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## Air Too Pure for Slavery and the Rights of British Liberty: The Black Experience in London, 1772-1883

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AIR TOO PURE FOR SLAVERY AND THE RIGHTS OF BRITISH LIBERTY:  
THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN LONDON, 1772-1833

by

Tony Frazier

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of History  
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AIR TOO PURE FOR SLAVERY AND THE RIGHTS OF BRITISH LIBERTY:  
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Tony Frazier, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2013

This dissertation presents abundant evidence that people of African descent were very present and visible in eighteenth-century London society. In the eighteenth century, London was one of the largest cities in the world with a population that reached almost 700,000 in 1750 and over a million in 1800. In addition, Great Britain was the leading slave trafficking nation in the world. Therefore, it was no surprise that the debate concerning black freedom and liberty was center stage in one of the most important regions in Europe and the Atlantic world. This question, much like the development of slavery in eighteenth-century London itself, intertwined both legal and social institutions.

The famous 1772 Somerset Case upholding the freedom of an escaped black servant added to blacks' legal uncertainty and left them in a position between slavery and domestic servitude. Some people believed that being on British soil freed blacks from bondage, and others considered baptism a symbol of freedom. Nevertheless, most blacks served as household servants, presumably without wages, making them *de facto* slaves. Certainly, they were treated as slaves and visual imagery—such as some paintings of blacks—show this, for example, by depicting them in slave collars.

Blacks existed in multiple categories such as an educated elite, household servants, runaways, and sailors. Some blacks attempted self-emancipation by running away from their masters. Numerous newspaper advertisements seeking information about black runaways provide evidence that attempted self-emancipation was common and that white masters considered their black servants to be property, not free citizens. Others blacks participated alongside white working-class people in violent protests against exploitation, such as in the Gordon Riots of 1780.

This dissertation assesses the status of blacks from multiple perspectives and concludes that black Londoners, under the law and in broad cultural understanding existed in an uncertain state. The dissertation adds to the scholarly understanding of the lives of black people in London as a trans-Atlantic phenomenon. While the context of life in London was different from that of the colonies, slavery nevertheless defined the existence of Londoners of African descent.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The black presence in early-modern England stems from John Hawkins's introduction of enslaved Africans to England during the years 1562 and 1563, after his voyage to the Guinea coast. He acquired some 300 black slaves who were sold to the Spaniards in the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> This initial step into slave trafficking introduced blacks into England during the late-sixteenth century in numbers that alarmed Britons. Subsequently, by 1596, the black population of England was so significant that Queen Elizabeth I felt compelled to issue an edict objecting to the presence of blacks in her realm. She declared, "Several blackamoors have lately been brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already too many here . . . . Her Majesty's pleasure therefore is that those kinds of people should be expelled from the land."<sup>2</sup>

There were subsequent arrangements outlined again in 1601 to deport blacks from England.<sup>3</sup> These proposed expulsions were due to the belief that black people would taint the purity of English blood and take jobs away from other servants. Another rationale given for the removal of blacks was their status as infidels and non-

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>2</sup>Folarin Shyllon, "The Black Presence and Experience in Britain: An Analytical Overview," in *Essays on the History of Black Britain: From Roman Times to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, eds. Jagdish Gundara and Ian Duffield (Avebury: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1992), 202. David Bygott, *Black and British* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>3</sup>Shyllon, "The Black Presence," 202.

Christians.<sup>4</sup> However, these plans were unsuccessful and were undermined by the contradictory fact that Queen Elizabeth herself employed an African entertainer and page at her court, reflecting a Tudor family tradition in existence since the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII, who employed a black trumpeter known as John Blanke. Despite the desire of the queen for an exodus of blacks from Britain, their numbers grew due to England's increased role in the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Although English participation in the slave trade was minimal before the mid-seventeenth century, the end of the English Civil War and the beginning of the Restoration signaled a growing British involvement in the trafficking of enslaved Africans. This was primarily due to the desire for new sources of labor for the various plantation settlements in the English colonies created prior to the English Civil War,<sup>5</sup> settlements that included Barbados; the Leeward Islands; and the North American colonies. This increasing demand for slave labor resulted in the creation of the Royal Adventures into Africa, a joint stock company, chartered in 1660. The Royal Adventures' mission was to supply the New World colonies with slaves. However, the company declined due to severe financial difficulties, reaching its demise in 1672.

The Royal African Company, chartered in 1672, proved to be more successful than its predecessor. Its charter included a monopoly on trade for a period of 1000 years. Possessing the power to seize ships and property of unauthorized slave traders,

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<sup>4</sup>James Walvin, *The Black Presence: A Documentary History of the Negro in England, 1555-1860* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 64.

<sup>5</sup>Colin A. Palmer, *Human Cargoes: The British Slave Trade to Spanish America, 1700-1739* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 4. Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy, 1660-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

it was the first large-scale English organization devoted to the slave trade.<sup>6</sup> During the heyday of the Royal African Company, from 1672 to 1698, individuals such as John Locke, who owned shares worth £600, and many other prominent Britons made huge profits.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, its monopoly ended, throwing open the slave trade to private merchants. From this point, companies utilizing large commercial ports came to dominate the slave trade.

The importation of blacks into Britain increased further after the War of the Spanish Succession and the peace settlement of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. The outcome resulted in the coveted Asiento being awarded to England. This was a contractual agreement between Great Britain and Spain in which they agreed that Great Britain would supply the Spanish colonies with slaves. Queen Anne placed the responsibility of conducting the slave trade on the South Sea Company, chartered in 1711. This company received a lifetime monopoly on trade to South America.<sup>8</sup> This agreement lasted until the War of Jenkins Ear broke out in 1739. The South Sea Bubble, a risky financial speculation that sunk the British national government's stock, contributed to weakening the power of the South Sea Company. As a result, in order to avoid future risks the company reduced its involvement in the slave trade.<sup>9</sup>

The difficulties of the Royal African Company and the South Sea Company did nothing to dampen the zeal of Englishmen who participated in large numbers in the slave trade from the early half of the eighteenth century. These traders, located in

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<sup>6</sup>Palmer, *Human Cargoes*, 4-5. Morgan, *Slavery*, 9.

<sup>7</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 151. John Locke managed to reconcile the belief in the inalienable rights of man with the view that black slavery was a justifiable institution.

<sup>8</sup>Palmer, *Human Cargoes*, 10.

<sup>9</sup>Palmer, *Human Cargoes*, 11.

the port cities of London, Liverpool, and Bristol, built or bought ships, purchased supplies and goods, and hired crews. The right of free trade of slaves became recognized a fundamental right of Englishmen.<sup>10</sup>

The increased prosperity of the Atlantic Slave Trade linking three continents fueled the growth of the black population of England during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Africans were sold in the slave port cities of Bristol, Liverpool, and London. Bristol in the early period from 1723 to 1743 was England's leading slaving port. The prominence of Bristol was due to its role in the trade of slaves and sugar, the latter produced by slave labor. Its rival, Liverpool, also built on slave labor, surpassed Bristol as the leading slaving port in the in the eighteenth century. Overall, both cities underwent transformations from mere towns to great world ports due to the trafficking of human cargo.<sup>11</sup>

In the eighteenth century, Africans continued to enter England in great numbers. Although London was Britain's smallest slave port when compared to Liverpool and Bristol, it was the largest city in the world with a population that reached almost 700,000 in 1750 and over a million in 1800.<sup>12</sup> While serving as the English capital as well as a major port city characterized by new industries and trade, London had an extremely diverse population, which consisted of not only Europeans but also black Africans, both enslaved and free. By the middle of the century, it was handling almost three-quarters of the sugar imported into England, with the profits

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<sup>10</sup>Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1944), 30-32.

<sup>11</sup>Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* (London: Continuum, 2001), 28. Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, 32-36.

<sup>12</sup>M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), 171.

from this business playing a crucial role in the city's success. Consequently, London became the center for money lending, serving the dual role of broker and banker. It garnered lucrative commissions and interest for accommodating the peculiar needs of planters and slave merchants.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, London represented the vibrant society that made up the world of politics and fashion. London attracted the best and the worst, the enterprising and the parasitic people who were seeking their fortunes, searching for work, or running away. London had an abundance of everything including heavy traffic, culture, and filth. London was the heart of British political, cultural, commercial, and intellectual life.<sup>14</sup>

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, colonial slavery developed into a mature social and legal institution. The maturity of slavery throughout the Atlantic world ensured that increasing numbers of blacks eventually found their way to England due to a variety of circumstances. For instance, some entered English society as slaves directly from Africa. Others arrived from the Americas where they had already served as slaves. Many blacks entered London in the mid-eighteenth century as slaves or trained domestics in the service of returning colonial governors and West Indian planters who chose to bring their house slaves with them rather than employ English servants.

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<sup>13</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 44.

<sup>14</sup>Kirstin Olsen, *Daily Life in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century England* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 57-58.



Blacks also entered London as children and teenagers brought over as menials or body-servants to serve rich English families. Their initial use was to serve as fashionable items.<sup>15</sup> Naval captains also returned with black valets whom they then sought to sell.<sup>16</sup> These white Britons brought with them their black chattels and their slave- holding presumptions and practices. Despite these various avenues of entrance to England, the primary occupation of the majority of black slaves in London was domestic servitude.

Under the category of domestic servant, blacks worked as pages, valets, footmen, coachmen, cooks, and maids. Their status was a state of enslavement, because unlike their white counterparts they did not receive wages. There must have been reasons for this development other than the search for labor, because there was not a shortage of white domestics.<sup>17</sup> Black servants offered more than labor; they were a symbolic representation with which their owners sought to impress society and to reaffirm their social positions or prestige. The most important commodity offered by black servants was a lifetime of unpaid labor.<sup>18</sup> Unlike those in the plantation colonies, where slavery existed under codified law, black slaves in London lived between a station of chattel slavery and domestic servitude. Blacks represented a class of slavish servants trapped in an ambiguous status.

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<sup>15</sup>Shyllon, *Black Slaves*, 11.

<sup>16</sup>Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), 14-25. J. Jean Hecht, *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1956), 33-35.

<sup>17</sup>Hecht, *The Domestic Servant*, 1.

<sup>18</sup>Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia: A History of Blacks in Britain*. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1972). 22.

Domestic servitude and cultural alienation were harsh realities for blacks in eighteenth century London. Even if chattel slavery did not exist in the law, it existed in the minds blacks and many white people. To be sure, owing service was not the same as being chattel, but domestic servitude coupled with cultural alienation and deprivation had all the trappings and consequences of slavery, regardless of whether a black person carried the appellation of servant, apprentice, or indentured servant. Blacks in England were in general not producing goods through their labor, but represented the means by which some whites attained their own status. Blacks who owed service were not free, and limitations that the law and British society placed upon them circumscribed their liberty. Most did not have freedom of movement and did not receive wages, and all were subject to corporal punishment. Black servants were at their mistresses' and masters' "beck and call." Their labor belonged to others. Consequently some black slaves, indentured servants, and apprentices ran away to resist oppression and to obtain liberty.

Due to the external origin of slavery, the legal standing of blacks in England remained uncertain throughout the eighteenth century. Because Great Britain was the leading slave trafficking nation in the world, it is no surprise that the debate concerning black freedom and liberty was center stage in one of the most important regions in Europe and the Atlantic world. Slavery, which was not a defined custom in London, despite blacks' presence there since the sixteenth century, lacked the legal sanction of a fully developed slave code. This ambiguity regarding the status of blacks contrasted strikingly with the development of slave law in the colonies, and

blacks' thirst for freedom and their increasing involvement in British society comprise central themes of the work that follows.

This dissertation seeks to explore the status of blacks in London from 1772 to 1833. The study starts with 1772 as a beginning date because of the *Somerset Case*, decided in that year. At the crux of the *Somerset Case* was the issue of whether or not it was legal to forcibly remove a slave from England. The escaped slave that this trial centered on was James Somerset, who had been purchased in Virginia by Charles Stewart, a cashier and paymaster. In 1769, upon Stewart's return to London, Somerset ran away and was subsequently recaptured in 1771. He later resided in irons onboard the ship *Ann and Mary* from which, upon arrival in Jamaica, Stewart planned to sell him as a slave. However, Captain Knowles of the Jamaican-bound ship had a writ of Habeas Corpus issued against him by three witnesses to the capture of James Somerset. The writ required Knowles to bring Somerset to court and prove why his detention was legal.<sup>19</sup> This celebrated case, which dominated newspapers with letters and articles, pitted many abolitionists, such as Granville Sharp, against West Indian planters, with both sides wanting a firm decision dealing with the legality of slavery in England.

On June 22, 1772, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield ruled that Stuart had illegally forced Somerset to leave England. He stated that slavery could only exist if a statute or positive law sanctioned the institution. Despite Mansfield's narrow ruling, which

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<sup>19</sup> William Cotter, "The Somerset Case and the Abolition of Slavery," *History* 79 (1994): 40. Shyllon, *Black Slaves*, 82-83. James Oldham. *The Mansfield Manuscript and the Growth of English Law in the Eighteenth Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1221-1243.

suggested that English law did not allow this case and Somerset must be discharged, all over England and America, slaves, abolitionists, lawyers, and judges cited the Somerset case as the end of slavery in the British Isles. However, upon closer examination, this case remains part of the legal misunderstanding in relation to the emancipation of all blacks in England.

*Somerset v. Stewart* (1772) has remained a turning point for historical interpretations of slavery in the England. The actual verdict and its meaning and the resulting verdict have been a point of contention in various historical interpretations. Some scholars regard the ruling as the end of slavery in England, while this study offers counterpoints to that accepted truth. Several historians have offered various interpretations of the Somerset trial. Christopher L. Brown sets forth that the *Somerset Case* led to a verdict filled with ambiguities. In delivering his judgment Lord Mansfield found a way to preserve the “slaveholders’ right to service of their slaves, but not the right to enforce it.”<sup>20</sup> The ruling witnessed a public interpretation that gave Mansfield’s words a lucidity, which did not match his rhetoric. In Brown’s estimation those individuals who sought validation that English law guaranteed liberty found their evidence in the decision. The nuanced words of the Mansfield found witnesses in the newspaper accounts, which truly ignored the limited ruling of the chief justice. Brown further argues that blacks and whites behaved in the aftermath of the *Somerset Case* as if the institution of slavery had been outlawed. Brown posits that although the *Somerset Case* unleashed new attacks against slavery

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 97.

and the slave trade another ten years would pass before the coalescing of a full-blown antislavery lobby emerged in England. Brown suggests that the case left a dubious legacy, because while limiting the rights of slaveholders in England, the trial lawyers acknowledged the rights of slaveholders in British North America. The champions of British liberty only sought to remove slavery from their midst while preserving the purity of their institutions.<sup>21</sup>

Vincent Carretta offers a view on the *Somerset Case* that differ somewhat from Christopher Brown's. Carretta generally accepts the standard notion of the *Somerset Case* as the moment that abolished slavery in England. Yet, he offers a critical point that the decision did not abolish slavery in England de jure, but circumscribed slavery de facto by removing the slave masters' power to forcibly remove a slave from England.<sup>22</sup> In the absence of such power, slave owners right to claim possession weakened, because slaves could legally self-emancipate themselves by running away in England. Carretta acknowledges in agreement with Brown that the press and the general public viewed the decision as the legal blow striking down slavery in England.<sup>23</sup>

James Walvin's interpretation differs from Brown and Carretta's understanding of the *Somerset Case*. Walvin argues that the facts of the *Somerset Case* represent a turn from historical myth to accepted truth. Walvin stresses that Lord Chief Justice Mansfield never pronounced all slaves in England to be free.

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<sup>21</sup> Brown, *Moral Capital*, 96-98.

<sup>22</sup> Vincent Carretta, *Equiano The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 207.

<sup>23</sup> Carretta, *Equiano*, 205-211.

Although the common repeated sentiment remains a constant phrase in historical studies, this does not make it true. According to Walvin, slavery in England continued to exist despite the Somerset ruling.<sup>24</sup> This dissertation analyzes the ambiguities of the Somerset Case and offers a different interpretation of the post-Somerset climate in regards to black freedom and liberty in London.

The end point of this dissertation is 1833, the first year of the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire. The study spans the period between the disputed end of slavery in the metropole and the unquestioned legal abolition of slavery in the colonies, and thus offers unique vantage points from which to assess slavery, as it relates to black freedom and liberty in English society.

This dissertation also attempts to illuminate the broader black experience in late-eighteenth- century and early-nineteenth-century London. While the legal history is useful in understanding slavery in London, historians have placed less emphasis on the people who sought to emancipate themselves through acts of absconding and demonstrated their agency and as they sought freedom.

Some fundamental questions that are raised in this dissertation include the following: 1) Does the presence of black runaways, along with advertisements seeking the return of them indicate that some form of slavery existed after the 1772 *Somerset Case* in London? 2) What was the response of the different social classes within the black community, to slavery, domestic servitude, and English life? 3) What did freedom and liberty mean to blacks, after the 1772 *Somerset Case*? 4) What was

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<sup>24</sup> James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 41-45.

the impact of radical English thought on the black people in London? 5) How did whites create images of blacks?

Chapter Two examines various legal cases prior to and after the famous *Somerset Case* and describes the social condition of blacks prior to 1772. Through a variety of sources, it also offers a history of the *Somerset Case* and the various meanings attributed to it.

Chapter Three examines the representation of blacks in various media and uncovers British attitudes and opinions regarding the black population. Chapter Four examines the identity of black runaways named in the newspaper advertisements in the post-1772 *Somerset* climate in London. It investigates the status of black people as it pertained to de facto and de jure slavery in London. This chapter further investigates the diversity within the London black community. Clearly, not all blacks were runaways during this time, and evidence exists to support the acknowledgement of the diversity in the everyday lives of blacks.

Finally, Chapter Five seeks to discuss what freedom meant for not only blacks but also the wider British population. It investigates black participation in activities that involved radicalism, the role of crowds in freeing black from capture as well as black participation in popular revolts.

The Conclusion briefly situates the topic of black runaways as a larger phenomenon in the Atlantic world, demonstrating how blacks in the eighteenth and nineteenth century navigated English society as the other in a foreign world.

## CHAPTER II

### COURT CASES: LEGALITY OF SLAVERY IN BRITAIN

The legal status of blacks in British history proved to be a perplexing question in English and Scottish courts. The growth of English law concerning black slavery ebbed and flowed throughout the eighteenth century. The decisions of English law on slavery were a mixture of common law pleadings and judicial opinions. Black slavery in England was legal in multiple ways; it was officially permitted on British ships and at African trading posts, and it was lawful in the British colonies. Yet, in England itself the laws on slavery were not clear and ever changing. However, several questions created a shift in the law regarding the legality of slavery in the British Isles. First, what was the legal status of blacks upon entry into England? Second, were slaves free upon arrival in England? Third, did baptism confer freedom to slaves? Finally, could slaves serve as mere merchandise for the purposes of inheritance, bequests or the payment of debts? However, in the face of these questions, it would be the end of the eighteenth century before English jurisprudence and the English courts could reach a legal resolution regarding slavery in England.

One of the earliest cases that dealt with slavery was the 1569 *Cartwright* case. This case marked the first time that slavery was in fact outside of English traditions of liberty. The ruling involved a slave imported from Russia and implied that the slave



was free since “England was too pure an air for slaves to breathe in.”<sup>25</sup> The decision did not list the race of the slave, but it was likely that the slave entering England from Russia at that time was in fact white. The *Cartwright* principle was at the center of much later debate and legal rationale.

The first case in which an English court faced the legal quagmire of black slavery was *Butts v. Penny* (1677).<sup>26</sup> This involved a suit brought in court for action of *trover*<sup>27</sup> court for the value of ten Negroes taken by the defendant. The issue before the court was whether or not and under what conditions blacks constituted personal property to the extent an action in *trover* would stand.

The court ruled in favor of Butts under the provision that since merchants purchased and sold blacks as merchandise, and since they were infidels as well, they constituted property so therefore *trover* was sufficient. This ruling in effect sanctioned black slavery under English law and never mentioned the earlier *Cartwright* case, which had placed slavery as a practice against the principles of English law and society. *Butts v. Penny* (1677) was the first time the ancient English

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<sup>25</sup>A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 321-322.

<sup>26</sup> 2 Lev. 201, 83 Eng. Rep. 518 (K.B. 1677), James Oldham, “New Light on Mansfield and Slavery,” *Journal of British Studies* 27 (January, 1988): 48. Edward Fiddes, “Lord Mansfield and the Somerset Case,” *Law Quarterly Review* 50 (1934): 501. Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*, 321-322. William M. Wiecek, “Somerset: Lord Mansfield and the Legitimacy of Slavery in the Anglo-American World,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 87 (1974): 89-90.

<sup>27</sup>Henry Campbell Black and Joseph R. Nolan, *Black’s Law Dictionary: Definitions of the Terms and Phrases of American and English Jurisprudence, Ancient and Modern* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1990), 1508. A type of common law action used generally to recover the value of personal property wrongfully converted by another. It allowed the treatment of a slave as chattel: a thing so unfree that is available for sale.

system of bondage, called *villinage*<sup>28</sup>, was considered a relevant precedent for the enslavement of blacks.

