: Essays on Slavery, Migration, and Imagination* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2005), 45; *Boston Evening Post*, Mar. 2, 1747; Daniel Neal to Thomas Foxcroft, 29 April 1729, Colman Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Beginning with Perry Miller’s masterful *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953), my thinking about the reorientation of New England identity in the British Atlantic draws on a vast multidisciplinary literature that includes Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, MA, 1967); McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*; Bruce Tucker, “The Reinvention of New England, 1691-1770,” *New England Quarterly*, 59 (1986), 315-40; John H. Elliott, “Introduction: Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World,” in Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World* (Princeton, 1987), 11; Jack P. Greene, “Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America,” in *Imperatives, Behaviors, and Identities: Essays in Early American Cultural History* (Charlottesville, VA, 1992), 143-73; Michal J. Rozbicki, “The Curse of Provincialism: Negative Perceptions of Colonial American Plantation Gentry,” *Journal of Southern History*, 63 (Nov. 1997), 727-52; David R. Jansson, “Internal Orientalism in America: W. J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* and the Spatial Construction of American National Identity,” *Political Geography*, 22 (2003), 293-316; and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, 1992). For a recent conspectus, see Trevor Burnard, *The British Atlantic*, in Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (New York, 2009), esp. 123-24. On the invention of a New England identity rooted in a myth of the fathers, in addition to Perry Miller’s seminal work see esp. Robert Middlekauf, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York, 1971); and Cressy, *Coming Over*.

objective reality: a slave runs away, is advertised for sale, gets drunk in a tavern, kills or is killed by his or her master, returns a gold ring, or drowns. As they reduced the enslaved to social and cultural signifiers, all these stories fed into and arose out of the mythology of slavery and the closely related desideratum of empire in New England and the wider British Atlantic world. As vehicles for describing slavery and slaves, they are all relentlessly one-sided, partial truths open to multiple interpretations that ultimately left out as much as they left in. Narratives overlapped, voices merged and submerged, fact and fabrication became blurred. Certain meanings always remained tied to local circumstances. Readers far beyond Boston probably missed the significance of a cryptic aside that appeared in the *Boston Gazette* at the height of the Mark and Phillis trial in 1755: “*Altho’ the Execution must be shocking, ‘tis not doubted but the Sheriff may supply himself with AN EXECUTIONER OF THE LAW, without going out of the County.*” Not merely another lamentation over the failings of local law enforcement, the hidden transcript here relied on readers knowing two things: first that a slave belonging to Richard Foster, who was the sheriff of Middlesex County from 1731 to 1764, had been implicated in the conspiracy and had testified at the trial; and second, that Foster was in fact the deceased victim’s brother-in-law. For all we know, instead of attempting to stop the crowd as it had its way extra-legally with Mark’s dead body, Foster might well have encouraged or even joined them.⁵¹

One of the purposes of this essay has been to suggest shifting focus away from the problematic meanings that attached to particular narratives, and to urge consideration of their significance in the aggregate instead. For in the end, what strikes one perhaps most powerfully about the print culture of slavery are genealogies of performance that demanded the ritual production and dissemination of similar narratives over time. From a distance, and specifically in the mind’s eye created by print, the slave societies of the south and the West Indies differed, or at least *seemed to*

⁵¹ Richard R. Johnson, *Adjustment to Empire: The New England Colonies, 1675-1715* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1981); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1997); James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986), 1-26; Ross Chambers, *Room For Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago, 1991), esp. 181-183; Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York, 1948), esp. 261-63; *Boston Gazette*, August 25, 1755; Goodell, Jr., “Trial and Execution of Mark and Phillis,” 33. None of the extensive newspaper coverage devoted to this affair identified Foster as John Codman’s brother-in-law. It is briefly noted in Justin Winsor, ed., *The Memorial History of Boston, including Suffolk County, Massachusetts, 1630-1880* (Boston, 1881), 327.