Meanwhile in the British North American colonies racial slavery was becoming entrenched by judicial sanction and statutory regulation. By 1677, the colony of Virginia had given judicial and statutory recognition to racial slavery. Three of Hugh Gwyn's servants appeared before a colonial court, two of whom were white laborers, one a Scot and the other a Dutchman. The third was a Negro named John Punch. All three workers stood trial for running away to Maryland. The two white laborers received thirty lashes, and four years extra service. The third man, John Punch, received thirty lashes but also had to "serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere." Punch lost his freedom for life, unlike the two white laborers.<sup>29</sup>

The recognition of the legality of property interests in blacks who were not Christians was the foundation of two cases, *Noel v. Robinson* (1687) and *Gelly v. Cleve* (1694).<sup>30</sup> Both cases were decisions of courts in Great Britain that followed similar legal reasoning of *Butts v. Penny*. In *Noel v. Robinson* (1687), the court

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<sup>28</sup>Wiecek, "Somerset: Lord Mansfield," 90-92, Emory Washburn, "Somerset's Case, and the Extinction of Villenage and Slavery," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 7 (1864): 308-312. The feudal villeinage labor system bound the worker to the master's estate in a status comparable to that of a serf. A villein was a person attached to a manor, akin to a slave, who performed the base and servile work in the manor for the lord and was the lord's property. A villein was incapable of owning property. The master possessed a limited physical dominion over the villein and his direct descendants through the male. There were two types of villein, *villein in gross* and *villein regardant*. *Villein in gross* was annexed to the person of the lord and could be transferred by deed from one owner to another. A *villein regardant*, on the other hand, was annexed to the manor of the lord and was a serf. The system of villenage, was in decline around the time of the Norman conquest of England in 1066. It was extinct by the end of Elizabeth I's reign.

<sup>29</sup>T.H. Breen and Stephen Innes, "Myne Owne Ground," *Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore 1640-1676*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 28.

<sup>30</sup>Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*, 324. Wiecek, "Somerset: Lord Mansfield," 89.

validated a slave owner's property interest in black slaves by holding that Sir Martin Noel's devise of moiety (one of two equal portions) of his West Indian plantation, including slaves, was a valid disposition of property. The verdict in *Gelly v. Cleve* (1694) upheld an Englishman's claim to a property interest in black slaves because they were heathens and the principle that any court would accept their status because they were not Christians.

The notion that Englishmen had a right to own black slaves who were heathens arose again in the case of *Chamberlain v. Harvey* (1696).<sup>31</sup> Chamberlain, the plaintiff, brought suit in trespass<sup>32</sup> against the defendant Harvey for detaining a black, allegedly owned by Chamberlain. Chamberlain's father, a planter in Barbados who had originally owned the slave, died leaving the black to Chamberlain's mother. The widow remarried and moved to England, taking the slave with her. While in England, the slave received a baptism without the plaintiff's permission. When Chamberlain's mother died, her second husband freed the black slave from his service. The slave hired himself out to several masters, and when the suit entered trial, he was working for the defendant at a wage of six pounds a year.

The court ruled in favor of Harvey but neglected to address the two factors: the black's migration to England and his baptism conferring freedom. The ruling resulted in a compromise that held that a slave's condition did not equal the legal status of moveable personal or chattel property, and therefore an ordinary action in

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<sup>31</sup>Oldham, "New Light on Slavery," 48. Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*, 324-325. Wiecek, "Somerset: Lord Mansfield," 90-92.

<sup>32</sup>*Trespass per quod servitium amisit*, an old declaration claiming loss of the services of a servant. It would liken the slave to a bound or apprenticed laborer, a human being whose freedom was restricted but not annihilated.

trespass for damages was not appropriate in this case. The court refused to base the slave's status in England on Barbados law but did not declare the slave emancipated either.

The legal definition of slavery shifted in the early eighteenth century and moved toward a position of limiting its growth in Britain. The case of *Smith v. Brown and Cooper* (1701) involved the plaintiff Smith who had sold a slave to the firm of Brown and Cooper in the Parish of the Blessed Mary of the Arches in the Ward of the Cheap. When the firm decided not to pay for the slave, Smith sued. The court in *Smith v. Brown and Cooper* (1701) ruled that a plaintiff could not sue in *assumpsit* (an action for the recovery of damages for the nonperformance of contract) for the purchase price of a slave. Chief Justice Holt informed Smith that his argument had no merit because he should have pleaded that the sale occurred in Virginia where slavery received sanction by royal law. Holt avoided comment on the fact that sale of slaves did occur in England. It was conceivably an attempt by Holt to keep colonial law and English law separated. The case received great attention due to statements from the bench from Chief Justice Holt and Justice Powell. In *Browne and Cooper*, Holt also famously stated that "as soon as a negro comes into England, he becomes free: one may be a villein in England, but not a slave," and his colleague on the bench Justice Powell stated, "the law took no notice of a Negro."<sup>33</sup> Both statements seemed at once to support the contention that English law did not recognize slavery based on race alone. Yet, closer reading reveals that Holt meant that a slave entering England

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<sup>33</sup>Wiecek, "Somerset: Lord Mansfield," 92-93.

could not be treated as a piece of chattel and destroyed with impunity, but in reality was akin to a villain who possessed limited rights despite their servile status and property status.

A later case, *Smith v. Gould* (1706), centered on the plaintiff Smith suing Gould for damages for not turning over a singing African slave after purchase. Gould cited precedent from *Butts v Penny* and *Chamberlain v. Harvey*. The defendant's argument against Smith's request for relief was essentially that made in *Chamberlain*; namely, that *trover* was not an appropriate pleading to recover a slave because "the owner had not an absolute property in him; he could not kill him as he could an ox. . . . Men may be the owners and therefore cannot be the subject of property." The court further ruled, "this action does not lie for a Negro, no more than for any other man; for the common law takes no notice of Negroes being different from other men." The court also ruled that there is no such thing as a slave by law of England and disallowed the opinion in the case of *Butts v. Penny* (1677).<sup>34</sup> Despite these grand statements, the rulings of Chief Justice Holt and his colleagues created more ambivalence with their allowance of trespass *quare captivum suum cepit* (the plaintiff might give in evidence that the party was his negro) and he bought him. These actions were favorable to slave owners and permitted slave transactions. These different legal cases did not end the legal debate over slavery in England, but their very arguments created serious doubts about the strength of property in slaves.

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<sup>34</sup>Oldham, "New Light on Slavery," 48. Wiecek, "Somerset: Lord Mansfield," 93.

These rulings fashioned more contradictions in the legality of black slavery in England. The uncertainty over the status of blacks brought to England disturbed West Indian plantation owners. Attorney General Philip Yorke and Solicitor General Charles Talbot, who were law officers of the Crown, responded to these concerns. At a special dinner arranged in London at Lincoln's Inn Hall, a delegation of merchants and planters invited the distinguished jurists to express informally their sentiments after dinner. Their sentiments became the Yorke-Talbot opinion of 1729 that answered planters' questions. They felt their rights as owners were in dispute in England. Their concerns focused on the issue of freedom for slaves when arriving in London, and they wondered if baptism brought freedom. In light of these concerns, Yorke and Talbot postulated that entry into the British Isles did not constitute freedom for slaves, baptism did not bestow freedom, and the master could compel the slave to return to the plantation. Both men noted that a slave was property. This opinion delivered after a dinner conversation lacked the force of a judicial credence. Yet, the judicial authority of its authors gave this opinion the legal merit to uphold the enslaved status of blacks until the *Somerset* decision of 1772.<sup>35</sup>

Lord Chancellor Hardwicke (formerly Philip Yorke) defended his opinion twenty years later when he held the esteemed position that placed him in charge of the laws of England. The Lord Chancellor sought to defend the Yorke-Talbot opinion in the case of *Pearne v. Lisle* (1749). He took this opportunity to recognize officially in the court of law his opinion of twenty years earlier. In *Pearne*, the plaintiff had

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<sup>35</sup>Oldham, "New Light on Slavery," 49. Wiecek, "Somerset: Lord Mansfield," 93-94.

allowed the defendant Lisle to hire fourteen black slaves in Antigua at a yearly rate of 100 pounds. The plaintiff claimed that the defendant had refused to pay for the slaves and had refused to return them. Lord Hardwicke first ruled that the plaintiff would be required to pursue his claim in the colonial court in Antigua.<sup>36</sup>

Lord Hardwicke was eager to imprint in a judicial decree on what he had expressed unofficially in 1729. First, he contended that a Negro slave was chattel and thus recoverable by a plaintiff suing for damages. He stated that no legal differences existed between enforcing service contracts of English servants or *villeins* and black slaves. Hardwicke attacked Lord Holt's holding in *Smith v. Gould* (1706) as turning on a mere procedural mistake by the plaintiff. He also criticized Lord Holt's notion that the act of setting foot in England established a slave's freedom because it could not explain why a slave would not receive emancipation upon landing in British-controlled Jamaica, whose slavery practices were presumably unchallengeable. For Hardwicke slavery was legal in Great Britain and the colonies with each following the same legal rule regarding slaves. Finally, Hardwicke reaffirmed his earlier opinion that baptism of a slave did not lead to emancipation. Popular mythology however remained wedded to the idea that baptism conferred freedom to blacks.<sup>37</sup>

The legal maze grew thicker later in the eighteenth century in a ruling by Lord Chancellor Henly. He acknowledged a former slave's claim to freedom in *Shanley v. Harvey* (1762). Joseph Harvey entered England as a child, in 1750. Margaret

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<sup>36</sup>Oldham, "New Light on Slavery," 49. Wiecek, "Somerset: Lord Mansfield," 94. Fiddes, "Lord Mansfield," 502. Drescher, "Manumission in a Society," 90.

<sup>37</sup>Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), 114-115.

Hamilton, the niece of Edward Shanley baptized him and changed his name. As she was dying, she left a dowry to Harvey. The dowry was worth £700 or £800. Plaintiff Shanley tried to claim Harvey as his property, and Harvey resisted and claimed he was free. Lord Chancellor Henley ruled that Harvey was a freeman and enjoyed all the rights of a freeman. Henley stated “as soon as a man sets foot on English ground he is free: a Negro may maintain an action against his master for ill usage, and may have a writ of Habeas Corpus if restrained of his liberty.”<sup>38</sup> This law existed to prevent illegal imprisonment of a person without legal action. This case was wide ranging in its opinion but made little impression on public opinion and held no great practical effect in England. Not only did the trafficking of slaves continue, but blacks also had to deal with the practice of kidnapping for sale abroad.

At the time of *Shanley v. Harvey* (1762), anti-slavery forces were gathering momentum. The number of black slaves brought to England by wealthy planters was increasing. There was sentiment that the environment of English free people was a bad influence that aroused blacks to be discontent with their lot. Blacks frequently ran away from their masters, who could not use the whip as punishment because it represented a repressive deterrent that buttressed the system of slavery in America. The one weapon available to masters in London was to recapture runaways and ship them back to the plantations.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 484. Shyllon, *Black Slaves*, 24-39, Wiecek. “Somerset: Lord Mansfield,” 94-95. Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*, 328-329.

<sup>39</sup>Edward Fiddes, “Lord Mansfield,” 502.



On the face of it, the chattel status of black slaves was at variance with the spirit and even the letter of English law. Legal arguments about chattel slavery called for a choice between two hallowed legal principles: property rights and personal liberties. There was a need for a judicial defense of slave owners' property rights as well as the slave's freedom.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the ambiguity in British law regarding the status of black slaves, slavery in England did not compare in any form to the sheer size and practice of slavery in the Caribbean and the Americas. In England, slavery was not a labor extraction mechanism as it was in the New World. The peculiar American brand of slavery did not exist in England. Instead, in England slavery was clearly an alien institution, a mutation of colonial bondage, which was kept uneasily afloat by certain English traditions about property that were ill-designed to cope with the concept of property in human beings. Yet, slavery and black servitude and labor in Britain, were suitable institutions, susceptible to change whereby they were able to develop a deceptive chameleonic appearance that in all manner represented slavery, which contributed to black exploitation.

Among some whites, there was a growing concern about the number of blacks, which became a matter of debate during the middle and late eighteenth century. Blacks were becoming numerous throughout the teeming streets of London. In fact, London as the capital was witness to the greatest concentration of blacks in

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<sup>40</sup>Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom*, 17.

England; among them were free blacks, black runaways, domestic servants, prostitutes, musicians, apprentices, and sailors.

Black immigrants in London were a class apart. Their position was friendless and anomalous, in an age of minute social distinctions. However, as their numbers appeared to increase throughout the century, the black presence became a greater concern for some in Great Britain. The *Gentleman's Magazine* pointed out: "The practice of importing Negro servants into these Kingdoms is said to be already a grievance that requires a remedy, and yet it is every day encouraged."<sup>41</sup> One writer to the *London Chronicle* expressed a desire to tax black servants "who of late years are become too abundant in this kingdom and obstruct a more eligible population."<sup>42</sup> That the black population numbers would grow in a city of like London in the eighteenth century is understandable. Even more alarming was the large number of blacks living in the capital. This was perfectly logical because London was the greatest entry for exotic goods, people and commodities; it was the center of a social milieu that viewed the employment of black servants as fashionable.

British officials had no idea how many blacks were in the country. Both lobbyists for slavery and opponents of the institution had political reasons for inflating or deflating the size of the black population. In the 1760s some observers began to produce an estimate of the number of blacks in the country. Those entities included both the *Gentleman's Magazine* and *London Chronicle*. The mode of calculation that produced this assessment was not part of the newspaper accounts.

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<sup>41</sup>*Gentleman's Magazine*, 34 (1764): 493

<sup>42</sup>*London Chronicle*, 1765, 387.

However, the complete absence of statistics makes it necessary to fall back on the conjecture of contemporaries for the best possible estimate on the number of blacks in London.

In 1764, the *Gentleman's Magazine* stated that the black population of London alone was nearly 20,000.<sup>43</sup> The *London Chronicle* reported claims of both male and female blacks of about 30,000.<sup>44</sup> These estimates appear high, because during the 1772 *Somerset* deliberation Lord Mansfield's court estimated the black population between 12,000 and 15,000.<sup>45</sup> If the 1772 population estimations were correct then, there was a marked decline in the city's black population from 1764 to 1772. This is questionable in a city's whose population doubled during the century. Nevertheless, without a true census or an accurate measurement the estimation of 14,000 at the time of the *Somerset* decision has remained the accepted number. There is no way to determine what occupations or status the entire population of 14,000 blacks held. However, a great proportion of those blacks were indeed runaways fleeing their unpaid servitude. During the eighteenth century hunger, danger, and the constant struggle for survival were hallmarks of the city of London. Despite this meager existence, blacks continued to run away and take their chances with London's limited choices rather than continue their lives as domestic servants.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>*Gentleman's Magazine*, 34 (1764): 493.

<sup>44</sup>*London Chronicle*, 1765, 387.

<sup>45</sup>William Cotter, "The *Somerset* Case and the Abolition of Slavery," *History* 79 (1994): 31-56. George, *London Life*, 10. Fryer, *Staying Power*, 68.

<sup>46</sup>Mary Dorothy George, *London Life in the XVIIIth Century*, 171. Seymour Drescher, "Manumission in a Society without Slave Law: Eighteenth Century England," *Slavery & Abolition* 10 (December 1989): 191.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century abolitionist Granville Sharp led the attack against the institution of slavery. Sharp was the grandson of the Archbishop of York and son of the Archdeacon of Northumberland. His wealthy older brothers were leading philanthropists. Granville Sharp, who came from a respected family, was once an apprentice to a linen draper and held a minor post as a clerk in the government's Ordinance Office.<sup>47</sup>

Sharp became aware of the plight of blacks upon a visit to his brother, William Sharp, in 1765. William Sharp was a surgeon who often treated patients against smallpox, and offered free treatment to the poor. On one occasion, when Granville Sharp was leaving his brother's office, he encountered Jonathan Strong, a seventeen-year-old black slave among the poor patients waiting to receive treatment at the door. Jonathan Strong was barely able to walk, and he was fever-ridden. In addition, he was almost blind due to the beating he had received from his master David Lisle, who had brought Jonathan Strong to London from Barbados in 1765. Lisle had thrown the slave out into the streets to die.<sup>48</sup> Granville Sharp and his brother became dismayed at the act of cruelty shown to the black slave. They arranged for his admission to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and after a four-month stay Strong was discharged. The brothers maintained his upkeep until he was well enough to work. They later found him employment as an errand boy with a Mr. Brown, an apothecary.

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<sup>47</sup>E.C.P. Lascelles, *Granville Sharp and the Freedom of Slaves in England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 1-8.

<sup>48</sup>Lascelles, *Granville Sharp*, 16-25. James Oldham, *The Mansfield Manuscripts and the Growth of English Law in the Eighteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1224-1225.

Granville Sharp treated the Strong case as an act of charity and eventually moved on to other things. Two years later Lisle noticed Strong in the streets of London and attempted to capture him. Lisle claimed Strong as his property, sold him to a Jamaican planter James Kerr, whereby Strong was then bound for shipment to the West Indies. Strong appealed to Granville Sharp, who intervened to help him again. Sharp was not a trained lawyer; he was self-taught. Nonetheless, his acumen was exemplary; James Somerset's lawyers in the Somerset trial would use his legal briefs later. Sharp got a hearing in the court of the Lord Mayor, who eventually ruled that because Jonathan Strong had not stolen anything and since he was not guilty of any offense, he was at liberty to go free.<sup>49</sup>

David Lisle, brought suit in court claiming £200 in damages against Granville Sharp for depriving him of his property. Sharp protested the right of a master to claim blacks as property. After this encounter with Jonathan Strong and to win his case against David Lisle, Sharp became obsessed with proving slavery illegal in England and arguing that the York-Talbot opinion was not the law of English custom. He also advocated that blacks were the King's subjects and therefore entitled to protection of the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679. Sharp's study of the law and subsequent legal findings halted Lisle from pursuing the legal matter, and the case soon died out as the antagonists let the legal wrangling end.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 98-99. Edward Scobie, *Black Britannia: A History of Blacks in Britain* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1972), 51-53. Lascelles, *Granville Sharp*, 16-25.

<sup>50</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 116-117.

Granville Sharp, whose steadfast purpose was to prove in court that slavery had no justification morally or legally, published a pamphlet entitled *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery; or of Admitting the Least Claim of Private Property in the Persons of Men, in England* in 1769. He cited both legal precedents and biblical scripture to refute any idea of slavery being legal in Great Britain. For Sharp, true justice held no respect of persons, order, parentage, nor could it ever deny to anyone his or her natural liberty, which he believed to be the true intention of English law.

Black female slaves suffered from the same legal puzzle as male slaves. The *Hylas Case* highlighted the plight of black women in London. In 1768 before the Court of Common Pleas, John Hylas, a black slave servant successfully sued for the return of his wife Mary who suffered re-enslavement in the West Indies. Both slaves had come to England from Barbados, and had subsequently married with the permission of their owners. John Hylas had left the service of his owners, Mr. and Mrs. Newton, but had never received legal manumission. When the Newtons later demanded his return, their counsel advised that there was no legal means in England to compel Hylas to resume his position as slave.<sup>51</sup>

In his remarks on the case, Granville Sharp argued from common law precedent on villeinage that Hylas's claim to liberty rested upon the evidence that he had lived independent of his master for more than a year. Once the Newtons had

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<sup>51</sup>Granville Sharp, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp, Esq. Composed from his own Manuscripts and Other Authentic Documents in the Possession of his Family and the African Institution*, ed. Prince Hoare (London: Henry Colburn, 1820), 47-48. Shyllon, *Black Slaves*, 40-42.

failed to provide maintenance, the owners lost the right to his service. The court subsequently established Hylas's liberty. Sharp claimed the wife's condition followed that of her husband, and thus she was free. The court found that Mary Hylas's purported owner could not claim rights of ownership over the claims of her husband, and ordered her return to England as a free woman.<sup>52</sup> In this case, the court confirmed a slave's right to quit the service of an indifferent or negligent master and ruled that a woman's subservience to her husband took precedence over her obedience to her master. The *Hylas Case* was not an isolated incident. Granville Sharp cited the example of Elizabeth Brooks, and at least two and perhaps three other women taken from their husbands and sold to the West Indies.<sup>53</sup> The status of the husband represented the status of the wife according to Granville Sharp in his recollections of the case.

A new case presented itself in 1770. Sharp's reputation as a protector of runaway slaves gained great notoriety as he was constantly relied upon to defend London blacks threatened with transportation to the colonies throughout the late 1760's and early 1770's. In 1770, he aided a runaway slave named Thomas Lewis. John Malony and Aaron Armstrong, two watermen, kidnapped Lewis and dragged him to a boat on the Thames, secured him with a cord and gagged him with a stick. They rowed him to a ship bound for Jamaica, where upon arrival his master had arranged his sale. The kidnappers worked for Robert Stayplton, who claimed

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<sup>52</sup>Sharp, *Memoirs*, appendix 11, iv-vii.

<sup>53</sup>Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the Laws of God Compared With the Unbounded Claims of the African Traders and British American Slaveholders*. (London: B. White and E. and C. Dilly, 1776), 34.

Thomas Lewis was his slave and property. The servants of a Mrs. Bank heard Thomas Lewis's cries for help during his capture. They alerted her and she appealed to Granville Sharp to help the runaway Thomas Lewis. Sharp obtained a writ of Habeas Corpus to halt the deportation. This dispute became the case of *Lewis v. Stayplton* (1771) with Chief Justice Lord Mansfield presiding over the trial.