differ in certain basic respects, from New England's societies with slaves in degree more than kind.⁵² That is not to deny important distinctions that eighteenth-century New Englanders themselves recognized and maintained. Josiah Quincy, for one, took great pride in the difference he saw between democratic New England and aristocratic South Carolina, where a handful of "opulent and lordly planters" ruled over "poor and spiritless peasants and vile slaves." The purpose here is not to transform New England's slave population by some revisionist gymnastics into South Carolina's black majority. It is rather to observe that reverberations and reiterations of sameness homologized the geography of British Atlantic slavery, fashioning in the process what amounts to a consensus history of British Atlantic slavery. At the level of print culture, and of imagining culture more generally, slavery in eighteenth-century New England thus represented not a problem but a solution.⁵³

In July 1741, a group of white vigilantes descended upon an aged black man named London in Roxbury, Massachusetts. London was out past the nine o'clock curfew, which ordinarily might have got him sent home with a stern warning and led a concerned citizen to write in to one of the local papers about the problem of unsupervised slaves. But at the height of the hysteria surrounding the New York conspiracy, London found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. When a search of his person revealed that he had a lone bill in his pocket, London repeatedly denied that he had stolen it. In no mood to take any chances, the whites insisted that he had received it from a local slave woman who, after her master "gave her the Discipline," had confessed taking a sizable amount of cash from him. The charged scene seems to have played off fears of London's involvement in the same kind of illicit exchange system that had existed in Boston for years and, if one believed the flood of initial reports, had recently supported slaves' "hellish designs" in New York. Week after week since April, shocking "new discoveries" in New York had revealed a plot that had expanded to include

⁵²Wide reading in different theoretical literatures informs my understanding memory as a performative construct. Particularly helpful studies include Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), esp. 219; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, 1986), esp. 5; Pierre Bourdieu, "Identity and Representation: Elements for a Critical Reflection on the Idea of Region," in *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA, 1991), esp. 221-23; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, 1992); Paul Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, 2004); Roach, *Cities of the Dead*; Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), esp. 2; and two works by Marshall Sahlins: *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, 1981); and *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985). Diana Taylor includes an apt discussion of performance events as acts of cultural transfer in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC, 2003), 1-53.

⁵³ Quincy quoted in David Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence, KS, 2006), 106.

dozens of slaves along with numerous whites, “Spanish Negroes,” and even a “Popish Priest.” As New Yorkers coerced admissions and meted out harsh punishments, these New Englanders tied a single black man to a tree in a pasture and similarly attempted to “make him confess.” When London proved unyielding, the attackers cut him down and left him to die in the wet evening grass. He had been “whipped” to “such a degree” that he perished not long after being carried back to his master’s house. A hastily conducted coroner’s inquest ruled London’s death an “*Accidental Murder*,” collateral damage in the common fight against unruly slaves.⁵⁴

Ritualized first by the ceremonies of public execution, then again by their reproduction in print, the deaths of London, Arthur, Bristol, Mark and Phillis, and countless other slaves marked and questioned the boundaries of circum-Atlantic identity for New Englanders who increasingly tended to think nationally and act locally. As part of a process that Joseph Roach has called surrogation, in death their effigies were “distanced from the community” of British Atlantic slavery “in order to participate sacrificially in its reaffirmation.”⁵⁵ The members of the Roxbury crowd convinced themselves through their act of violence that they were like the New Yorkers, Antiguans, Jamaicans, South Carolinians and other colonials who faced down recalcitrant slaves in the late 1730s and 1740s; to convince others of their identity they “produced textual equivalents” that reenacted events and turned social practice back into cultural artifact.⁵⁶ Thus did social and cultural modes of performance produce one another interactively, and thus did they sear events like the New York conspiracy into a collective memory that lingered for many years afterward. In January 1744, no less than three Boston newspapers noted the accidental death in New York of a young white girl. She had been shot by her own brother with a pistol that “had been loaded . . . since the Alarm of the late Negro Plot” some three years before. A year after that, in 1745, a brig arrived in New York carrying a slave sailor named Hanover, who had been “concern’d” in the 1741 conspiracy but had managed to escape to Jamaica. There, Governor Trelawney had spotted his name on a list of those “indicted and not to be found” and sent him back to face English justice. How Hanover had spent the years in between was anybody’s

⁵⁴ For London’s murder, see *Boston Gazette*, *Boston Post Boy*, *Boston Evening Post*, July 20; *New England Weekly Journal*, July 21; *Boston Newsletter*, July 23.