William Murray, first Earl of Mansfield, the fourth son and eleventh child of a Scottish peer, the 5<sup>th</sup> Viscount Stormont, was born at Perthshire, on 22 March 1705. Educated in England, Murray's titles included two terms as Speaker of the House of Lords, Solicitor General, former Attorney General, Chancellor of the Exchequer, cabinet minister, Whig party leader both in the House of Commons, and then in the House of Lords and finally to the Chief Justice in 1756. He held the unofficial title, "father of English commercial law."<sup>54</sup>

Mansfield did not address the question whether or not slavery was illegal in England. He limited the case to whether or not the claim of property by Stayplton was valid.<sup>55</sup> Thomas Lewis had served several masters and lived in New York, Boston, Santa Cruz, and Havana. He claimed he was free and had received wages, and, further if this was true he could claim freedom, because slaves did not receive wages. He had served Stayplton twice in England and upon each escape was captured again by his master. During the argument of the case, Lord Mansfield reportedly asked counsel for Stayplton whether he had any "any deduction of

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<sup>54</sup> Shyllon, *Black People*, 48-49.

<sup>55</sup> James Oldham, "New Light on Mansfield and Slavery," *Journal of British Studies* 27 (Jan: 1988): 49-52. Scobie, *Blacks in Britain*, 52-59. Gerzina, *Black London*, 105-115.



property,” to which counsel responded that he could prove Lewis to have been the servant of the defendant. Mansfield then commented about having granted several writs of habeas corpus to deliver slaves to their masters, but he observed “whether they have this kind of property or not, in England, has never been solemnly determined.”<sup>56</sup> These writs of habeas corpus served to remedy unlawful restraints of liberty. Mansfield’s commentary during the trial about granting several writs for masters to obtain their slaves was part of the trial proceedings. There is no factual evidence discovered to date, which supports his statement of several during trial for masters recovering slaves.

After the testimony was concluded, Dunning, counsel for Lewis, told the jury that he would not bother them with notions of property since, “I don’t myself see what evidence there is on which the question of property can be construed.” Lord Mansfield responded, “Yes, there is evidence. I shall certainly leave it to the Jury to find whether he was the defendant’s property or not.”<sup>57</sup> He instructed the jury to bring in a special verdict if they thought property ownership was clear, otherwise, to bring a general verdict of guilty. He instructed the jury to rule on whether or not Lewis was legally Stapylton’s property. The jury verdict was no property, and Mansfield set Thomas Lewis free.<sup>58</sup> There was no property in Lewis because Mansfield held that years earlier when the Spanish privateer ship had captured the ship Lewis was aboard. Thus Lewis ceased to be the property of Stapylton. A break

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<sup>56</sup>Sharp, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp*, 59.

<sup>57</sup>Sharp, *Memoirs*, 59-60.

<sup>58</sup>Oldham, *The Mansfield Manuscripts*, 1225-1228. Gerzina, *Black London*, 105-115.

in the chain of ownership meant that no claim of property was valid in this case.<sup>59</sup>

This ruling was very narrow and allowed Mansfield to avoid the larger issue of slavery in England. During the Thomas Lewis trial, Mansfield also stated to Lewis' counsel:

You will see more in this question than you see at present. It is no matter mooting it now; but if you look into it, there is more than by accident you are acquainted with. There are a great many opinions given upon it; I am aware of many of them: but perhaps it is much better that it should never be discussed or settled. I don't know what the consequences may be, if the Masters were to lose their property by accidentally bringing their slaves to England. I hope it never will be finally discussed; for I would have all Masters think them free, and all Negroes think they were not, because then they would both behave better.<sup>60</sup>

These types of sentiments from Mansfield incensed Granville Sharp, who felt Stapylton was not punished appropriately. According to Granville Sharp, Mansfield deliberately centered the case on the question of property to avoid the recognition of English slavery in the trial.

The question of Lewis's freedom was a central thrust at the trial. It appears that his status as shown in newspaper advertisements underwent several degrees of change. Newspaper advertisements seeking the return of Thomas Lewis support some of the information presented during the trial. Thomas Lewis was the subject of four advertisements in *The Daily Advertiser* during 1769 and 1770.

The first advertisement listed him as a runaway from the "George" in Paradise-Row. The "George" was likely a ship or a tavern, and the advertisement

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<sup>59</sup>Oldham, *The Mansfield Manuscripts*, 1225-1226.

<sup>60</sup>Granville Sharp, *Memoirs*, 60-61.

noted a Negro boy named Augustine, who also had the surname Thomas Lewis. His physical condition as described in the advertisements alludes to some distressing deformities. Lewis's physical description in the advertisements described him as having both legs remarkably crooked, a sore on one of his ankles, and his right wrist a little distorted. He wore a blue or green cloth coat. The advertisement offered a reward to whomever apprehended him or gave information to the master of the George.<sup>61</sup> The second advertisement listed his status as a servant for life; the reward for his return was a half a guinea. Robert Stayplton offered in the advertisement that he would pay all charges and claimed he knew Lewis's whereabouts. He alleged that someone was harboring Lewis in a court in Piccadilly.<sup>62</sup>

A third advertisement listed Thomas Lewis as a runaway from the "Castle" in Jews-Row, Chelsea, and described him wearing a different set of clothes. The "Castle" was most likely a ship or a tavern where he served. His clothing description upon escape was a crimson colored shag waistcoat, and a pair of deerskin breeches, and he allegedly had a fiddle with him. This third advertisement also means that he had escaped again since the advertisement noted he escaped from a different tavern or shop. The reward for his return was a half a guinea and there was a warning that "whoever entertains him shall be sued." His status was an indentured servant for life according to the information listed in the advertisement.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 3 January 1769.

<sup>62</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 7 February 1769.

<sup>63</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 4 July 1769.

The fourth advertisement listed him as a Negro slave runaway from the ship *Snow Hopewell* at Irongate. His physical appearance had not changed, but he now wore a frize coat or black thick-set cloth coat, check shirt, breeches, or trousers. The question of who owned Lewis changed in this advertisement. In earlier advertisements he was the property of Robert Stayplton of Chelsea, but now he belonged to the subscriber of the advertisement, a man named James Smith. This was also the first time that an advertisement identified Lewis as someone's property. James Smith, the new owner, offered a reward amount of one guinea. The advertisement requested that whoever secured him return him to the bar of the New York Coffee-House, Sweeting's Alley, or to the Castle in Chelsea. The advertisement claimed that Thomas Lewis, or Augustine, had been advertised in the *Daily Advertiser* three times previously and his chief area of hiding was in and around Piccadilly.<sup>64</sup>

These four advertisements raise questions about facts of the case and shed light on the ambiguous nature of status for blacks in late eighteenth-century London. It would appear that Thomas Lewis escaped from three ships while in service to Robert Stayplton and one ship while serving James Smith. In each instance, there may have been an attempt to send Lewis out of the country before the beginning of the trial for his freedom. The advertisements indicate that he was considered a servant for life. There is indication that the condition of servitude was closely akin to slavery in London. Stayplton claimed that Thomas Lewis was his property and a

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<sup>64</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 12 March 1770.

servant for life, which clearly indicated that in his mind that there existed no definite end to the service of Lewis. If all masters could claim property in their black servants and a right to their service for life, then domestic servitude was closely associated with slavery. Thomas Lewis actively resisted his servile status by running away and was an active participant in his own self-emancipation.

Blacks, along with other members of eighteenth-century English society, closely followed the various legal cases concerning the statutes of slavery in England. The *Somerset Case* of 1772 once again centered on the issue of forcing a runaway slave from the realm of England; the intent was to sell the runaway upon return to the sugar colonies. This trial centered on the escaped slave James Somerset, who was born in Africa, shipped to Virginia onboard a slave ship, and purchased there by Charles Stewart in 1749. Stewart was slaveholder in Virginia and a British receiver of customs, who moved to Massachusetts to serve his duty. In 1769, Stewart's obligations required him to return to London. James Somerset, his slave who accompanied him, ran away in 1771 and was recaptured by Stewart in the same year. Stewart transferred the slave to Captain Knowles of the ship *Ann and Mary*, bound for Jamaica. Upon arrival in Jamaica, Stewart planned to sell Somerset. However, thanks to the intervention Granville Sharp, Captain Knowles had a writ of Habeas Corpus issued against him by three witnesses and sanctioned by Chief Justice Lord

Mansfield. The writ forced Knowles to deliver James Somerset to court and prove why his detention was legal.<sup>65</sup>

Chief Justice Lord Mansfield repetitively delayed the trial. The writ for Somerset's return was December 1771 and the trial did not take place until June 1772. In the interim period, he ordered five separate hearings. He consistently urged Charles Stewart to dissolve this matter by simply manumitting Somerset, but Stewart refused, and the last hearing found Mansfield offering remarks that clearly show his uneasiness and some frustration with the proceedings. At the third hearing on 14 May 1772, Mansfield again urged the parties to settle the case.

Mansfield made clear at this hearing that in previous cases concerning slave transport to Jamaica the parties agreed amongst themselves to handle those situations. He asserted at this hearing both parties do the same again. If they continued to insist in this matter then the court must give its opinion. At the heart of the issue only the law, not compassion or inconvenience would hold sway in court. He attested to the fact that sale of a slave was legal in England and the law would protect that price of agreement. Yet, he acknowledged that this instance was different because James Somerset was the object of enquiry. Mansfield's argument here differentiates between the sale of a slave and the capture and enforced removal of a slave from England as two different strands of law. Mansfield offered the following qualifiers in

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<sup>65</sup>William Cotter, "The Somerset Case and the Abolition of Slavery," *History* 79 (1994): 40. James Oldham, *The Mansfield Manuscript and the Growth of English Law in the Eighteenth Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1221-1243.

his statement about the case and a warning of the consequences that could follow the court's decision. The question now before the court was:

Whether any dominion, authority or coercion can be exercised in this country, on a slave according to the American laws? The difficulty of adopting the relation, without adopting it in all its consequences, is indeed extreme; and yet, many of those consequences are absolutely contrary to the municipal law of England. We [judges] have no authority to regulate the conditions in which law shall operate. On the other hand, should we think the coercive power cannot be exercised: it is now about 50 years since the opinion given by two of the greatest men of their own or any times, (since which no contract has been brought to trial, between the masters and slaves;) the service performed by the slaves without wages, is a clear indication they did not think themselves free by coming hither. The setting 14,000 or 15,000 men at once loose by a solemn opinion [due to the "class action" aspect], is very disagreeable in the effects it threatens. There is a case in Hobart, (*Coventry and Woodfall*,) where a man had contracted to go as a mariner: but the now case will not come within that decision. Mr. Stewart advances no claims on contract; he rests his whole demand on a right to the negro as slave, and mentions the purpose of detainure to be the sending of him over to be sold in Jamaica. If the parties will have judgment, '*fiat justitia, ruat cælum*;' let justice be done whatever the consequence. 50£ a head may not be a high price; then a loss follows to the [14 - 15,000] proprietors of above 700,000£ sterling. How would the law stand with respect to their settlement; their wages? How many actions for any slight coercion by the master? We cannot in any of these points direct the law; the law must rule us. In these particulars, it may be matter of weighty consideration, what provisions are made or set by law. Mr. Stewart may end the question, by discharging or giving freedom to the slave.<sup>66</sup>

As a result, this celebrated case, which dominated newspapers with letters and articles, in essence pitted abolitionist Granville Sharp against West Indian planters, with both sides wanting a firm decision on the legality of slavery in England. James Somerset's lawyers, Serjeants William Davy and John Glynn, and barristers James Mansfield and Francis Hargrave worked without compensation because they believed

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<sup>66</sup>Somerset v Stewart, Lofft 1; 20 Howell's State Trials 1, 79-82; 98 Eng Rep 509. (King's Bench, June 1772), 93; accessed 28 February 2002.  
<http://downloads.members.tripod.com/medicolegal/somersetvstewart.htm>;

their cause was right.<sup>67</sup> The side representing Charles Stewart included the West Indian planter interest, barristers John Dunning and William Wallace. Dunning and Stewart came to recognize their subordinate role in this drama relative to the West India interests. Stewart wrote in 1772 that “the West India planters and merchants have taken [the case] off my hands; and I shall be entirely directed by them in the further defence of [the case].”<sup>68</sup>

After hearing from both sides during the course of the trial, Chief Justice Mansfield ruled on June 22, 1772, and his decision thus read:

The only question before us is, whether the cause of return is sufficient. If it is not, he must be discharged. Accordingly, the return states, that the slave departed and refused to serve; whereupon he was kept, to be sold abroad. So high an act of dominion must be recognized by the law of the country where it is used. The power of a master over his slave has been exceedingly different, in different countries. The state of slavery is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political, but only by positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasion, and time itself from whence it was created, is erased from memory. It is so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law. Whatever inconveniences, therefore, may follow from the decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore the black must be discharged.<sup>69</sup>

The decision made it illegal for masters to recapture and force their slaves to leave England. Mansfield stated slavery could only exist if a statute or written law sanctioned it. Consequently, Mansfield’s statement suggested that slavery had never existed in England, because no such law had ever been enacted. All previous court decisions governing the status of African slaves were common law rulings and

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<sup>67</sup>Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, 480-482. Oldham, *Mansfield Manuscripts*, 1221-1224. Cotter, “The Somerset Case,” 34-35.

<sup>68</sup>Washburn, “Somerset’s Case”, *Proceedings of Massachusetts Historical Society*, 323-324.

<sup>69</sup>*Somerset v Stewart*, Lofft 1; 20 Howell’s State Trials 1, 79-82; 98 Eng Rep 509, 95.



opinions concerning property and commerce. This case was before the King's Bench, the highest court in England. The ruling suffered many interpretations. However, Mansfield had only narrowly ruled that English law did not allow this case and discharged James Somerset. All over England and America, slaves, abolitionists, lawyers, and judges cited the *Somerset* case as the end of slavery in the British Isles. In actuality, the case became and remains mired in the legal misunderstanding that it emancipated all blacks in England.

Lord Mansfield rejected the notion that he had freed all slaves but he could not deter the popular notion of liberty and the symbolic meaning of his ruling.<sup>70</sup> Mansfield wrestled with the implications of the slave system and the adherence to legal principles of Great Britain. He was ambivalent about overturning precedent and allowing colonial law to supplant English law. His attempts to settle the case before trial point to his reticence about the case. Mansfield's statements in various sources years after the case solidify his admonishment that he did not end slavery in England.<sup>71</sup> Both sides of the argument and the larger public read the case in different ways. Granville Sharp and, it appears, some blacks at the trial saw victory, and at least some West Indian planters at least some thought Mansfield had ended slavery. The larger public through newspapers and commentators conflated commentary from the trial arguments to mean more than Mansfield's judgment at the end of the trial. Mansfield recommended to the merchants that if this question was so great a

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<sup>70</sup>Peter O. Hutchinson, ed., *The Diary and Letters of Thomas Hutchinson* (London: Sampson Low, 1883), II, 277 (entry 29 Aug 1779).

<sup>71</sup>

commercial concern that they apply to Parliament, which in his estimation represented the only method to settle this point in the future.

Indeed Mansfield owned a slave himself, his nephew Sir John Lindsay's mulatto slave child, Dido. Dido's mother had been a slave, seized on board a captured Spanish vessel by Lindsay's ship. Lindsay left his child to the care of Lord Mansfield. She served as a domestic in the Mansfield household, and he was known to be fond of her. In his will of 1782, he specifically bequeathed Dido her freedom, and at his death, he left her £500 and an annuity of £100. His request in his will to confer Dido's freedom offers a complicated composite of the chief legal person in England who was also complicit in the denial of liberty to blacks in England. In some respects, his actions place him in the same company as David Lisle, owner of Jonathan Strong, Robert Stapylton, owner of Thomas Lewis, and Charles Stewart, owner of James Somerset. Dido's status and life in the household most likely produced certain ambivalence in the mind of Mansfield about the legal status of blacks in English society.<sup>72</sup>

Estwick began his book with the declaration:

The cause of Somerset a Negroe, lately adjudged upon in the Court of King's Bench, was so far from giving any disgust to the West Indian Planters residing in this Kingdom, that they were all along desirous of having it brought to a solemn issue; in order that a question of so much importance to them, might be finally settled upon clear principles of law.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1994), 11-13.

<sup>73</sup>Long, *Candid Reflections*, 1.

Black people followed the case, sat in the courtroom, and waited outside the court for news of their fate. Upon the announcement of the court, decision the delegates from the black community present in court bowed to the bench and then showed their emotion by clinching hands with other blacks. Those outside cheered as the announcement reached their ears. Nearly 200 blacks held a party after the *Somerset Case* to celebrate their triumph in a Westminster tavern. The ticket price of admission was five shillings each.<sup>74</sup>

One black response to the *Somerset Case* in North America was the idea that slavery was no longer legal in England. In late 1773, Bacchus, a seventeen-year-old Virginia slave grasped enough English to learn about the Somerset decision, and he along with a companion female runaway, Amy, whose age was listed as twenty-seven years old, escaped, trying to find their way to England. They possibly imagined that if they could get to England that they could have freedom there. Bacchus' master perhaps felt the same way about English freedom as he expressed his sentiments in a newspaper advertisement. He complained about Bacchus and other black runaways in his statement "I have some Reason to believe they will endeavour to get out of the Colony, particularly to Britain, where they imagine they will be free (a Notion now too prevalent among the Negroes, greatly to the Vexation and Prejudice of their Masters)."<sup>75</sup> That news of the *Somerset Case* reached slaves, Bacchus and Amy, in piedmont Virginia, some three thousand miles away, speaks to the network of communication transmitted across the Atlantic. This momentous legal case

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<sup>74</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 125. Gerzina, *Black London*, 130.

<sup>75</sup>*Virginia Gazette*, September 30, 1774.

encouraged the resistance of black runaways on distant shore to take flight and seek their self-emancipation.<sup>76</sup>

The question of the breadth of the *Somerset* ruling was a matter of dispute reflected in the legal writings of William Blackstone. He authored the influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. He maintained associations with both Granville Sharp and Chief Justice Mansfield.<sup>77</sup> He never mentioned the Somerset case even though his editions span the period from 1765 to Blackstone's death in 1780. In the seventh edition, published in 1775 after Somerset, Blackstone states:

The spirit of liberty is so deeply implanted in our Constitution, and rooted even in our very soil, That a slave or a Negro, the moment he lands in England, falls under the protection of the laws and so far becomes a freeman though the master's right to his service may *possibly* still continue.<sup>78</sup>

The last phrase did not appear in the first edition (1765) and read "may 'probably' still continue" in the second (1766) and third editions (1768). Probably was changed to possibly in the fourth edition (1770) and remained *possibly* throughout the subsequent editions. Historian Peter Fryer believes that Blackstone made the change from *probably* too *possibly* at Lord Mansfield's suggestion.<sup>79</sup>

Blackstone's statement suggests that the *Somerset* decision did not end slavery in England.<sup>80</sup> His qualifier--"though the master's right to his service may possibly continue"--raised the question of whether a former slave might owe some period of

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<sup>76</sup>Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Low Country* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 461.

<sup>77</sup>Hoare, *Memoirs*, 40.

<sup>78</sup>Blackstone, Sir William. *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765).

<sup>79</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 121.

<sup>80</sup>Walvin, *Black and White*, 115. Shyllon, *Black Slaves*, 59-62.

indentured servitude even though he could not be held as a slave in England. After 1772, it became common for slave owners in the West Indies and the colonies to oblige slaves to sign an indenture prior to going to England.<sup>81</sup> Mansfield noted in *Somerset* that Mr. Stewart advanced no claim on contract and only upon a contract claim would the court have to face Blackstone's view that the master's right to his service may possibly continue.

In the immediate aftermath of *Somerset*, a new case testing the limits of *Somerset* decision dealt with a black servant whose master had died in 1769. The *Cay and Crichton* trial occurred in a Prerogative Court in 1773. This type of court had jurisdiction over the estates of deceased persons. Crichton, the executor of the estate had given an inventory of the deceased's goods and chattels, but he omitted the black from the property list. The omission meant the inventory was not perfect and thus legally challengeable. During the trial arguments, counsel for Crichton argued that the recent *Somerset* case had declared that blacks were free in England, and consequently they could not be the subjects of property, or represent any part of a personal estate. The counter argument was that the *Somerset* case was in 1772, but the master had died in 1769, at which time blacks were still property, and therefore the black should be part of the estate property. The presiding judge Dr. Hay ruled that this court had no right to try any question relating to freedom and slavery, but agreed that since the *Somerset* decision emanated from the court with the jurisdiction over these issues that he would affirm that the black was not property at any time in

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<sup>81</sup>Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 135. Davis, *Problem of Slavery*, p. 501.

England. This provides a clear example that some judicial officials thought Mansfield had freed all slaves in England, or at least they thought it was possible to interpret the ruling in that way.<sup>82</sup>

As the legal rulings moved forward in the courts, some in English society continued to practice schemes that contradicted all the legal rulings. West Indian planters continued to disregard the impact of the Somerset case by practicing forced repatriation. They simply ignored the Mansfield decree and continued to remove their slaves from the country by force. There are examples of kidnapping after 1772. In the first case a year after the Somerset Case, Granville Sharp in correspondence with a Reverend Robert Findlay who resided in Glasgow described the story of Elizabeth Brooks, a black woman who sought his help to gain her freedom. Sharp wrote to Findlay:

I have Original Letters by me wrote by a poor Negro woman, one Elizabeth Brooks, who after living nine or ten years with her Husband in a free state in London was found out by her Mistress (a West Indian Lady of Fortune in Cecil Street in the Strand), was torn by her from her afflicted and almost despairing Husband and secretly shipped for Antigua. This Lady also, it seems, is esteemed a mighty good sort of Woman in the Eyes of the World, but that did not prevent the ascendancy of her West Indian prejudices.<sup>83</sup>

Sharp elucidated that perhaps she thought she had a right to do what she pleased with her own property, but legally she had no right to claim such property. The Somerset Case ruling potentially stymied her outright claim of Elizabeth Brooks,

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<sup>82</sup>Granville Sharp, *The Just Limitation of Slavery in the laws of God, compared with the unbounded claims of the African Traders and British American Slaveholders* (London: B. White and E. and C. Dilly, 1776), Appendix 10, 77-78.

<sup>83</sup>Letter from Granville Sharp to Rev. Robert Findlay March 10, 1773. The Granville Sharp Papers from Gloucestershire Record Office.

so the mistress created the scheme that Brooks had carried away some cloths that belonged to the her when she absconded from service and by this machination, the former owner obtained a warrant for the arrest of Elizabeth Brooks. The scheme was to ship Brooks back to Antigua as soon as a ship was ready to sail. When the ship was ready the mistress sent a message to the Justice of the Peace that her compassion for Brooks induced her to ask the official for her release. The official complied with the request. As Brooks was returning home to her husband, “she was waylaid by order of her mistress, forced into a Post Chaise by an armed Ruffian, and hurried away to Gravesend where she was shipped for Antigua.”<sup>84</sup> Sharp remarked that Brooks was now in Antigua, but offered no other statements about her narrative. Elizabeth Brooks’s status was in doubt, but clearly she had received some sort of education, and she knew to contact Granville Sharp for aid in her plight.

The second case, in April 1774, involved John Annis. Annis was a former slave of William Kirkpatrick in St. Kitts and served as a cook on a ship in England. Kirkpatrick kidnapped Annis from his ship and placed him on board a different vessel headed for St. Kitts. Granville Sharp attempted to help him and had a *writ of habeas corpus* issued for his release, but the writ arrived too late. The ship had already sailed, and Annis returned to St. Kitts, where he was brutally tortured and died.<sup>85</sup> The third case, in 1786, also involved Granville Sharp, who this time succeeded in freeing Henry Demane from forcible removal.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Letter from Granville Sharp to Rev. Findlay.

<sup>85</sup>*London Chronicle*, 27 April 1774.

<sup>86</sup>Shyllon, *Black People*, 173; Hoare, *Memoirs*, 248.

Blacks in London faced other issues such as a lack of wages as apprentices and indentured servants. The *Somerset* decree did not clear the murkiness as to the status of blacks in London. The impact of the *Somerset* decision was evident on a court case, which appears to have concerned a white woman married to a black servant. In 1774, John Wilkes, sitting as a London magistrate, heard the case of a poor woman who was married to a black, a slave to a merchant in Lothbury. The woman testified that her husband, who was born in Guadeloupe, had been a servant for fourteen years without wages. The London magistrate, relying on the *Somerset* decision, discharged him from his master telling him that he was not a slave, according to the laws of this free country and recommended that he and his wife hire an attorney and bring an action against the master for fourteen years of back wages.<sup>87</sup>

Unlike the English courts, the Scottish courts dealt with the issue of black slavery from a broader perspective than had been the case in the *Somerset* decision. The *Knight v. Wedderburn* (1778) court case settled the legal uncertainty of black slavery in Scotland. The background of the case involved the commander of a vessel involved in the African trade. He imported a cargo of Negroes into Jamaica, sold one of them, Joseph Knight, a slave boy about twelve or thirteen years of age, to Mr. Wedderburn. Wedderburn came to Scotland and brought Joseph Knight along as his personal servant. Knight remained in his service for several years afterward and eventually married. After his marriage, he asserted his freedom, and left the service of Wedderburn. Wedderburn had him apprehended on a warrant. A ruling in the

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<sup>87</sup>Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 128. *Scots Magazine*, xxxvi (1774), 53. *Gentleman's Magazine*, xlv, January (1774), 89.



favor of Knight found that the laws of this kingdom did not recognize the state of slavery, and the laws of Jamaica concerning slaves did not extend into Scotland.<sup>88</sup>

The Knight Case condemned the slavery of blacks in much stronger language than in similar English cases. The language of Knight v. Wedderburn surely is broader than Somerset: “[Slavery] being unjust, could not be supported in this country to any extent: That, therefore, the defender had no right to the Negro’s service for any space of time, nor to send him out of the country against his consent.”<sup>89</sup>

One of the principal reasons for doubting the broad sweep of *Somerset* was comments made by Mansfield in the case of the *R. v. The Inhabitants of Thames Ditton*. The trial took place in 1785, thirteen years after *Somerset* and three years before Mansfield retired as Chief Justice. Blacks were in an insecure position due to the uncertainty of their standing under the Poor Law. The existing regulations, derived from the Elizabethan statutes, assumed that all persons had a parish of settlement, but the law made no mention of foreigners or of persons born in the colonies. Consequently, Irish and Scottish paupers without settlement could be transported back to their homelands. There existed other means to acquire a settlement, which included the occupancy of property, by holding public office, by marriage, and by service. The category of service carried with it a negative connotation because parish officials anxious to deny relief to unemployed servants

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<sup>88</sup>F.O. Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 177-183. Fryer, *Staying Power*, 126-127. Michael Craton, James Walvin, and David Wright, *Slavery, Abolition, and Emancipation: Black Slaves and the British Empire: A Thematic Documentary* (New York: Longman, 1976), 171

<sup>89</sup>Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*. (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), 18.

and apprentices were notorious for the extensive litigations. It was by service that blacks would usually acquire a settlement, which was important for establishing rights of residence as well as the right to relief in the event of unemployment after quitting their master's service.

Charlotte Howe was a slave purchased in America by Captain Howe and brought to England in 1781. In November 1781, Howe went to live in the parish of Thames Ditton and Charlotte continued to live with him there in his service until the June of 1783, when he died. Charlotte was then baptized in Thames Ditton, and lived with Captain Howe's widow who, however, soon moved to a new parish, St. Luke's in Chelsea. Charlotte continued to live with Captain Howe's widow for five or six months, when she left her service.<sup>90</sup> Under English poor law, a pauper had to qualify for relief within a particular parish, and Charlotte applied to Thames Ditton for relief. Two justices in Thames Ditton, however, ordered that she be moved to St. Luke's, in Middlesex, because she had served the last forty days in that parish. An appellate court overturned the order, holding St. Luke's responsible for Charlotte's relief, and the parish of Thames Ditton appealed that decision to Lord Mansfield who ruled:

The poor law is a subsisting positive law, enforced by statutes which began to be made about the time of Queen Elizabeth . . . The present case is very plain. For the pauper [Charlotte] to bring herself under a positive law she must answer to the description it requires. Now the statute says there must be a hiring, and here there was no hiring at all. She does not therefore come within that description.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Catterall, *Judicial Cases*, 20.

<sup>91</sup>Oldham, *Mansfield Manuscripts*, 1236.

Earlier, Mansfield had engaged in discourse with counsel for Thames Ditton and had emphasized that the Somerset case had not resolved all of the legal relationships between a master and a servant when the latter enters England. Thames Ditton counsel argued: “The Court has never decided that a negro brought to England is there under an obligation to serve.”<sup>92</sup> Mansfield interjected: “The determinations go no further than that a master cannot by force compel him to go out of the kingdom . . . . The Case of Somerset is the only one on this subject. Where slaves have been brought here, and commenced actions for their wages, I have always nonsuited the plaintiff.”<sup>93</sup> Lord Mansfield’s ruling placed slaves in a precarious position. Slaves could not use the law to appeal for wages; without a wage agreement, they could not prove a hiring, without a hiring, they could not gain a settlement, without a settlement, they had no right to parish relief. The law was very harsh for a wageless servant or slave in London. Wages not only secured money for survival, but also were a means to certify a free status and a way to acquire rights of residence within a parish.

Mansfield enforced rulings for individual blacks who sought redress in his court. In March 1779, he awarded £500 in damages to Amissa, a free black, when a captain of a Liverpool slave ship tried to sell him back into slavery in Jamaica. Mansfield ordered the captain to bring Amissa back to London and to pay him £500 in damages.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Oldham, *Mansfield Manuscripts*, 1236.

<sup>93</sup>Oldham, *Mansfield Manuscripts*, 1236.

<sup>94</sup>Oldham, *Mansfield Manuscripts*, 1237-1238.

Mansfield informed Thomas Hutchinson, who was the deposed governor general of Massachusetts during the American Revolution in 1779 that he had released two blacks from slavery. The two black slaves had stowed away on a ship from Virginia bound for Bristol. Once they arrived in London, they applied to Mansfield for *habeas corpus*. The owner of the ship agreed to send the two back to their homes in Africa.<sup>95</sup> Hutchinson stated, “How the Virginia planter was satisfied his lordship did not say, but he [Mansfield] seemed much pleased at having obtained their release.”<sup>96</sup> Hutchinson was a Loyalist residing in London and a friend of Lord Mansfield.

The question of black freedom in England remained in flux after the Somerset Case. Forty-five years after the *Somerset Case* and twenty years after the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the reverberation of that trial entered the nineteenth century legal pendulum of black freedom in the case of Grace Jones, a slave from Antigua. In 1822 a Mrs. Allan of Antigua came to England, accompanied by her domestic slave, Grace Jones. After living in England for a year, they returned to Antigua together. Grace continued in the capacity of a domestic slave, until August 8, 1825, when a customs officer in Antigua seized Grace on the legal premise that Mrs. Allan illegally imported her in 1823. The officer claimed that Grace’s entry into England and re-entry into Antigua contravened the slave laws. Grace, he argued, was a free British subject unlawfully imported as a slave into Antigua. Soon after, Mr. Allan made an affidavit of claim, as sole owner and proprietor of Grace, as his slave.

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<sup>95</sup>Hutchinson, *Diary and Letters*, 274-275.

<sup>96</sup>Hutchinson, *Diary and Letters*, 274-275.

On August 5, 1826, the judge of the Vice-Admiralty Court of Antigua decreed that Grace be returned to the Allans with costs and damages for her detention. The Customs authorities appealed the decision, and in 1827, Lord Stowell in the High Court of Admiralty heard their appeal.<sup>97</sup> The main question in the case was whether “slavery was so divested by landing in England that it would not revive on a return to the place of birth and servitude?”<sup>98</sup>

Lord Stowell categorically denied the slave Grace had any claim to freedom:

She could derive no character of freedom that would entitle her to maintain a suit like this (founded upon a claim of permanent freedom) merely by having been in *England*, without manumission . . . This suit, therefore, fails in its foundation: she was not a free person; no injury is done her by her continuance in a state of slavery, and she has no pretensions to any other station than that which was enjoyed by every slave in the family. If she depends upon such a freedom, conveyed by a mere residence in *England*, she complains of a violation of right which she possessed no longer than whilst she resided in England, but which had totally expired when that residence ceased and she was imported into Antigua.<sup>99</sup>

Lord Stowell proceeded carefully in his deliberations and clarified his views on the issue of slavery by examining previous court cases in England, but reminded the court that those cases had no legal bearing upon statutes of the colonies. Lord Stowell legal rationale emerged from his alarm that his words and actions not suffer the fate of Lord Mansfield’s in the *Somerset Case*. Stowell believed Mansfield

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<sup>97</sup>John Haggard, *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the High Court of Admiralty During the Time of The Right Hon. Lord Stowell, and the Right Hon. Sir Christopher Robinson, Volume II, 1825-1832* (London: Saunders and Redding, 1833), 94-95.

<sup>98</sup>Haggard, *Reports of Cases*, 95.

<sup>99</sup>Haggard, *Reports of Cases*, 100.

allowed public sentiments and misunderstandings to shape the outcome of the Somerset Case rather than set the facts straight about the true intentions of his legal ruling. He expressed the view that the “public inconvenience that might follow from an established opinion that negroes became totally free in consequence of a voyage to *England*, without any express act that declared them to be so, is not altogether to be overlooked.”<sup>100</sup> Lord Stowell further explained his position by declaring that if blacks gained freedom simply from being in England, then a consequence of such actions could induce slaves to try various schemes to secure passage to London. He professed concern that such freed slaves would return to the West Indies with their freshly granted freedom and establish new black communities, they would create problems for the colonies, and these recently freed blacks would unsettle the peace and security of the West Indies. Lord Stowell denied the appeal and granted monetary damages to the Allan family. The amount of damages awarded was 36£. and 6 shillings and the appraised value of the slave Grace were 125£.<sup>101</sup>

The record of legal cases on slavery illustrates two important features of the experience of blacks in eighteenth century London. First, the courts dealt in most instances with individuals who had fled from their masters, and secondly these runaways all faced transportation to the slave colonies. Usually the blacks whose cases came before the courts were runaway slaves who had somehow found avenues in which to earn wages as servants or some means to survive the streets of London. Through some misfortune or accident, the paths of the runaway and his or her former

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<sup>100</sup>Haggard, *Reports of Cases*, 115.

<sup>101</sup>Haggard, *Reports of Cases*, 114.

master crossed once again, and the owner recaptured the person and held him or her prisoner until passage back to the colonies could be arranged. The master's interest in regaining the runaway was not to restore a personal servant, but to recover his capital and to make a profit by selling the fugitive to the plantations. In some respects, these types of transactions allowed the master to sentence a disloyal slave or servant to a much harsher existence. The cases of Jonathan Strong (1767), Thomas Lewis (1771), James Somerset (1771), and in Scotland, Joseph Knight (1778), all followed this pattern.

Before *Somerset*, blacks who had run away from their masters feared the sale or transportation to the colonies. In Britain, the owners used as their chief weapon a return to the colony as punishment. However, the *Somerset* decision made it illegal to force slaves against their will to return to the sugar colonies in the Americas. Therefore, there was less of a legal obstacle to prevent slaves, apprentices, indentured servants, and free people from fleeing their masters and seeking their right to become free, wage-earning servants or laborers.

Beneath the rubric of English law and the related court cases the assertive and active roles runaway blacks took by escaping servitude and later resisting re-enslavement lies at the heart of the legal ambiguity of their status. Their actions triggered the law and brought Granville Sharp to their defense. The act of running away from their servitude was resistance against the circumstances of their lives in London. Indeed, the judicial cases reflected the indeterminate status a black possessed in England, but blacks had at their disposal a ready-made weapon to clear

up their own uncertainty about British law. This weapon was flight into streets of London to join other blacks who had already asserted their own emancipation.



## CHAPTER III

### ENGLISH ATTITUDES AND BLACK IMAGES

In the minds of many white Londoners of the eighteenth century, blacks were a common presence in society. Whites constructed their own images of blacks. These images were of course in many ways related to social reality, but the whites' cultural construction of black has its own reality and is important in understanding the lives of the minority population.

Journalists, essayists, playwrights, and artists all contributed to the cultural image of blacks. The depiction of blacks occurred in multiple ways in eighteenth-century London. White representations of blacks provide the opportunity to explore how English society sought to deal with the population of black people. Englishmen expressed a litany of concerns and beliefs about the blacks they saw in their surroundings. These included a fear of a growing black population, concerns about economic competition with white workers, alarm regarding miscegenation, apprehension about blacks forming groups and agitating for freedoms, and the belief that blacks had nothing to offer to the community. Not all images projected fear or alarm. Artists sometimes depicted blacks in everyday life and imagined situations as peaceful and helpful, but subservient. Whites often used black images to boost their own status and privilege.

## **Fear of a Growing Black Population and Threat to White Workers**

Three individuals Granville Sharp, Edward Long, and Sir John Fielding approached the presence of blacks from their own respective vantage points. Although all three men held unique ideologies, they agreed on the problem of the black presence in English society. Granville Sharp, one of the earliest anti-slavery activists in London, was a famous abolitionist for his assistance of black runaways. Edward Long was a West Indian planter and historian, and Sir John Fielding, was the Chief Magistrate of the city of London.

Granville Sharp expressed concerns about the increase in the number of slaves in London and noted with some surprise that there was not an increased usage of slaves in occupations other than domestic service. Sharp's multiple defenses of blacks fleeing from their masters had earned him a reputation as a protector of black freedom. Sharp's dedication to helping blacks was without question, yet on the issue of their very presence he expressed deep concern pertaining to job competition between black slaves and servants and the English working class.

Sharp argued against slaveholding in England. He believed a system of slavery was in its beginning stages in London and speculated that, if the practice grew, slave masters would greedily employ slaves in many occupations other than as household servants. He cautioned that this situation would lead to breeding of blacks in great numbers and their employment in many kinds of work in England, similar to patterns in the North American colonies.

I have the satisfaction to observe, that the practice of slave-holding is now only in its infancy amongst us; and Slaves are at present employed in no other

capacity, than that of Domestic Servants. But if such practices are permitted much longer with impunity, the evil will take root; precedent and custom will too soon be pleaded in its behalf; and as Slavery becomes more familiar in our eyes, mercenary and selfish men may take it into their heads, to employ their Slaves (not merely in domestic affairs as at present, but) in husbandry; so that they may think it worth their while to breed them like cattle on their estates, as they do even in the North American colonies.<sup>102</sup>

He warned that the black population had already grown too abundant. Sharp added “that a real and national inconvenience should be felt, by permitting every person (without inconvenience to himself) to increase the present stock of black Servants in this kingdom, which is already much too numerous.”<sup>103</sup> Sharp continued his attack on black slavery and possible economic detriment to whites by concluding “the public good seems to require some restraint of this unnatural increase of black subjects.”<sup>104</sup> Sharp’s words lay the complexity of an abolitionist on full display. Was Sharp simply putting forth these arguments as a rouse to defend slaves against the system of slavery, or was he also appealing to the fear of blacks shared by others in English society? His immense efforts to free black runaways pictures a man sympathetic to black suffering, yet unable to offer an argument that would support his overall aims of not allowing slavery to grow as a system in England. While he became the great champion of runaway blacks, Sharp wrestled with profound belief that blacks harmed the English worker. His ambivalence toward black slaves and servants represented a duality that is often overlooked in most accounts of his biographical narrative. The arguments put forth by Sharpe rest on the assumption that

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<sup>102</sup>Granville Sharp, *A Representation of Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery or of Admitting the Least Claim of Private Property in the Persons of Men, in England*. (London: Benjamin White and Robert Horsfield, 1769), 92.

<sup>103</sup>Sharp, *A Representation of Injustice*, 74.

<sup>104</sup>Sharp, *A Representation of Injustice*, 75.

all slaves imported into London worked as domestic servants. Sharp compared the plight of the English wage laborer to slavery and reasoned that black slaves deprived English subjects of bread. He argued slave labor was not necessary in England. He asserted: “The expense to board and clothe a slave is much more expensive to the master than the wages of English labourers.”<sup>105</sup> The master must pay the freight of the slave, dental and medical bills in case of sickness and accidents, and a multitude of other unavoidable costs, which the master must deduct from his or her own budgets. According to Sharp, those who sanctioned slavery argued that the financial advantage of slaves was that they received no wages, as did free servants, who, like the blacks were also clothed and boarded.<sup>106</sup> Sharp’s argument about the plight of English laborers versus black servants clearly was based on a conviction that white workers could perform the same jobs as blacks. Sharp argued that the displacement of the white workers would be a blow to the fabric of English society.

Ironically, Edward Long, who shared none of Sharp’s concern about the injustices of black slavery, expressed similar trepidation about the black presence. Long entered the narrative of the black presence in British society as a commentator by writing a scathing rebuke of the 1772 *Somerset Decision* in his book, *Candid Reflections* (1772). Long’s name became identified with the pro-slavery arguments of English planters who felt threatened by the court case and the nascent abolition movement promoted by individuals such as Granville Sharp in England.

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<sup>105</sup>Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice*, 76.

<sup>106</sup>Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice*, 77.

Edward Long agreed with Granville Sharp that too many blacks were already living in London, which, according to both men, represented a danger to the public good. It is almost as if Long was paraphrasing Sharp when he wrote: “we must agree with those who have declared, that the public good of this kingdom requires that some restraint should be laid upon the unnatural increase of blacks imported into it.”<sup>107</sup> He used Sharp’s argument to claim that without a legal statute there were no means to enforce the master’s claim over a runaway slave. Long attributed the alleged unnatural increase of blacks to the busy commercial ties between England and the West Indies. He suggested that prosperous masters needed black domestics, as white servants were impractical.

Long did not share Granville Sharp’s fear that blacks would enter other fields beyond domestic service. He asserted that blacks were “incapable of adding any thing to the general support and improvement of the kingdom; for few, if any, of them have the requisite knowledge for gaining a livelihood by industrious courses.”<sup>108</sup> Long added they were not able to be farmers, machine workers, nor craftsmen. According to Long, blacks did not possess the constitution, inclination, or skills to perform the common tasks of pre-industrial artisans in the English climate and country.<sup>109</sup> The concern expressed by both Long and Sharp originated from a space of fear about the black presence. Sharp expressed his concern in terms of protecting white workers, but Long believed or asserted that blacks were necessary as domestic

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<sup>107</sup>Edward Long, *Candid Reflections Upon the Judgement Lately Awarded By The Court of King’s Bench, in Westminster Hall, On What Is Commonly Called The Negro-Cause, By A Planter* (London: T. Lowndes, 1772), 46.

<sup>108</sup>Long, *Candid Reflections*, 50.

<sup>109</sup>Long, *Candid Reflections*, 50.

servants. Clearly, in Edward Long's estimation blacks were only capable of domestic service.

The alarm about how many blacks entered English society did not end with Sharp and Long. Sir John Fielding offered his own thoughts about blacks that parallel those of Sharp and Long. Fielding, like Sharpe, found problems associated with the perceived large number of black men and women entering into the kingdom. He asserted that these individuals caused trouble or became dangers to the families who brought them into London, resulting in the blacks' release from service.

### **Fear of Subversive Blacks**

Fielding carried the argument one step further. He expressed concern that blacks brought into London by their masters were utilizing the help of fellow black servants to escape and create dissension amongst blacks, thus leading to social disorder.