⁵⁵ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 279-80.

⁵⁶ This sentence adapts and quotes Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 274.

guess.⁵⁷

It may be that Herbert Aptheker was right after all, that in these and other instances, jittery whites reacted to an Atlantic wave of slave unrest that crested in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. It may also be the case that David Brion Davis had it right when he observed that “throughout the Americas, slavery presented more significant similarities than differences.” The point to be stressed here is that the print culture of slavery gave both claims every appearance of subjective truth. Building on John Gillis’s observation that the British Atlantic was a place the cultural geography of which people tended to dwell *on* rather than *in*, the preceding pages have attempted to show that cultural convergence as a meaningful marker of social identity depended to a substantial degree on shared imagination no less than on more tangible common circumstances.⁵⁸ Sketching some of the ways in which slavery came to occupy a position never far from the center of an Anglo-American imagination that encompassed and transcended regional and imperial boundaries and identities, I hope to have suggested also that slavery in New England, like the meaning of New England itself, has always been a myth, a time- and culture-bound invention of successive generations, each with its own set of social and ideological imperatives. George III was already on the brink of losing thirteen of his American colonies by the time Adam Smith observed that Britain’s rulers had, “for more than a century, amused the people” with the idea “that they possessed a great empire on the west side of the Atlantic.” But this empire had “hitherto existed in imagination only.” In fact, Smith wrote, it had never really been an empire at all, but merely “the project of an empire.”⁵⁹

As slavery in eighteenth-century New England became part of what Smith called the “showy equipage” of mimetic consumerism, patriotic ferment, and genteel cultures of display, it too became a project of empire. Useful enough in its own right to anyone who prowled the waterfronts, back alleys, and respectable homes where slaves labored, slavery nevertheless remained for most New Englanders “not a gold mine, but the project of a gold mine.” With the disintegration of the first British Empire

⁵⁷ *Boston Evening Post*, Jan. 2, 1744; *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 3, 1744; *Boston Newsletter*, Jan. 5, 1744; *Boston Evening Post*, Mar. 4, 1745.

⁵⁸ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), 262; John Gillis, *Islands of the Mind: How the Human Imagination Created the Atlantic World* (New York, 2004). The reference here is meant to evoke and refine Jack P. Greene’s claim in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1988), that provincial Americans were becoming more alike and more British on the eve of the Revolution.

⁵⁹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations* (1776; reprint Indianapolis, 1976), 946-47.

during the era of the American Revolution, New Englanders lost a major incentive to continue supporting slavery's expense and variously reached the conclusion that the project, like empire itself, ought to be laid down if it could not be completed. That decision, once reached, cleared the way for subsequent generations to reverse Emerson's logic and declare in the days of the early republic that the New England newspaper never loved slavery. But as Emerson's namesake Ralph Ellison once observed, "That which we remember is, more often than not, that which we would like to have been; or that which we hope to be. Thus our memory and our identity are ever at odds; our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists." In the decades before the American Revolution, slavery in New England became a future fiction – an uneasy fantasy of what New Englanders wanted their society to be, or to become. Avatar of a new regional understanding of empire, and of its relational reverse, print lent itself to the development of a slaveholding identity that post-revolutionary New Englanders would not only renounce, but deny ever having fostered.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 946-47; Ralph Ellison, "The Golden Age, Time Past," *Esquire*, 51 (January 1959), 105; Jonathan Hart, "Imagining Culture: Crossing Boundaries in Early Modern Europe," in Hart, ed., *Imagining Culture: Essays in Early Modern History and Literature* (New York, 1996), 1; David S. Shields, *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690-1750* (Chicago, 1990). The seminal study of the mythology of slavery in post-Revolutionary New England is Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, 1998). Other important studies of memory, myth, and regional identity in New England include Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity From the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 2001); John Seelye, *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock* (Chapel Hill, 1998); David Jaffee, *People of the Wachusett: Greater New England in History and Memory, 1630-1860* (Ithaca, 1999); and Stephen Nissenbaum, "New England as Region and Nation," in Edward L. Ayers et al, eds., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore, 1996), 38-61.