The immense confusion that has arose in the families of merchants and other gentlemen who have estates in the West-Indies, from the great number of Negro slaves they have brought into this kingdom, also deserves the most serious attention; Many of these gentlemen [merchants and absentee planters] have either at vast expense caused some of their blacks to be instructed in the necessary qualifications of a domestic servant, or have purchased them after they have been instructed.<sup>110</sup>

Fielding was critical of the practice of British merchants and families bringing blacks to London as cheap servants, having no rights to wages. He invoked the sentiment that the air of liberty was so strong that the imported black servants grew

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<sup>110</sup>John Fielding, *Extracts From Such of the Penal Laws, As Particularly Relate To the Peace and Good Order of This Metropolis* (London: T. Cadell, 1769), 144-145.

restive or non-compliant. Fielding stated: “they no sooner come over, but the Sweets of Liberty and the Conversation with free Men and Christians, enlarge their Minds.”<sup>111</sup> Blacks allegedly received help from other blacks and poor whites, and this allowed them to think they were on the same level as other servants, which Fielding lamented. The uneasiness Fielding expressed did not arise from a sense of benevolence for blacks, but from a concern that their presence caused problems for his office. He directly posited the agency of blacks in challenging the social order of the London community. As the chief law officer, he feared greatly what the black presence meant to the stability of English society.

Fielding alleged that blacks were forming societies and getting newly arrived blacks baptized, which, he claimed, made them believe they were free. His assertions about what a discharge entailed were vague. He blamed resident blacks for corrupting and swaying the mind of every black servant who entered England. Fielding’s claims offer some evidence that something akin to a community of blacks did help other blacks in eighteenth-century London. The worry that Fielding expressed about blacks helping other blacks represented a shared sentiment with Edward Long. Long lamented that, upon arrival:

These servants grow acquainted with a knot of blacks, who, having eloped from their respective owners at different times, repose themselves here in ease and indolence, and endeavour to strengthen their party, by seducing as many of these strangers into the association as they can work to their purpose. Not infrequently, they fall into the company of vicious white servants, and abandoned prostitutes of the town; and thus quickly debauched in their morals, instructed in the science of

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<sup>111</sup>Fielding, *Extracts*, 144-145.

domestic knavery, fleeced of their money, and driven to commit some theft or misdemeanour, which makes them ashamed or afraid to return to their Master.<sup>112</sup>

He asserted that a community of blacks was helping black runways and encouraging them to flee their masters. Fielding believed that white servants were helping blacks in seeking their freedom once they arrived in London. Long's argument that blacks were afraid and ashamed to return to their masters after their morals became corrupt after stealing and committing crimes posits that blacks had weak moral fiber and that their benevolent masters would welcome them home after their forays into London to acquire their liberty.

Three different individuals, an abolitionist, a planter, and a police magistrate all found the black presence alarming. They each offered various reasons, but all arrived at the same conclusion that the blacks represented a threat to social and economic order in English society.

### **Fears about Miscegenation**

The images of blacks in eighteenth-century London also produced concerns about sex relations between blacks and whites. Miscegenation was an issue that several white writers sought to address during this period. In a letter published in *The London Chronicle* a writer under the pseudonym "Anglicanus," lamented that importation of blacks into England was a "growing piece of ill policy, that may be productive of much evil."<sup>113</sup> Anglicanus added that blacks were replacing white workers, and "we are by this means depriving so many [Englishmen] of the means of

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<sup>112</sup>Edward Long, *Candid Reflections*, 47.

<sup>113</sup>*The London Chronicle* 29 September-2 October, 1764.



getting their bread, and thereby decreasing our native population in favour of a race, whose mixture with us is disgraceful, and whose uses cannot be so various and essential as those of white people.”<sup>114</sup>

A similar view found expression in *The London Chronicle*, a year later. A writer by the name F. Freeman wrote to *The London Chronicle* in 1765. He expressed concerns about the rising public debt and raised questions about what types of remedies could help to pay off such debt. He suggested a tax on black servants whose numbers had grown too numerous for his taste. In the same vein as Edward Long and Granville Sharp, he considered blacks as possible rivals to the job prospects of white English workers. Freeman felt that blacks did not possess the skill sets to duplicate all the jobs that whites could accomplish. He believed that their presence was a threat to the positions of white domestic servants and it would lead to miscegenation: “The mixture of their breed with our own ought by no means to be encouraged, because it cannot be made so useful, and besides is disgraceful. In their employments they therefore stand in the way of our own people, and by so much of the means of subsistence as they obtain, they lessen the degree of our native population.”<sup>115</sup>

He further suggested that a tax on all who own them or employ them would be a suitable measure. Freeman proposed a tax of forty shillings for each of the thirty thousand blacks he claimed to exist in London. The resulting tax would produce a yearly sum of sixty thousand pounds, which could pay the two million dollar interest

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<sup>114</sup>*The London Chronicle* 29 September-2 October, 1764.

<sup>115</sup>*The London Chronicle* October 19-22, 1765.

on the debt. Freeman suggested that the owners had brought these slaves into the kingdom and paid nothing for their service, so the tax would not harm them in the least. If released from slavery, blacks could not possibly be equal to Englishmen, for they had no birthright in comparison to native-born members of the community. A white person in England must be superior to any black, and a tax would create a tiered system to measure quality and constitutional rights to render the difference officially. Servile occupations must remain in the hands of English white workers and not blacks as a means of patriotic and national duty to ensure the strength of the nation.<sup>116</sup>

Samuel Estwick offered yet another polemic against miscegenation. Estwick addressed this issue by attacking Lord Mansfield's decision in the Somerset case. Estwick also urged Lord Mansfield to offer a bill in parliament that would prohibit blacks from entering Great Britain. Estwick stated:

It was in representation, if not in proof, to your Lordship, that there were already fifteen thousand Negroes in England; and scarce is there a street in London that does not give many examples of that . . . let a Bill originate in the House of Lords, under your Lordship's formation; . . . let the importation of them be prohibited to this country . . . . In short, my Lord, by this act you will preserve the race of Britons from stain and contamination.<sup>117</sup>

Like Samuel Estwick, an anonymous writer a year later urged Parliament to address his concerns about the black population. This correspondent not only argued against importation of new blacks but advocated deportation of those already present. He urged that:

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<sup>116</sup>*The London Chronicle* October 19-22, 1765.

<sup>117</sup>Samuel Estwick, *Considerations On The Negro Cause Commonly So Called, Addressed To the Right Honourable Lord Mansfield, ... By A West Indian* (J. Dodsley, 1772), 32.

Parliament will provide such remedies as may be adequate to the occasion, by expelling the Negroes now here. Who are not made free by their owners, and by prohibiting the introduction of them in this kingdom for the future; and save the natural beauty of Britons from the Morisco tint; and remove the envy of our native servants, who have some reason to complain that the Negroes enjoy all the happiness of ease of domestic life, while many of those starve for want of place.<sup>118</sup>

These writers shared a clear message that miscegenation between black and white was evil. Others continued the assault on interracial relationships in London. James Tobin, a West Indian planter from the island of Nevis, observed that “the great number of blacks at present in England, the strange partiality shewn for them by the lower order of women, the rapid increase of a dark and contaminated breed, are evils which have long been complained of, and call every day more loudly for enquiry and redress.”<sup>119</sup> The issue of lower-class white women mingling with black men was also a rallying cry of Jamaican planter Edward Long, who characterized the unnatural increase of blacks and the fondness of lower orders of women for black men as a reason for the alleged numerous births of mulatto children in England.<sup>120</sup> Long predicted that:

in the course of a few generations more, the English blood will become so contaminated with this mixture, and from the chances, the ups and downs of life, this alloy may spread so extensively, as even to reach the middle, and then the higher orders of the people, till the whole nation resembles the Portuguese and Moriscos in complexion of skin and baseness of mind. This is a venomous and dangerous ulcer, that threatens to disperse its malignancy far and wide, until every family catches infection from it.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>*The London Chronicle* March 13-16, 1773..

<sup>119</sup>James Tobin, *Cursory Remarks Upon the Reverend Mr. Ramsey's Essay On The Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves In The Sugar Colonies* (G. & T. Wilkie, 1785), 118.

<sup>120</sup>Edward Long, *Candid Reflections*, 48-49.

<sup>121</sup>Long, *Candid Reflections*, 48-49.

In 1778 Philip Thicknesse, a travel writer who, like many others, feared subversive groups amongst blacks, saw the real threat to be racial mixing. “London abounds with an incredible number of these Black men, who have clubs to support those who are out of place; and every town, nay in almost every village, are to be seen a little race of mulattoes, mischievous as monkeys, and infinitely more dangerous.”<sup>122</sup>

### **Equiano and His Marriage to a White Woman**

Despite obvious widespread fears, a marriage between a prominent black and an middle-class white woman appeared to cause no panic in late eighteenth-century London. The union garnered a great deal of press, but the coverage was not hostile. The relationship that became a cause for attention was the marriage between Equiano, the most well known British black of the eighteenth century and Susana Cullen, a white woman. Cullen was from a middle-class family of some modest means. She met Equiano during one of his book tours.<sup>123</sup> Several newspapers publicized their nuptials.<sup>124</sup> For example, *The Gentleman’s Magazine* announced:

At Soham, co. Cambridge, Gustavus Vassa the African, well known as the Champion and advocate for procuring the suppression of the slave trade, to Miss Cullen, daughter of Mr. C. of Ely, in the same country.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup>Philip Thicknesse, *A Year’s Journey through France and Part of Spain* (Bath: Printed by R. Cruttwell, for the author, 1778) 2: 108.

<sup>123</sup>Vincent Carretta, *Equiano The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 347-348.

<sup>124</sup>*Lloyd’s Evening Post*, April 20-23, 1792. *London Times*, April 23, 1792.

<sup>125</sup>*Gentleman’s Magazine*, Part I, 1792, 384.

The positive, or at least benign, press coverage of Equiano's marriage contrasted sharply with the attitudes expressed by writers like Samuel Estwick, Edward Long, James Tobin, and others. Four years earlier, Equiano had answered some outrageous assaults on black slaves from James Tobin. Tobin had attacked miscegenation on the Caribbean plantations and in English society. Equiano had responded to Tobin by asking, forcefully: "why not establish intermarriages at home, and in our Colonies? And encourage open, free, and generous loves upon Nature's own wide and extensive plain, subservient only to moral rectitude, without distinction of colour of a skin?"<sup>126</sup> Equiano's status in British society may have rendered objections to his marrying a white woman moot. He certainly had attained a high position in English society, making his skin color less visible to those who feared blacks.

### **Black Images Establishing White Identity**

The late eighteenth century witnessed multiple depictions of blacks in English society. Satirists, dealing with political tumult of the Georgian period, used the black body to connote slavery of their fellow Londoners. Painters found a market for portraits of well-known black Londoners. Playwrights gave black characters central roles in their operas and plays.

One of the central symbols of this period was that of Mungo, a caricature of a black slave that became famous during this period. He first appeared as a vital

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<sup>126</sup>Letter from Gustavus Vasa, the Ethiopian, and the King's late Commissary for the African Settlement, *The Public Advertiser*, 28 January 1788.

character in Isaac Bickerstaff's 1768 comic opera, *The Padlock*<sup>127</sup>, where he presented a comic foil and a sharp commentary on his oppression. The plot of the play revolved around an older male, Don Diego, who pondered marriage with a poor sixteen-year-old girl, Leonora, who was in love with a young man named Leander. All parties including her parents and Don Diego agreed that Leonora should live in his home under an elderly chaperone named Ursula, for a period of three months to test her virtuousness and suitability for marriage. Don Diego left his home and travelled to the home of Leonora's parents to tell them that he intended to marry their daughter. Before leaving, Diego placed Ursula in charge of the home, with strict instructions to permit no one to enter the home. Don Diego used a large padlock to lock Leonora and Mungo inside his home to guard Lenora's purity during his absence, hence the name of the play. Leander, a young student in a nearby school, gained the favor of Mungo by serenading him with his guitar and wine. After gaining entry into the home, Leander flattered the lascivious Ursula, who could not resist his charms. Leander thus schemed his way into the house and made his declaration of love for Leonora known. Don Diego returned home to find a drunken Mungo, who reminded Diego of his misfortune. Diego finally calmed down, realized his mistakes, and allowed the two young lovers to wed. Don Diego also removed the bars from his windows as a symbolic gesture. The themes of the play were liberty, captivity, submission, rebellion, jealousy, and trust. The play became a success, but perhaps not entirely due to its themes. Some attribute the popularity of the play to the character

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<sup>127</sup> Isaac Bickerstaff, *The Padlock: A Comic Opera in Two Acts* (London: Charles Wiley, 1768).

Mungo, whose presence drove the value of the play, first for the English audience and, later, foreign audiences.<sup>128</sup>

*The Padlock* was an English adaptation by Bickerstaff of Cervantes' *The Jealous Husband*. Charles Dibdin, the composer, wrote the songs and the music for the play. Dibdin also assumed the stage role of Mungo in blackface. Yet the play, as its name suggests, was about some type of imprisonment or enslavement. Although the writer granted Mungo some lines to lament African slavery, the theme of the play is neither freedom for slaves nor emancipation for blacks. The play became a huge success for Bickerstaff and Dibdin. After the sensation and popularity of *The Padlock*, the name "Mungo" entered the eighteenth-century social and popular culture as a byword for both servile and uppity blacks.<sup>129</sup>

The play established multiple firsts in the theatre. For instance, it was one of the earliest dramas to reproduce black dialect on the English stage. Mungo became the first example of a blackface character on the London stage.<sup>130</sup> The success of the *The Padlock* was proven in the fifty-four performances between 1768 and 1769. It was the first score by Charles Dibdin and the first time that Bickerstaff had utilized Dibdin's music. The blackface depiction of Mungo gave Dibdin the most popular role of his life. Originally, Jack Moody, a West Indian actor was to play Mungo, but he proved unable to master the songs. Dibdin later remarked that he deliberately

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<sup>128</sup>J.R. Olfield, "The Ties of Soft Humanity": Slavery and Race in British Drama, 1760-1800," *Huntington Quarterly* 56, No. 1 (1993): 9-11.

<sup>129</sup>Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life before Emancipation* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>130</sup>Julie Carlson, "New Lows in Eighteenth Century Theater: The Rise of Mungo," *European Romantic Review* 18, Issue 2 (2007): 140.

made it hard for Moody to capture the ideal Mungo role because he wanted the role for himself. Indeed, it was Jack Moody who originally gave the idea of a black servant to Bickerstaff and Dibdin, after claiming he could mimic black dialect after spending time as an actor in the West Indies, especially in roles on stage in Barbados.<sup>131</sup> The dialect of the play became so popular that one of the lines from the play, “What e’er’s to be done, Poor black must run; Mungo here, Mungo dere, Mungo everywhere,” enjoyed widespread use.<sup>132</sup> Mungo was a construction sprung from the mind of Isaac Bickerstaff and Charles Dibdin. Their imagined Mungo was lazy, gullible, and untrustworthy, but he possessed a quick wit and lamented his life in servitude.

The play succeeded in creating a character who posed no threat sexually. The character Mungo was devoid of erotic interests in the play, but he must protect the love interest of his master, whereas Ursula was portrayed as a lustful and sexual conniving servant. In a telling remark, Don Diego spoke of banishing all from his house that had the “shadow of man or mankind.”<sup>133</sup> Evidently the “shadow of man” meant Mungo possessed no humanity, nor was he a male whom Diego should fear if left alone with his future wife.

A biographer of Isaac Bickerstaffe regarded *The Padlock* as an anti-slavery drama and counted Isaac Bickerstaff as one of the “first to bring upon stage the

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<sup>131</sup>Peter Thasch, *The Dramatic Cobbler: The Life and Works of Isaac Bickerstaff* (Cranberry, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1971), 154.

<sup>132</sup>Thasch, *The Dramatic Cobbler*, 155.

<sup>133</sup>Bickerstaff, *The Padlock*, 30.



realistic Negro who became a comic figure.”<sup>134</sup> However, it seems apparent that Mungo was a play for laughter, not abolition. Mungo’s speech was a West Indian pidgin amalgamation that Bickerstaff used for great comic effect. It was broken English that presented at its heart not sympathy, but ridicule.

Mungo’s name came to represent his status and his race in English society. The *Oxford English Dictionary* recorded the meaning of “mungo” generically as “a Negro slave” and attributed its origin to Bickerstaff’s play.<sup>135</sup> By 1769, the term “mungo” had apparently become a typical epithet for a black slave as the result of *The Padlock*. The popularity of the name Mungo was important in plays and portraits, but a survey of newspaper advertisements during the period revealed no black runaway thus named. The non usage of the a popular name such as Mungo on black servants signifies a clear demarcation between popular culture and the lived reality of black servants and their masters in eighteenth-century London. It is ironic that the name Mungo would possess such popularity, and yet no master would ever attach the name to one his enslaved servants.

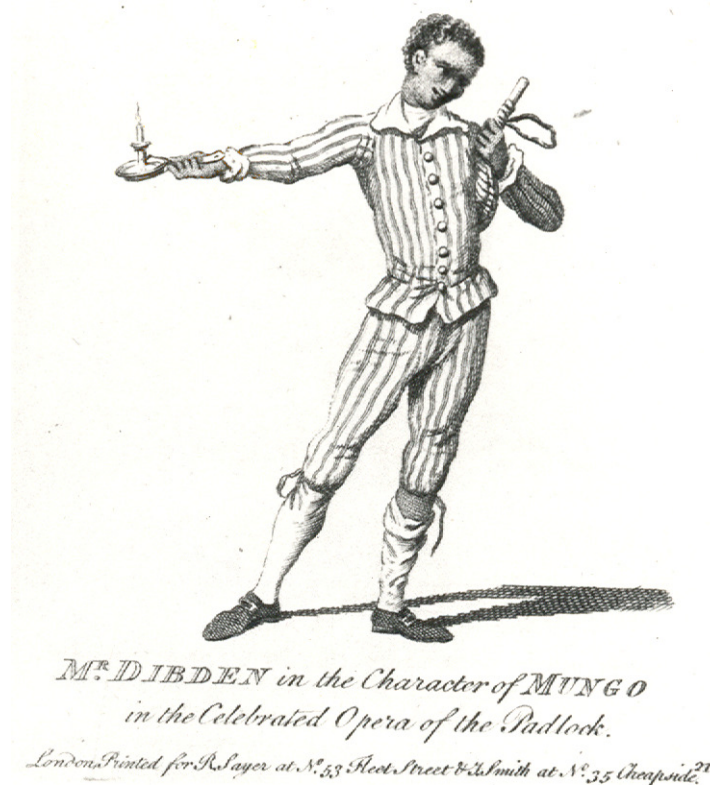
### **Constructed Images of Blacks**

The popularity of the play and the character Mungo continued off stage. Engravers depicted the character, as played in blackface by Charles Dibdin in individual prints in 1768 and 1769. Mungo entered the stage dressed in a tight-fitting, red-and-white-striped silk suit (Figure 1).

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<sup>134</sup>Thasch, *The Dramatic Cobbler*, 160.

<sup>135</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2000; online edition. S.V. “Mungo”, May 15, 2012.



**Figure 1 Butler Clowes, Mr. Dibdin in the Character of MUNG O in the Celebrated Opera of the Padlock (1769). © Trustees of the British Museum**

The usage of the image Mungo in print continued with a piece that resembled what later came to be known as a prose poem published in 1769. Although *The Padlock* inspired the poem, the writer treated Mungo with great concern that was not found in the original play for the character Mungo. The writer of this sympathetic bit wrote in the same jargon as *The Padlock*. Although the words uttered from this construction of are allowed a fuller response and given space to lament his plight. Although the poem utilizes the backdrop of the play, it is an original script, not part of the text from the play.

## MUNGO'S SOLILOQUY.

What a miserable life does *Mungo* live! – I am treated like a beast of burden – worse than a jack-ass with panniers upon his back. – *Mungo* must do this, do that, do everything – and answer for the success of everything – for if any thing goes wrong, then the fault is laid on *Mungo's* shoulders – *Mungo* is abused and vilified. – It is d- -d hard and cruel to blame me, because the Livery would not be corrupted – How could I help it? – I am sure I tempted them sufficiently – they would not take his Gr-s' bribes, neither his money nor his tickets – it was none of my fault – yet *Mungo* is now cursed, suspected of treachery, and threatened to be discarded for it – *Mungo* must do all the dirty work, and be d---d for it into the bargain – A cobbler is a happier man than *Mungo* – but *Mungo* is not such a fool and blockhead as his Gr—calls him – *Mungo* sees how the cards are going – his Gr—now holds very bad hands – the game is almost over with him – he cannot stand it long – the outs will be in – *Mungo* must take care of himself – he must, in time, seek out a new master – and make a merit of deserting his old one. – His Gr---'s present ill treatment of me, so underservedly, gives me the opportunity of doing it – and which *Mungo* will not lose.<sup>136</sup>

Here existed a Mungo who lamented his life and treatment. The allusion to the panniers was a direct reference to the opening of the play in which the character had a basket on his back. In the soliloquy, Mungo depicted a world where he did all the labor and was responsible for everything. He suffered abuse and mistreatment. It appeared that someone had destroyed the livery, the servant's uniform, and the blame fell upon Mungo. Mungo reported that all his master's attempts to protect the livery failed. The response of the master was cursing Mungo and threatening to remove him from his position. Mungo implied that he would eventually gain the upper hand over his master or would leave the service of his master by running away after suffering such bad treatment. The poem clearly was using similar language to the play and addressing its issues, but with a complete reversal of meaning. Readers were

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<sup>136</sup>*The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, July 4, 1769.

supposed to sympathize with the unjustly treated black slave. There were multiple perspectives on a constructed popular image of blacks.

The sympathetic aspects of Mungo's life found more breath in a poem published in 1787. The author was ostensibly a clergyman whose name remains unknown, but his intent is clear. The words offered a defense to the position of the fictionalized Mungo. The newspaper account opened with a purported account of the origin of the poem:

October 1787

Mr. Urban,

Sept. 24.

The following Epilogue to "The Padlock" was written by a very worthy Clergyman, soon after the first representation of that opera. The author of this little poem died in the Summer of 1786, and, having never been published, a copy of it is presented to your Magazine, by one who agrees in sentiment with the author, and who thinks it will be readily received by you, as being worthy of a place in your valuable repository.

J.D.

#### EPILOGUE TO THE PADLOCK.

MUNGO speaks:

"TANK you, my massas! Have you laugh your fill"----  
Then let me speak, nor take that freedom ill.  
E'en from my tongue some heartfelt truths may fall  
And outrag'd nature claims the care of all.  
My tale, in any place, would force a tear,  
But calls for stronger, deeper feelings here.  
For whilst I tread the free-born British hand;  
Whilst now before me crouded Britons stand;  
Vain, vain that glorious privilege to me,  
I am a slave, where all things else are free.  
Yet was I born, as you are, no man's slave,  
An heir to all that liberal Nature gave;  
My thoughts can reason, and my limbs can move,  
The same as yours; like yours my heart can love:  
Alive my body food and sleep sustains;  
Alike our wants, our pleasures, and our pains.  
One sun rolls o'er us, common skies around;  
One globe supports us, and one grave must bound.

Why then am I devoid of all to live,  
 That manly comforts to a man can give?  
 To live untaught Religion's sooting balm,  
 Or life's choice arts; to live, unknown the calm  
 Of soft domestic ease; those sweets of life,  
 The duteous offspring, and th'obedient wife.  
 To live, to property and rights unknown,  
 Not ev'n the common benefits my own.  
 No arm to guard me from oppression's rod,  
 My will subservient to a tyrant's nod.  
 No gentle hand, when life is in decay,  
 To smooth my pains and charm my cares away;  
 But helpless left to quit the horrid stage;  
 Harrass'd in youth and desolate in age.  
 But I was born in Afric's tawny strand,  
 And you in fair Britannia's fairer land.  
 Comes freedom then from colour? Blush with shame,  
 And let strong Nature's crimson mark your blame.  
 I speak to Britons-Britons, then, behold  
 A man by Britons snar'd and seiz'd, and sold.  
 And yet no British statute damns the deed,  
 Nor do the more than murderous villains bleed.  
 O sons of freedom! equalise your laws,  
 Be all consistent-plead the Negro's cause;  
 That all the nations in your code may see  
 The British Negro, like the Briton, free.  
 But, should he supplicate your laws in vain,  
 To break for ever this disgraceful claim,  
 At least, let gentle usage so abate  
 The galling terrors of its passing state,  
 That he may share the great Creator's social plan;  
 For though no Briton, Mungo is a man!<sup>137</sup>

The author granted Mungo an active voice. This sympathetic subject had much to say about the plight of Africans in London. The language encompassed the most passionate aspects of Enlightenment thought and anti-slavery sentiment. The writing demonstrated a clear challenge to *The Padlock* and its comic renderings. The Mungo in this poem is not a jester or someone who was weak, but a slave giving

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<sup>137</sup>*The Gentlemen's Magazine*, October 16, 1787, 913-914.

voice to his own humanity. This subject lashes out at a larger English society that enjoyed freedom while slavery became the destiny of far too many Africans. The juxtaposition of freeborn English people and African slaves was a thematic strain throughout the poem. The work was an eloquent plea for abolition of slavery and a vigorous defense of black freedom. Here in this poem the writer drew upon the ideals of natural law to assert equality amongst all peoples and an end to slavery, which for this writer was against the natural state of liberty.

Three years after the initial production of *The Padlock*, in January of 1772, a completely new and different image of Mungo appeared in London: A painting called *High Life Below Stairs, or Mungo Addressing My Lady's Maid* by William Humphrey. In this picture Mungo seduces a white maid with caresses, wine, and Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (Figure 2). A fellow black playing on a musical instrument appears to be along for the fun, but the focus of the picture is Mungo and the lady's maid. Yet the two blacks appearing in the same image symbolized a unique communal relationship between blacks. The appearance of two blacks in the same image was extremely rare. Normally only one black appears in paintings. Unlike in *The Padlock*, which contained an asexual Mungo, this projection conveys a sexualized individual. The Mungo in the new print is seeking the affection of a lady's maid. It is not clear if Humphrey sought to convey some personal sentiment about interracial relationships, but it is quite clear that the image involves interracial characters and is sexual in nature. Mungo is not only wooing the lady's maid,



**Figure 2 High Life below Stairs, or MUNGO addressing my Lady's Maid (1772).  
© Trustees of the British Museum**

but is embracing her as he places his arms around her and touching her breast.

Whereas in the play Mungo had supplied the wine for the young couple, here the wine has a personal purpose designed to gain favor for Mungo. In the text below the image, the words read: "For Wine inspires us and fires us with courage, love, and joy,

etc.”<sup>138</sup> This image of Mungo reveals a sexual character uninhibited by societal norms who is actually challenging his status. Here underneath the stairs was a servant using guile and cunning to win the affection of the lady’s maid. The constructed image of Mungo remained popular and contained various messages for the larger English public.

The character Mungo reflects diverse views of Londoners about blacks. His image rendered blacks visible, comic, and sympathetic. It allowed an imagined black figure to occupy white consciousness in multiple means and ways.

### **A Genre of Eighteenth-Century Painting: Blacks in White Society**

The discussion of images of blacks in eighteenth-century English art must begin with William Hogarth (1697-1764); Hogarth was a prolific painter who oftentimes utilized blacks in his paintings and engravings. His work in the earlier part of the eighteenth century influenced artists who followed him. Hogarth’s artistic vision embodied empathy for the English common people and attempted to project what destiny lay ahead for them. He asserted that he cared about the “nobodies,” as he termed them, which became a central focus of his art.<sup>139</sup> Hogarth also decried the commercialism of English society, and his paintings reflected his rejection of material wealth as the norm of society.

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<sup>138</sup>William Humphrey, *High Life Below Stairs, or Mungo Addressing My Lady’s Maid* (London: pub. for Robert Sayer, 1772), Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington/Yale University, New Haven.

<sup>139</sup>David Dabydeen, *Hogarth’s Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 11.



Hogarth began in the 1730s to paint a series called *A Harlot's Progress Plate I* (Figure 3), becoming one of the earliest English artists who presented on canvas the lives of common people in a compassionate description.



**Figure 3 William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress Plate 1* (1732). © Trustees of the British Museum**

*A Harlot's Progress* is a morality tale about the life of harlot. Hogarth used each image in the series to convey how the young innocent girl arrived in London and died after a series of events. The series told the story of Mary (or Moll) Hackabout, a simple country girl who arrives in London, seeking work, perhaps as a servant. Instead, she is drawn to prostitution, is arrested and later dies of syphilis. The series centralized a theme of Hogarth's paintings in which characters possessed life, shared a capacity for tragedy, suffering and redemption, and Hogarth insisted that they were subjects of worthy of painting. He championed the common people in his paintings.

In *A Harlot's Progress* Plate II (Figure 4) Moll causes a distraction by knocking over a table of tea, and a young black servant, in feathered turban, tea kettle in one hand, feigns surprise at the scene. The artist clothed the servant in an oriental style of dress, including a turban, using a motif that remained common throughout the eighteenth century.



**Figure 4 William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress* Plate II (1732). © Trustees of the British Museum**

The popular trope of oriental dress placed upon black servants appears to have served a taste for the exotic for their English owners, while at the same time allowing them to control the black body by adorning their servants with whatever fashion they saw fit to dress them. Many of the commodities that English people utilized, including tobacco, tea, coffee, and blacks from the Atlantic Slave Trade, were on

display in Hogarth's painting. While Hogarth represented the English poor with great sympathy, he depicted blacks as the exotic "other."

English artists expressed in their paintings multiple themes related to black life. In 1764, William Verelstyn an artist famous for paintings containing fruits created *A Black Boy* (Figure 5). In the image, a black pageboy is dressed in expensive livery with a slave collar attached to his neck. The boy is carrying a plate of fruits. The painting depicts the servitude of the black boy. The painting was undoubtedly created to promote, with intent or unconsciously, the master's position in English society.



**Figure 5 William Jones, *The Black Boy* (1764). © Trustees of the British Museum**

Oftentimes in family portraits, the black page added an indicator of the status to aid in the displaying the affluence and importance of the family. In the portrait *Morning* (Figure 6) by Johann Miller, the black indicates the apparent prosperity and status of the family. While the children are playing in the center, this young page is not included in their activities. There is a place in the social order for a black as a servant, but not as an equal to the other subjects in the image.



**Figure 6 John Sebastian Muller, Morning (1766). © Trustees of the British Museum**

George Moorland was a British painter who enjoyed great recognition as an artist of landscape and family portraits. He produced between 1788 and 1789 three paintings that contained black servants: *The Party Angling* (Figure 7), *Angler's Repast* (Figure 8), and *Fruits of Early Industry and Economy* (Figure 9). The angling portraits connote pastoral scenes of fishing. Moorland depicted social manners and tastes of the eighteenth century. The ladies in the work were his wife, Mrs. Moorland, and Mrs. William Ward, (the artist's sister, Maria). The men in

picture were John Raphael Smith and William Ward.<sup>140</sup> The liveried black servant was an accessory to the party and an appendage to the prosperous group fishing. His presence with the fishing party conveyed that they had a black to serve them as they enjoyed their leisure activity. Their status was paramount in the picture.



**Figure 7 George Moorland, A Party Angling (1789). ©Trustees of the British Museum**

The last image of the series (Figure 9) depicts the interior of a rich merchant's residence, with the family living in opulence. The men are discussing some issue very earnestly while the woman and child receive drink, most likely tea, from the black servant. The servant remains at the edge of the picture and not the center,

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<sup>140</sup>J.T. Herbert Baily, "The Connoisseur: An Illustrated Magazine For Collectors," IV, (September-December 1902): 212-213.

conveying that he is only an appendage. A child plays with her dog on the ground. This illustration communicates commercial interests, a rich family's inner sanctum, and the subjugation of black servitude in one image.



**Figure 8 George Moorland, *The Anglers Repast* (1789). © Trustees of the British Museum**



**Figure 9 George Moorland, Fruits of Early Industry and Economy (1789). © Trustees of the British Museum**





**Figure 10 William Redmore Bigg, *A Lady and Her Children Relieving a Cottager* (1784). © Trustees of the British Museum**

*A Lady and Her Children Relieving a Cottager* (1784) (Figure 10) by William Redmore Bigg depicts a mother teaching her children about charitable giving and sheds light on class relations. The mother steers her young daughter toward a poor woman holding her child. The young girl offers a coin to the woman. The black servant carrying an umbrella and a coat strolls along with the upper-class family. The theme focuses on the mother teaching her children about their duties. The black servant underscores the wealth and privilege of the family. The servant wears an expensive looking livery uniform and a turban, which exuded an exotic nature. He is

clearly a small boy, and his distance connotes that the servant, while attached to the family, has a subservient position in the household.



**Figure 11 Isaac Cruikshank, *Washing the Blackamoor* (1795). © Trustees of the British Museum**

In *Washing the Blackamoor* (1795) (Figure 11) artist Isaac Cruikshank utilized race to satirize Frances Villiers, Countess of Jersey, the mistress of the Prince of Wales (the future King George IV).<sup>141</sup> Lady Jersey sits in an arm-chair leaning back with a pained expression while two ladies wash her face which has the complexion of a mulatto. The Prince of Wales (left) crouches at her feet, holding out a basin in both hands. He says: “Another Scrub & then!! take more water.” The lady in the middle says: “This stain will remain forever” and Frances Villiers says: “Does it look any whiter.” The lady on the right holds a scrubbing-brush and puts a soap-ball to Lady

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<sup>141</sup>Martin J. Levy, countess of Jersey, (1753-1821), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, April 2, 2012.

Jersey's face, saying, "You may as well attempt to remove the Island of Jersey to the Highest Mountain in Wales." The other lady in the far left side of the image smiles and says to Lady Jersey: "It vont do she must put on another face." She wears three feathers in her hair. On the extreme right is a dressing-table and beneath it sits a dog. Cruikshank, it appears, borrowed from the Aesop Fable "Washing the Ethiopian." This theme of this fable originated in a master's mistaken belief that he could make a black servant turn white. However he finally realized that a person's basic nature does not change.<sup>142</sup> Cruikshank utilized this fable to satirize these individuals with a blackface comedy illustrating the continued usage of blacks as tools for English attitudes. These images ridiculed blacks and used their bodies as a source of satire.

Richard Cosway, a noteworthy miniature artist of the eighteenth century painted a family portrait of himself, his wife, and their black servant. The painting titled *Mr. and Mrs. Cosway* (Figure 12) depicted the Cosways sitting in a decadent garden with the black servant pulling grapes from a tree and serving them to the couple. The servant's uniform was a fashionable assemblage. The Cosways had become famous in the late eighteenth century for their gaudy dress and well-decorated home that became celebrated for hosting the elite and royalty of British society. Cosway's success as a painter and his style of dress produced great jealousy amongst other artists of the period. The black servant dressed in crimson silk with elaborate lace and gold letters, also became a focal point of his critics. Cosway also bore the brunt of much scorn for his visage and was often teased for his personal appearance

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<sup>142</sup> Edward Baldwin, *The Book of Fables: Selections From Aesop and Other Authors Explained, and Adapted to Popular Use* (New York: Robert B. Collins, 1856), 131-134.

and insulted for having a monkey face.<sup>143</sup> But Cosway, in his self-portrait, was using his servant to illustrate his opulent lifestyle.



**Figure 12 Richard Cosway, Mr. and Mrs. Cosway (1784). © Trustees of the British Museum**

### Caricatures

Another aspect of English painting found black depictions that delivered crude depictions of blacks laced with racism. Richard Cosway's black servant became subject of ridicule in a caricature painting by William Howitt. Howitt gained fame as a landscape painter but also helped his brother-in-law, Thomas Rowlandson, a

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<sup>143</sup>George C. Williamson, *Richard Cosway, R.A. by Himself* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1905), 25-32.

famous satire artist of the same period with a variety of prints.<sup>144</sup> Howitt undoubtedly joined other artists in their distaste for Cosway and lampooned him and his black servant with the painting known as *Richard Cosway's Servant* (Figure 13). Howitt depicts a figure with a huge head, and big lips, holding all the tools of a painter. In essence he is using stylized, exaggerated feature to depict the servant as a way of ridiculing Cosway.



**Figure 13 William Samuel Howitt, Richard Cosway's Servant. © Trustees of the British Museum**

These types of caricatures are revealed in two other prints that are from two different periods but share a similar topic, which was the shocking nature of interracial unions between white men and black women. The first painting by William Hogarth, known as *Qui Color albus erat, nunc est contraries albo* ("What was once white is now the opposite"); or *The Discovery* (Figure 14), was originally

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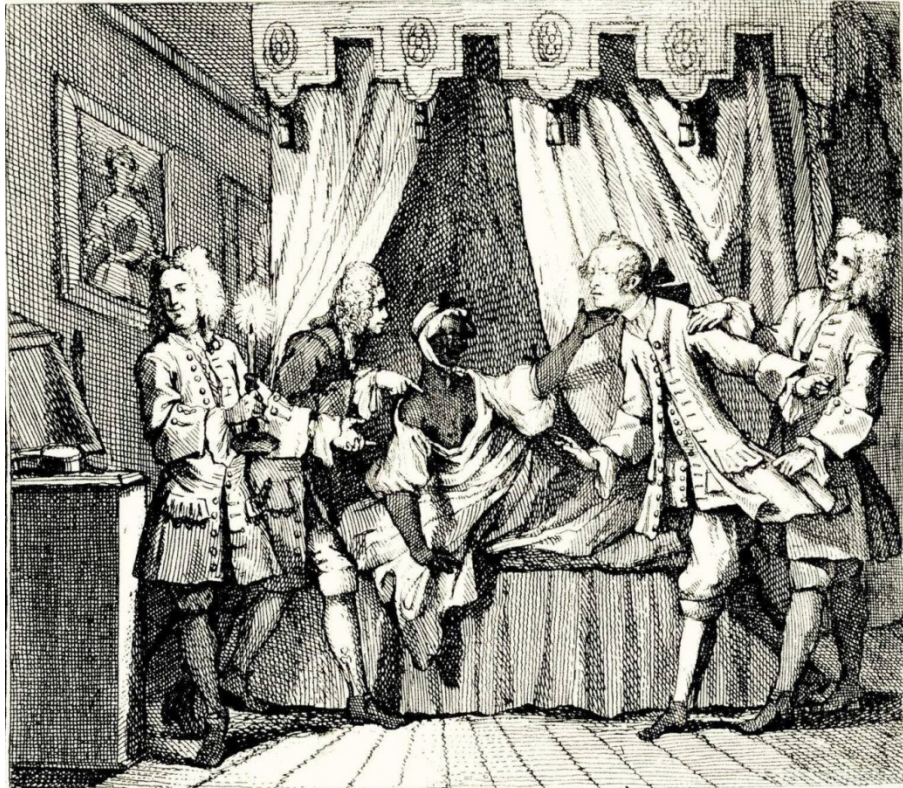
<sup>144</sup>Ralph Nevill, *Old Sporting Prints* (London: The Cranford Press, 1908), 30.

created in 1743. Samuel Ireland published the piece again twenty-five years after the death of Hogarth in 1788. The painting depicts Mr. Highmore a former manager of the Drury Lane Theatre. Highmore had infamously tried to seduce the wife of a friend. This indecency brought a great amount of ridicule after his failed attempt. The print is a recording of his failure as his friends find him a half-naked black woman. His friends had placed the black woman placed in the bed, so instead of the white wife of his friend, who was the object of his wishes.<sup>145</sup> The original print from its initial appearance faced suppression. Only about ten or twelve impressions were taken before it was destroyed.<sup>146</sup> Perhaps the climate of the times did not support the imagery of the interracial union between a white man and a black woman. Nevertheless, the print did not receive a true public airing until the latter half of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>145</sup> Samuel Ireland, *Graphic Illustrations of Hogarth from Pictures, Drawings, and Scarce Prints in the Possession of Samuel Ireland* (London: R. Faulder, 1794), 111-112.

<sup>146</sup> Ireland, *Graphic Illustrations*, 112.



**Figure 14 William Hogarth, *Qui Color albus erat, nunc est contraries albo* (“What was once white is now the opposite”) or *The Discovery* (1788). © Trustees of the British Museum**

Isaac Cruikshank created the second painting *A Morning Surprise* (Figure 15) around 1807. Both paintings depict a man startled to find in his bed a black woman. Cruikshank created a mocking picture of the black woman with protruding eyes, big lips, and other features designed to show a grotesque display of the black woman. The similarities between the two paintings are the feigned surprise of both white men to find black women in their bed. Both artists depicted interracial sex as either repulsive or deserving of ridicule. In contrast to the commentators who feared miscegenation and believed lower-class white women would succumb to black men,

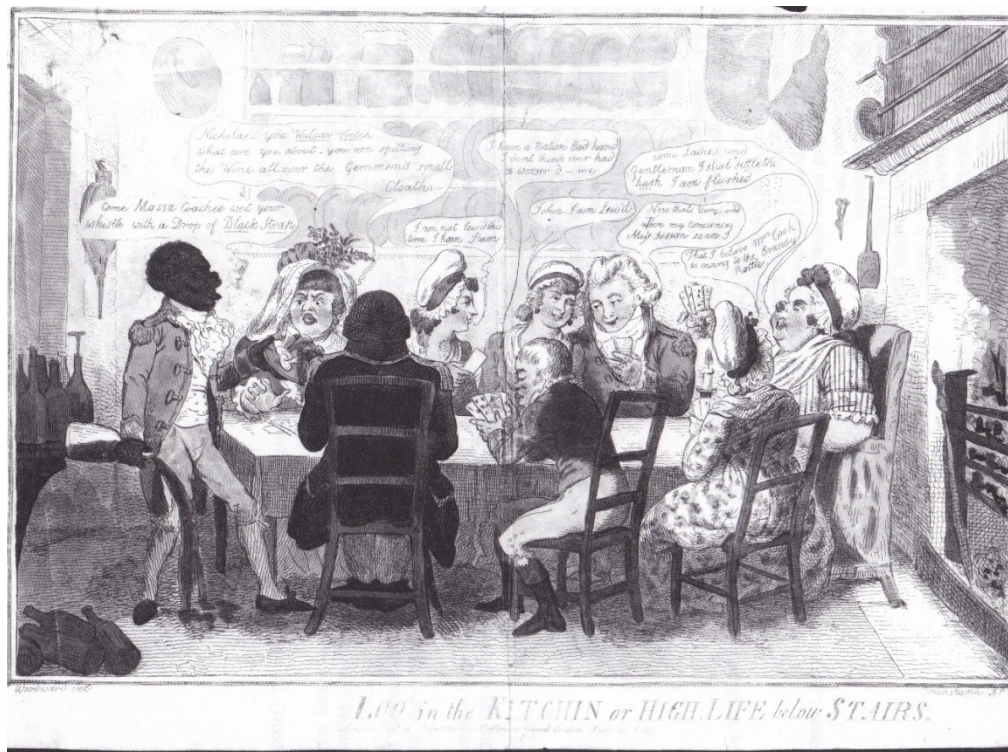
Hogarth and Cruikshank depicted the horror of well-to-do white men in the intimate company of black women. Interracial sex was a fear on many levels.



**Figure 15 George M. Woodward, *A Morning Surprise* (1807). © Trustees of the British Museum**

Isaac Cruikshank caricatured white and black servants in his painting *Loo in the Kitchen or High Life Below Stairs* (1799) (Figure 16). The servants are playing a card game, loo, in the kitchen. Each person in Cruikshank's image has speaking parts, but it seems clear that the black servant is not taking part in the card game. He is still serving the servants. In multiple ways Cruikshank reminds the viewer that the black was indeed a servant, and Cruikshank utilized broken English to represent the black man's speech. The intent was clearly not a sympathetic depiction, but one intended to mock the black servant.





**Figure 16 George M. Woodward, Loo in the Kitchen or High Life below Stairs (1799). © Trustees of the British Museum**

The representation of blacks in English art testified to their place in society. They were indeed part of the social fabric. The depictions of blacks included a variety of occupations including footmen, coachmen, pageboys, soldiers, sailors, musicians, prostitutes, beggars, and prisoners. English prints and portraits interpreted the experience of the blacks in both upper-class society and in contact with the lower orders. Numerous English paintings depicted the sense of otherness of blacks in the alien environment of the aristocratic and middle-class household. Blacks in the paintings of wealthy Britons typically remained mute in the background and received no acknowledgement. The blacks depicted in portraits often demonstrated no emotion and seemed devoid of personality or expression. Oftentimes these images of

blacks served as tokens, reinforcing the affluence and the colonial business interests of their masters. The paintings did not represent blacks as individuals in English society, but rather as stereotypes. Some painters used black people as objects of scorn or contempt.

English attitudes toward blacks found expression through the written word, on stage, and on artist's canvasses. English ideas about blacks during the period reveal multiple themes. There were those Britons who held the extreme view of fearing the black presence. Others utilized black imagery to gain notoriety and fame from the stage. Some made blacks the objects of ridicule in order to promote their own status as humorists. In some instances, whites treated blacks with great hostility, but in other contexts, whites were sympathetic. The ambiguous status of blacks in Britain found reflection in the multiple images that whites constructed of them.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LONDON BLACK COMMUNITY

Eighteenth-century London's black community was very diverse. This chapter will demonstrate that prior to and after the *Somerset* decision the social conditions of blacks in London society was complex, ranging from runaway slaves to the historic lives of well-known individuals such as Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano and Ignatius Sancho. The evidence of the diversity of black life exists in a variety of sources such as advertisements, criminal court cases, parish registers, Black Poor records, Loyalist records and the writings of literate blacks.

Although some monographs describe experience of blacks in England, many of the writings are one dimensional. Many neglect of the complexity of African life. However, close examination of advertisements seeking return of runaway black servants reveal the humanity and personhood of those running away. Information about the place of origin of Africans, scarification, clothing, skills and languages spoken, demonstrate the blacks were not just enslaved servants, rather, their lives reflect the same degree of diversity of the human experience as those who owned them as masters.

Newspaper advertisements seeking black runaways demonstrate a great range of information prior to and after the Somerset decision that sheds light on the social condition of blacks in Britain. Black runaway advertisements before and after 1772 reveal the ambiguous status of blacks after deserting their masters.

Inside and outside the maze of the legality of slavery in eighteenth-century London were black runaways themselves. They continued to find their own mechanisms of escape from “enslaved servitude” by deserting their masters’ service. However, several questions arise about conditions that certainly faced all black runaways. How did blacks who ran away survive in London? What was their incentive for running away? Did they receive help from other blacks or whites in London?

Contemporary historical references suggest that community formations of blacks in London were vital to survival. Not only did the black servant class form societies to protect their interests and help their fellow servants and new arrivals, these societies encouraged servants to desert their masters and contract marriages as soon as possible after arrival in London.<sup>147</sup> A few answers to the above questions answers are found in contemporary references that suggest community formation.

A 1767 advertisement in the *Public Advertiser* sought a runaway Negro man slave named Jack who called himself John Dixon. He had allegedly stolen clothing and other items. His master believed that another servant, a thin medium-sized sickly woman, who pretended to be his wife, was the instigator of the slave running away. The master stated in the advertisement that the woman at some point faced a discharge from her service as a ladies maid from the same household.<sup>148</sup> This suggests that the lower class of whites, with their threats of sedition, helped to foster a

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<sup>147</sup>Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 71.

<sup>148</sup>*Public Advertiser*, February 20, 1767.

climate advantageous to black resistance and self-emancipation. Black runaways may have found aid and comfort among working-class communities of poor whites. Whites would regularly keep kidnappers from recapturing blacks, and sometimes they would protect them with a threat of mass violence against press gangs sent by the former masters seeking the return of their property.

Newspaper advertisements offer a rich source of evidence about the lives of black runaways. The three newspapers that contained the bulk of the advertisements were the *Daily Advertiser* (1743-1796), the *Public Advertiser* (1753-1793), and *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (1735-1797). The latter had previously borne the title, *The London Gazetteer*, between the years 1735 and 1753, and it was entitled *The Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser* from 1753 to 1764.

The importance of advertisements stems from the valuable biographical details and descriptions they offer about the runaways. Advertisements for runaways represented, albeit in a different way, something akin to slave narratives. Clearly, advertisements are not the same as slave narratives, but they offer a rare glimpse into the lives of the runaway. The traditional slave narrative offers rich and vivid autobiographical information. The voice of the slave remains silent in advertisements, but the source introduces significant details about his or her life and culture. Thus, the newspaper advertisements in an important way allow the reader to deduce some information about black individuals seeking their freedom.

The advertisements provide evidence of the existence of a black presence in the social world of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century London. All black

runaways in Britain during the late eighteenth century were practicing a form of self-emancipation. Their flight generated newspaper advertisements seeking their recapture and return. The advertisements go beyond the confines of slave history. They are the history of the other Britain, that of a small black community that was part of the fabric of the British experience. The descriptions in the ads reveal a great deal about the status, physical characteristics, language skills, age, color, dress, occupation, origins, and personal qualities of the fugitives.

Newspapers allowed the owners to offer information about their black “property” and provide some understanding of the status of blacks in England. These newspaper advertisements served as a mechanism for masters to recover runaway slaves, servants, and apprentices. Similarly, newspapers provided a means for officers to find deserting recruits, and to magistrates and crime victims searching for their stolen goods and their robbers.

In utilizing newspapers as a historical source, it is important to examine newspaper culture during eighteenth century. During its publishing history the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* held the reputation of the most famous or the most infamous daily newspaper published in England, depending upon the political persuasion of its individual reader. The paper was an appendage of Prime Minister Robert Walpole in the early eighteenth century. The paper received financing from the Whigs and served their interests. During the mid to late eighteenth-century the *Gazetteer* uncoupled from a relationship that closely tied it to the whims of government influence, the newspaper exercised more independence in its coverage.

Its editor boasted that it was the most widely circulated daily paper in London. Despite this misleading self-promotion, it did not have the highest circulation, yet its longevity of sixty-two years and two months attests to its importance.<sup>149</sup>

The augmentation in the name of the *Gazetteer's* subtitle after 1753 placed it in direct competition with the *Daily Advertiser* and *Public Advertiser*.<sup>150</sup> These three newspapers competed for readership in late eighteenth-century London. There were many other newspapers in London, yet these were the only three that carried the title of “advertiser” as part of their name, if only for a time. All three newspapers were remarkably alike in layout and carried similar news. The editor of the *Gazetteer*, Charles Say, injected subtle differences into his newspaper to attract readers, and he oversold ads in an attempt to undercut his competition.

Despite the claims of its rivals, the *Daily Advertiser* reigned supreme and had the largest circulation amongst the three newspapers that held the name “advertiser” in their title. The *Gazetteer* and the *Public Advertiser* measured their popularity by comparing themselves to the *Daily Advertiser*. Editors consistently remarked in describing their circulation to public with the proverbial: “exceeded only by the *Daily Advertiser*.”<sup>151</sup> The *Daily Advertiser* was more popular because its sole focus as a newspaper was advertising, and this produced a large circulation. The *Daily Advertiser* was a pioneer in the process of specialization. It became the first to make

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<sup>149</sup>Robert Haig, *The Gazetteer, 1735-1797: A Study in Eighteenth-Century English Newspaper* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1960), v.

<sup>150</sup>Haig, *The Gazetteer*, 33.

<sup>151</sup>Haig, *The Gazetteer*, 57.

advertising its primary function. Not all the advertisements submitted for print could fit in the *Daily Advertiser*, and the other two newspapers benefited from the overflow.

The title of “advertiser” does not lessen the importance of the newspapers, because all London newspapers were “advertisers” in eighteenth-century London. Because advertising served as an important kind of commercial intelligence, which meant an audience needed daily information this placed newspapers known as advertisers in the same class as any other newspaper. *The Daily Advertiser*, was not a typical newspaper in the modern sense, as the paper contained some general news, but no essays or correspondence. *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* and the *Public Advertiser* differed from the *Daily Advertiser* by including not only advertisements, but letters to the publisher, responses to the letters, London news, appointments and promotions, police and legal news, reports of births, marriages, and deaths. The paper also included stock prices, sales of real estate, auctions, and foreign news.

Thus, these newspapers offer vital information on significant aspects of black life in eighteenth-century London. The advertisements reveal the naming patterns of many black runaways. These included African names and English surnames. It appears that blacks changed their names upon baptism, perhaps signaling a new persona to go along with change. Names held great importance, including among of the people from West and Central Africa. The changing of a name represented at



different stages an indication of a major occurrence in an individual's life.<sup>152</sup> In Africa, a person had the honor or the distinction of receiving a name by one's parent or ethnic group. A name often gave Africans a sense of cultural identity and a bond to their history.<sup>153</sup> The first act of slave owners in the African Diaspora was to change the name of a slave and strip that person of his or her former identity. Similar to slaves all across the Americas, black runaways in London received names of biblical, classical, Anglo, literary, geographical, or absurd origins. In the advertisements appeared names such as Sancho,<sup>154</sup> Pollydare,<sup>155</sup> Cuped,<sup>156</sup> Jack,<sup>157</sup> Phebe,<sup>158</sup> Scipio,<sup>159</sup> Quaco, who answers to the name Richard,<sup>160</sup> and Pickles.<sup>161</sup> In Africa, the process by which a name originated could include the practice of using days of the week, months, and seasons. Thus in Africa, a name such as "Quaco" meant born on a Wednesday<sup>162</sup>, and "Jack" was a derivative of "Quaco," and the names "Sam" and "Sambo" are various forms of the same name. The female slave names "Phoebe" and "Phibba were also very similar."<sup>163</sup> Several black runaways had more than one name.

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<sup>152</sup>Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 89.

<sup>153</sup>Ibid, 85.

<sup>154</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 5 September 1774.

<sup>155</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 2 March 1774.

<sup>156</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 16 February 1768.

<sup>157</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 21 December 1773.

<sup>158</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 3 September 1772.

<sup>159</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 11 July 1769.

<sup>160</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 18 July 1771.

<sup>161</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 21 January 1773.

<sup>162</sup>Michael Craton and Garry Greenland, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 59.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid, 156.

Advertisements that list surnames for black runaways demonstrate that a common practice of plantation life in the Americas, whereby a slave assumed the name of the master, was not always the case in London. This difference may emanate from the fact that most runaways appeared to change their names after escaping from their masters. Multiple advertisements confirmed the use of surnames. For example, one advertisement listed a runaway named “Sancho, it is supposed he goes by the name of James Brown.”<sup>164</sup> A second notice sought a “Negro man slave, named Jack and who calls himself John Dixon.”<sup>165</sup> Female runaways also appeared to change their names similar to males such as revealed in an advertisement referring to an “eloped, a female mulatto, called Elizabeth Donalson, or Dennison.”<sup>166</sup>

Advertisements that refer to the act of baptism often had one name or a surname. “Ran way “a Negro man named Pleasant, says he is christened and that his name is John.”<sup>167</sup> Similar advertisements offered other examples “absented from his master, a Negro fellow, named Cato, who was christened at St. Giles’s, on the 23d of April last, by the name of John Rowland,”<sup>168</sup> and “Sam, lately christened John.”<sup>169</sup> Indeed, many runaways perhaps received a baptism as justification for discarding their old names. In response to the master’s initial act of stripping the servant of his or her name, a runaway, in the first act of freedom, claimed a new name signaling a new persona. Very frequently in the advertisements, masters failed to mention a name for

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<sup>164</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 18 October 1771.

<sup>165</sup>*Public Advertiser*, 20 February 1767.

<sup>166</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 31 March 1770.

<sup>167</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 12 October 1770.

<sup>168</sup>*Public Advertiser*, 26 June 1771.

<sup>169</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 1 December 1770.

a runaway. A possible reason for could be the master's attempt to deny the black humanity of the runaways. The absence of names classified the runaways as mere appendages to their masters or mistresses as slaves, apprentices, or indentured servants.

The advertisements indicate that a great number of black servants arrived from outside of London. Many of the black runaways were not born in England. Several advertisements listed various points of origins and assumptions about the route blacks may have taken to enter London. The places runaways came from included Africa, the Caribbean, North America, other parts of Great Britain. Advertisements seeking blacks commonly noted diverse origins such as “a Virginia-born mulatto boy slave,” “Natives of the island of Bermuda,”<sup>170</sup> “born in Georgia,”<sup>171</sup> “the Negro is a Congo negro,”<sup>172</sup> “of the Angola country,”<sup>173</sup> “from the island of Martinico,”<sup>174</sup> “native of Madagascar,”<sup>175</sup> “lately come from New York.”<sup>176</sup> Other examples of points of origins for black runaways included that two runaways were from Jamaica.<sup>177</sup> One advertisement was for a runaway from Africa named Dick.<sup>178</sup> The ability to identify a place of origin for an individual runaway provides a mechanism to examine his or her route into London. Most of the Africans enslaved in the Atlantic System came from an area bounded by Senegal on the north, and

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<sup>170</sup>*Public Advertiser*, August 11, 1768.

<sup>171</sup>*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, February 22, 1770.

<sup>172</sup>*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, July 29, 1767.

<sup>173</sup>*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, June 17, 1769.

<sup>174</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, July 11, 1769.

<sup>175</sup>*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, July 6, 1768.

<sup>176</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, September 16, 1768.

<sup>177</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 20 November 1776, 25 June 1777.

<sup>178</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 11 May 1775.

Angola in the south. Other Africans came from Mozambique and, to a lesser extent, Madagascar. The procurement areas for slaves extended several hundred miles from the coast into the interior. Some regions supplied more slaves than others, and their importance to the slave traffic changed over time depending on factors of supply and demand.<sup>179</sup>

An advertisement that attested to the Atlantic-wide movement of blacks during this period involved a black runaway named Joseph Robinson. Robinson found himself part of the Atlantic System because he was Ellis's slave. The advertisement that sought his return listed the facts of Robinson's history. "Run Away Saturday Night, a Negro Man, named Joseph Robinson, bought of Governor Ellis in Georgia in the Year 1760."<sup>180</sup> Robinson's master, Pickering Robinson characterized Joseph as his property and indicated that he spoke good English and could write. The Governor Ellis mentioned in the advertisement was Henry Ellis, the second colonial Governor of Georgia. Before serving as governor, he had been an explorer, author, scientist, geographer. Ellis was part of a 1746 naval expedition to discover the Northwest Passage. Another intriguing part of Ellis's biography was his role as an English slave trader. He personally procured slaves from Africa for sale in Jamaica from 1750 to 1755. He became royal governor of Georgia in 1758 and helped to establish an effective constitutional government. By 1760, Ellis claimed the "subtropical" heat was harming his health and sought a recall from the British

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<sup>179</sup>Colin A. Palmer, *Passageways: An Interpretive History of Black America to 1865* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 42. Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Start of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 805

<sup>180</sup>*The Public Advertiser*, March 11, 1767.

government. Before leaving Georgia on November 2, 1760, Governor Ellis sold his slave Joseph Robinson to Pickering Robinson in Georgia.<sup>181</sup> Ellis's expertise on American affairs made him useful during the French and Indian War and he had considerable influence on the 1763 Treaty of Paris, which ended the French and Indian War. Ellis spent the period after his governorship living in Great Britain and France and died in Naples in 1806 after spending sometime as an observer of Napoleon's Italian campaigns.

There are clear indications from the advertisements that servitude continued to define the status of blacks in London after the 1772 *Somerset* decision. The appellations "indentured servant" and "apprentice" had become the preferred terminology to describe the status of black runaways. These terms appear to be nothing more than attempt to keep blacks in slavery under a different name. These types of situations point to a larger social reality that confirms to the ambiguity of status after *Somerset*.

Advertisements listed the status of the runaway variously as Negro servant, apprentice, or indentured servant. Most of the advertisements after 1772 were seeking young boys and mention that the individuals were repeat runaways. There is no mention of wages paid to any of these indentured servants or apprentices. Repeated attempts to escape servitude suggest that, whatever the status of the fugitive, a resistance to his or her lot existed and the black was seeking to change his or her

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<sup>181</sup>James F. Cook, *The Governors of Georgia, 1754-2004* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 5-7. Edward J. Cashin, *Governor Henry Ellis and the Transformation of British North America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 40-45.

condition. Frequent escapes are evidence of some process that allowed repeated chances to escape. Does recapture indicate that for some masters the advertisement served their purpose? There was no corroborating evidence in the advertisements, that provided evidence of the success of runaway ads as a means to recapture blacks. One such example of a repeat runaway was young black boy, who “Ran away on Monday Evening last, a Black boy about 13 years old. He is sulky and will not tell who he belongs to. He hath ran away above a dozen Times.”<sup>182</sup>

The absence of any identifiable artisans seeking their black servants perhaps indicates that the term “apprentice” was a mere euphemism for enslaved servants. Quite clearly, a black indentured servant, like a black apprentice, might have been a substitute name for a black slave. These terms characterizing status maybe have had one meaning and application for Englishmen and another for black people. An apprentice usually was bound to a skilled artisan for a period of years and was learning a trade or craft, which afforded some skills and wages. Advertisements seldom mention skills or crafts membership, and this possibly was an indicator that blacks were simply servants. They were not in service to learn a trade, but to serve. For the black runaways service was equal to status as much as occupation. Furthermore, after 1731, blacks were forbidden to learn a trade in London.<sup>183</sup> The lord mayor of London issued a proclamation prohibiting apprenticeship for black people:

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<sup>182</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 10 October 1772.

<sup>183</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 74.

It is Ordered by this Court, That for the future no Negroes or other *Blacks* be suffered to be bound Apprentices at any of the Companies of this City to any Freeman thereof; and that Copies of this Order be printed and sent to the Masters and Wardens of the several Companies of this City who are required to see the same at all times hereafter duly observed.<sup>184</sup>

There is no evidence to indicate the voiding of this order in London. Its impact may have lessened as the years passed, or the law may have become unimportant, as masters did not hire any blacks as time waned. What is clear is that some imperative produced a law to either curtail or prevent any future black participation in apprenticeships.

There are no advertisements after the *Somerset* case seeking the return of a “slave”, but even without using the term, those notices seeking return of apprentices and indentured servants clearly indicate the practice of holding blacks for service that had no termination date. Indenture and contracts implied two responsible parties forming a partnership. The service of blacks in London make it dubious that runaways, some as young as nine years old, were able to enter into apprentice contracts. How could a contract be valid when one party was not free? Several advertisements contain the phrase “belonging to” which connotes ownership. After the *Somerset* case, it appears to have been a normal practice of owners to circumvent the law and use the title, “apprentice” to identify their runaway blacks. A runaway from a ship, named John Cau symbolizes the ambiguity of status and freedom that

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<sup>184</sup>James Walvin, *The Black Presence: A Documentary History of the Negro in England, 1555-1860* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972, 65. Proclamation by the Lord Mayor of London, September 14, 1731.

was the lot of far too many blacks. Cau had lived with his master James Young and Young's father in London for 22 years. The age listed for him in the advertisement was 30 years of age. This means that John Cau had been a servant in the Young family since he was 8 years old. There was no mention of the terms "slave" "apprentice" or "indentured servant," but it appears his service was perpetual.<sup>185</sup> Domestic servants did several jobs in eighteenth-century England including serving as stewards, valets, butlers, gardeners, coachmen, footmen, grooms, maids, housekeepers, and cooks. These type of occupational duties are not found in the advertisements seeking black runaways.

The nature of blacks' legal standing remained a central facet in multiple advertisements. The advertisements seeking one of the oldest black runaways, named Cato, attests to the problematic nature of status in eighteenth-century London. Cato was about thirty years of age at the time he escaped from a ship. Cato had served eight years onboard the ship *Heart of Oak* in the capacity of a cook. His description in the advertisement listed factors such as having a body of middle stature, and a good command of English. The five guineas reward offered for Cato's represents one of the largest amounts offered during this period. The advertisement in the *Daily Advertiser* noted that he had taken a chest of clothes with him and made no mention of his status.<sup>186</sup> A second advertisement described Cato as about five feet eight inches high and missing several of his front teeth. It mentioned his escape from onboard the *Christian Smith*, a ship bound for Antigua some ten days earlier. His

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<sup>185</sup>*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 11 August 1769.

<sup>186</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 8 June 1772.



cooking skills were possibly aiding him in obtaining passage onboard ships. A warning to all ship captains directed them not to receive or harbor him.<sup>187</sup>

Cato had escaped from the *Heart of Oak* in early June 1772, a few weeks before the *Somerset* decision, and the second advertisement appeared September 9, 1772, a few months after the *Somerset Case*. Cato was apparently trying to secure his freedom by leaving Great Britain. The case appeared to have no impact upon his status, as the owner continued his pursuit of Cato. This habit of taking clothes was typical when a runaway escaped his master. His taking a chest of clothes also indicates that Cato may have intended to change his attire in order to elude capture in London, or perhaps he intended to sell the clothing and use the receipts to maintain himself in London. Cato, despite his murky legal status, like many other poor people in London, sought to survive the misery of the lower orders.<sup>188</sup>

The runaway advertisements at times reveal contradictory assertions of status for the same individual. A runaway named Weymouth was the subject of two advertisements in 1779. The language used in the advertisements reveals the continued ambiguity at the heart of the black experience in London. The September 1779 advertisement listed his name, Weymouth, but the December advertisement did not. The subscriber, or person who paid for the advertisement, lists his status as an indentured servant in September, but in the December advertisement Weymouth had the moniker “apprentice” attached to him. It was also apparent that this individual

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<sup>187</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 9 September 1772.

<sup>188</sup>Mary Dorothy George, *London Life in the XVIIIth Century* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1925), 171-172.

had repeatedly run away, as the December advertisement alludes to the fact that the runaway left “last Saturday” while the other runaway notice was in September.<sup>189</sup>

These examples illustrate the uncertainty of English law in relation to blacks during the late eighteenth-century. Regardless of the different categories of status afforded blacks, they still owed service to a master or mistress.

The ambiguity of status becomes clearer when examining the dress of black runaways. Clothing, always a marker of class and status, by its very opulence ironically indicated the lowliness of the servant’s position even though he may have been a pampered pet. An owner’s distinctive livery would constitute a distinguishable marker to connote who owned the runaway. Knowing what type of clothing a black runaway wore was similar to knowing his or her owner’s name. Newspaper advertisements illustrate the ways in which masters fashioned the appearance of their “servile servants.” At the same time, the autonomy that runaways exercised in their choice of clothes may perhaps say something about their own outlook on their appearance. Many advertisements listed a style of clothing known as livery. The livery was a style of uniform, fashionably cut, which identified one as a servant. The affluent would often display their wealth and good taste by dressing their blacks in showy liveries, which cemented their presence as a status symbol for a specific owner.<sup>190</sup> The wearing of livery served as a means of identification in the advertisement to aid the capture of a runaway, because the clothing was so

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<sup>189</sup>*The Daily Advertiser*, September 14, 1779, December 8, 1779.

<sup>190</sup>John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 51-55. Fryer, *Staying Power*, 25.

conspicuous it was easily identifiable. Livery suits looked sophisticated, but they were a sign of submission. The suit was an indication of the status of the owner, not of the servant wearing the clothing. Livery suits followed the clothing style generally recognized by known experts of the period. These suits typically had a contrasting color on the cuffs and collar, and usually embellished with special braid trimmings and buttons. A black male servant usually wore a livery. Some examples of livery styles worn included descriptions such as the description of a servant named Pickles wore an “olive-colored thickset coat and breeches, a green waistcoat with red and white Livery lace, and a blue baise surtout coat, and plain hat when he left.”<sup>191</sup> Samuel Taylor had “on a brown Livery turned up with blue.”<sup>192</sup> John Otley, was dressed in “an old brown Livery coat and waistcoat, lined with crimson, the cape and cuffs laced, buckskin breeches and silver buckles.”<sup>193</sup>

Many advertisements listed other clothing that clearly was not a livery uniform. This was possibly some indication that not all domestic servants performed the same tasks in a household or that some blacks enjoyed a higher status in a household than other blacks. Some clothing worn by runaways included fustian frocks, a type of cotton and linen mix; this was what someone at the lower order of society would wear. Their wardrobes often included short jackets, trousers or leather breeches, also worn by the lower orders.<sup>194</sup> Examples of this type of clothing abound in the advertisements. “Ran away, a Negro Man Servant, named Johnathan, but has

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<sup>191</sup>*The Daily Advertiser* 21 January 1773.

<sup>192</sup>*The Daily Advertiser* 24 October 1774.

<sup>193</sup>*The Daily Advertiser* 29 March 1775.

<sup>194</sup>Shane White and Graham White, “Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *Past and Present*, 148 (1995):153.

lately taken upon himself the Name of John Lambert. He has was dressed in a Thickset Coat and Waistcoat, and a Pair of dark Fustian Breeches, Worsted Stockings, Shoes with yellow Buckles, a Hat with a Gold Loop and Button; the Wool of Head is Short.”<sup>195</sup>

Blacks who fled from ships wore clothing that was similar to non-ship runways or wore clothing that signified they were sailors, such as a sailor’s habit. One escaped black sailor, “a Negro Man, named Barbitson, ran away from the *Ship Lydia*” and “had on a long blue Coat, with Breeches tied at the Knees with blue Tape, or Trowsers, and took with him a dark Fustian Suit of Cloth’s almost new, which is two small for him, two Hats, one with Silver Button and Loop, the other with a red Ribbon round it.”<sup>196</sup> Barbitson’s stealing extra clothes confirms the common practice of taking extra clothes. He stole clothing that was of a different style from the kind he was wearing.

Other examples show the variety of clothing worn by blacks in London. “Ran away a Negro Man named Sancho, had on when he went away a blue Suit of Cloaths with yellow Metal Buttons, Silver Buckles in his Shoes and Knees, had on a genteel Hat, his Hair generally well dressed.”<sup>197</sup> Sancho’s possession of a silver buckle indicated he might have been a servant attached to someone with great wealth. Most poor people in London did not possess silver buckles. It was more common for them to own buckles made of iron and brass.<sup>198</sup> Another individual named “Juba, a Negro

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<sup>195</sup>*The Public Advertiser*, March 10, 1769.

<sup>196</sup>*The Daily Advertiser*, October 3, 1777.

<sup>197</sup>*The Daily Advertiser*, October 18, 1771.

<sup>198</sup>John Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 40.

Man “had on a blue Coat very long in the Skirts, not made for him, Leather Breeches, and black Stockings, and a Hat with a Silver Tassel; he has along with him a blue Sourtout and Shirt; a blue Livery Cottee with worsted Lace, with a Waist-coat of the same Kind, which he wears; all much worn.”<sup>199</sup> It appears that Juba always wore the same two outfits, hence the master making sure to include a note about the condition of the well-worn attire.

Sometimes an advertisement reveals something of the accepted customs at that time. A young runaway, a black boy, about 14 years old, “had on a plush coat, waistcoat and breeches, with blue livery lace round the neck and cuffs, dark mottled flockings, and a turban; with a silver tassel on the top.”<sup>200</sup> This black boy obviously wore fine clothing. The description in the advertisement alludes to a person who most likely was a household servant.

The advertisements oftentimes noted that the runaway had stolen some item when fleeing. The elaborate garments of livery and other clothing were the property of the owner. The advertisements listing articles of clothing were very descriptive and indicated that masters wanted their clothing returned. The conditions of late eighteenth-century London would have induced such acts. The thefts may have allowed the runaway to sell the goods for food or barter entry onboard ships. One listing stated that the runaway “had in his possession a small silver stand, with six cut glass cruets, and labels, with a crest, on the stand, an eagle looking out of a ducal

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<sup>199</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, September 30, 1771.

<sup>200</sup>*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, June 17, 1769.

caronet.”<sup>201</sup> This stand, according to the master, was the enticement that caused the runaway’s flight from servitude.

Black sailors were part of the self-emancipation process. Many runaways from ships were the subject of advertisements. One advertisement proclaimed: “Ran away from his master’s lodgings, Negro named Jack is an apprentice to the sea.” Another notice read “runaway from onboard the ship *Hero*, an apprentice, a Negro boy named Pollydare.” “Ran away from the *Brig Mercury*, Samuel Black, a Negro servant, bound apprentice to the sea.” “A Negro servant ran away from onboard the ship *Lydia*.” “A black boy, called Weymouth, about fourteen years old ran away from his master onboard a ship.” “Ran away from the ship *Lord Howe*, Benjamin Francis (a free Negro man) apprentice.” “Ran away from the ship *Eden*, from Jamaica, a Negro indentured servant named Carhil about fifteen years old.”<sup>202</sup> These runaways from ships attest to the thread of sailing, which runs through many of the advertisements. The ship was not only a mode of transport, but it also served as an instrument of communication and played an important part in allowing blacks to elude their masters.

Black people in London, not unlike the entire English populations, were not immune from threat of impressments. For blacks, impressment was a danger, regardless whether they were free or unfree. Press gangs supplied the manpower onboard ships. In 1771, in the case of Thomas Lewis, his master hired a press gang to

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<sup>201</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 14 July 1775.

<sup>202</sup>*The Daily Advertiser* 8 June 1772, 21 December 1773, 2 March 1774, 29 September 1777, 3 October 1777, 13 September 1779, 30 October 1779, 20 November 1776.

kidnap him. An advertisement for a runaway Negro boy Sampson, who ran away from the *Ship Polly*, mentioned he was supposed to have entered a press gang.<sup>203</sup>

Employers commonly used press gangs to rid themselves of unruly apprentices and very often to recover runaway slaves, or clear the streets of idle workers.<sup>204</sup> The practice of impressment closely correlated to slavery in the English mindset, and press gangs served as slave catchers in many English ports. The practice of impressment angered and frightened sailors, black and white. Impressments meant the loss of freedom, both personal and economic, and many times the loss of life itself. Impressment was a disruptive force that united land-based groups and sailors to form a unified front to fight against a practice that created coerced servitude.<sup>205</sup>

How black sailors and runaways utilized indigenous and new languages was an essential skill. The English language skills of runaways varied greatly. An acculturation process naturally developed amongst slaves, servants, and apprentices as they entered English society. The ability of some runaways to speak English, and in some cases multiple languages, indicates a great deal of acculturation, and close proximity to their white masters. No advertisements examined in this study mention “Creole” or “pidgin” languages, which were the lingua franca on the coast of Africa. The ability to speak little or no English may have been an indication the runaway

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<sup>203</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, Thomas Lewis 12 March 1770. *Daily Advertiser*, 2 January 1771.

<sup>204</sup>Nicholas Rogers, “Vagrancy, Impressment and the Regulation of Labour in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Slavery and Abolition* 15 (Aug. 1994): 110.

<sup>205</sup>Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Rule of New York’s Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997), 374-390,407.

came directly from Africa.<sup>206</sup> The ability to speak good English probably meant that the individual was “country born” and raised in the colony and acculturated. Africans born and raised in colonial settings had little trouble learning the language.<sup>207</sup> The advertisements frequently alluded to language abilities. Dick, a black boy, an apprentice from the “native coast of Guinea speaks English tolerably well.”<sup>208</sup> A runaway named John spoke very good English;<sup>209</sup> a black boy, named Peter York spoke bad English;<sup>210</sup> “a Mulatto boy, named Northam, just arrived in England, speaks but little English;”<sup>211</sup> “a Negro man named Sam, born in Africa, . . . speaks pretty good English.” A 1775 advertisement described a young runaway as a nine-year-old boy named Waltown, “who can speak little English.”<sup>212</sup> Waltown’s description noted he was “a new Negro boy”, which possibly meant he was newly arrived from Africa. Some runaways spoke multiple languages like John Daw, a Negro man who spoke “good French, but very bad English”;<sup>213</sup> Jack, a Negro boy, who spoke “English very well, and French;”<sup>214</sup> and John Lewis, a Negro man who spoke “the French language and English fluently, stutters a great deal.”<sup>215</sup>

How a runaway wore his or her hair was an important feature of most advertisements. It appears some runaways wore their own hair, but others attempted

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<sup>206</sup>Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 566.

<sup>207</sup>Holloway, *Africanisms*, 84-85.

<sup>208</sup>*The Daily Advertiser*, May 11, 1775.

<sup>209</sup>*Public Advertiser*, 11 August 1768.

<sup>210</sup>*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 6 July 1768.

<sup>211</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, 17 September 1771.

<sup>212</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 16 November 1775.

<sup>213</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, Sept 12, 1771.

<sup>214</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 20 May 1769.

<sup>215</sup>*Public Advertiser* 10 September 1768.



to copy their masters' style of dress and change their social station by wearing wigs. The class distinction of wigs was very important. Wigs were a sign of social status, and a stylish and luxurious wig normally represented a position higher on the social scale.<sup>216</sup> The wearing of even a cheap, well-worn wig also conferred status to some degree to its wearer. Wigs were perhaps worn in a style to mimic the upper class. Notices often listed hairstyle as an indentifying marker to recapture runaways. "Ran away from his Master, A Negroe Man, answers to the name of Charles, and had on when he went away a silver laced hat, a blue plush lapelled coat, a pair of leather breeches, and a false woolly wig, and a pair of half-boots."<sup>217</sup> One master sought to recapture his servant who was "a good-looking Mulatta BOY, named JACK, had on when he went away either a plain brown Fustian Frock and Waistcoat, or a brown Livery Coat turned up with red, red Waistcoat, and red Shag Breeches, wears his own Hair with a Tupee pretty high and tied behind with a Ribbon."<sup>218</sup> Another notice stated: "Run away from his Owner, a Negro Man, named John Chalk, but who has lately gone by the Name of John Smart, woolly Head, but often times wears false Curls."<sup>219</sup> Similarly, an Englishman inserted this ad: "Ran away from his Master, Capt. Alexander Hamilton, a Negro Man, answers to the name of Charles, had on when he went away a Silver-laced Hat, a blue Plush lapelled coat, a Pair of Leather Breeches, a false woolly Wig, and a Pair of Half-boots."<sup>220</sup> The advertisements

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<sup>216</sup>Shane White and Graham J. White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture From Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 50.

<sup>217</sup>*Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, February 29, 1768.

<sup>218</sup>*Public Advertiser*, March 2, 1770.

<sup>219</sup>*Public Advertiser*, January 22, 1768.

<sup>220</sup>*Daily Advertiser*, February 25, 1768.

distinguished between false wooly wigs and wooly heads. A wooly head suggests that the runaway had wore his or her own natural hair and did not wear a wig. The utilization of a false wig perhaps meant that a runaway sought to disguise his or her appearance after running away.

Masters usually offered a reward for the return of each runaway. Most advertisements stated an exact amount. The amount ranged from a half a guinea to twenty pounds. In 1663, the Royal African Company had introduced a new gold coin called the guinea. Throughout the eighteenth century, the guinea was the measure of English wealth.<sup>221</sup> One guinea, which took its name from the gold that came from the Guinea Coast of Africa, equaled 21 shillings. One-pound sterling equaled 20 shillings. In some cases, no reward amount appeared in the advertisements. A threat that appeared often in many instances was that masters would sue anyone who detained or harbored their escaped servant or apprentice.

A consistent refrain in the advertisements was the request that whoever captured the runaway return him or her to a coffeehouse. Coffeehouses provided an adequate place for their repossession. Some noted examples included Carolina Coffeehouse, New Lloyd's Coffeehouse, Jamaica Coffeehouse, Mr. Stewart's Coffeehouse, Bar of Owen's Coffeehouse, Sam's Coffeehouse, and New York Coffeehouse.<sup>222</sup> Coffeehouses served as centers of business, reading rooms, forums for political intrigue and organization, a place for artists and provided a warm fireside

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<sup>221</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 21.

<sup>222</sup>*Daily Advertiser* 12 November 1773, 2 March 1774, 16 November 1775, 26 October 1776, 8 February 1777, 29 September 1777, 3 October 1777.

for politicians and planters to relax. Interested parties could find coffeehouses in most streets, alleyways and thoroughfares of London. They served as the crossroad of international trade and empire, news, and tales from the colonies and trading posts all were heard inside the doors. New Yorkers, Virginians, Carolinians, and Jamaicans stayed abreast of news from home by going to their own coffee houses where they would find colonial newsprints, merchants and travelers fresh from their regions. In addition, slave auctions often took place in coffee houses.<sup>223</sup>

Masters often expressed dismay and surprise that black servants or apprentices were fleeing their service. One master stated in his advertisement that the servant ran away without any provocation.<sup>224</sup> The constant refrain in the advertisements that someone decoyed or misled a servant to abscond implies some confusion amongst the owners about the rationale for a black to desert his or her master. Often the master added a message in the advertisement to entice the runaway to return or to encourage others to return them. “If he will return he may depend on being kindly received.”<sup>225</sup>

That some masters resorted to threats in their attempts to recover blacks revealed other features of the culture of servitude. A master seeking the recovery of a runaway named Harry declared that after Harry had escaped he was unwilling to return to his native Antigua and had formed some bad connections. His master suggested that Harry was under the influence of others who were inducing him to flee. The last caveat offered by the master was a threat that other measures would

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<sup>223</sup>James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1994), 3-4.

<sup>224</sup>*The Daily Advertiser* 17 January 1776.

<sup>225</sup>*The Daily Advertiser* 20 November 1776, 21 January 1773, 17 January 1776.

come, if he did not respond to the advertisement. The master noted that Harry was able to read, thus maybe he expected Harry to read his response. This is the first instance that suggested the premise of runaways reading their own advertisements.<sup>226</sup> The master's surprise or dismay at servants fleeing produced some interesting narratives. One servant, Henry King, handwrote a letter described as very indolent by the master. The master's characterization of the letter as lazy and sluggish implied he saw the letter as an affront to him personally. The master replied in the advertisement that Henry declared his intentions were to remain in England, rather than return to the West Indies. His master stated that King was still his property and was by no means "enfranchised" and that King's services belonged to him. Henry King's brief narrative grants a window into the search for autonomy that propelled many blacks not to accept their conditions upon entering English society.<sup>227</sup>

The newspaper advertisements are a testament to the battle between unfree black laborers and their owners. The skills that they used to survive the streets of London also made them also very valuable to their owners. The advertisements gave focus to some attributes and failed to notice others. These enslaved servants entered London arriving from the different parts of the Atlantic. Their skills, status, names, and culture were all part of a huge network of mobility that brought African, European, North American, and Caribbean history into direct contact with one another to formulate this Atlantic narrative of enslavement and self-emancipation in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century.

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<sup>226</sup>*Public Advertiser*, 17 April 1771.

<sup>227</sup>*Public Advertiser*, 8 October 1771.

The answer to the question of who were the black runaways remains vague, but no longer are their voices silent. Answers reside in an assortment of evidence that only allows part of the composite to form and begins to offer a roadmap for understanding their history with the caveat that their voice remains hidden at this time. The reader can glimpse something of the lived experience of black people in eighteenth-century London. If the legal position of blacks was ambiguous due to the ruling of the *Somerset Case*, masters who observed blacks suggested that many of these enslaved servants thought or imagined themselves free. No matter how unclear the laws, servitude marked the lot of many blacks. The advertisements reveal that no discernible skills were accruing to these servants as apprentices and indentured servants. The very titles “indentured servant” and “apprentice” were possibly no more than appellations to conceal from others the stench of owning slaves in eighteenth century London society. The newspaper advertisements revealed that blacks were willing to run away and self-emancipate, some on multiple occasions. Their owners regarded them as valuable property. There existed great variety in their lives: some were well clothed, some poorly dressed, some spoke English fluently and some had no identifiable language skills. The Atlantic system, which involved humans and goods, created conditions within which blacks were not only commodities but also found ways to gain freedom through this trading system.

The runaways were one part of London’s larger black community. A few privileged blacks attained a level of notoriety inside London that distinguished them from the rest of the black community. One of these individuals was Olaudah

Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, the African, noted former slave and abolitionist. Another was Ignatius Sancho, a former slave turned writer. The third was Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, who became the first black published writer denouncing slavery. All three managed to escape the horrendous conditions, which ensnared so many of their fellow blacks. Their varied routes to London made them part of the jetsam of black humanity dispersed throughout the Atlantic. These three writers and their personal narratives provide case studies about the varieties of ways blacks entered London, how they advocated for blacks, and the manner in which they achieved their emancipation.

Like the black runaways these individual black writers arrived in England by various means. They all lived highly acculturated lives and posited different kinds of agency to address their personal and collective experiences as blacks in English society. Equiano and Cugoano displayed more forceful voices in their writings than Sancho to attack the slave trade and conditions it wrought upon blacks. Each of these three prominent individuals in the black community adds to understanding how blacks lived in eighteenth century London.

Olaudah Equiano became the most famous black in eighteenth-century London. He was perhaps the most traveled black person of the era as his rich narrative attests to the intertwining of various regions and circumstances. Equiano wrote about childhood memories of his experiences of Africa, where he was born into the Igbo group of Nigeria. He was ten years old when captured and enslaved. Equiano did not gain his freedom until 1766, when he was twenty-nine years old.

During his lifetime, he served as a seaman under two masters, Captain Pascal and Mr. Robert King. He sailed in various British campaigns during the Seven Years' War with France, made numerous voyages between America and the West Indies, and visited England several times as a sailor. Equiano attended school in London under the patronage of a Miss Guerin, a cousin of Mr. Pascal. He later joined an expedition to the polar region and went to South America and finally settled in London during the 1770's. By the 1780's he had gained considerable appeal among blacks and whites as significant figure of importance and a vehement supporter of abolishing the slave trade.<sup>228</sup>

Equiano's attitude against slavery and the slave trade was part of his narrative. In 1774, Equiano wrote about a fellow black seaman onboard a ship set to sail for Turkey. The black sailor, John Annis, was a cook. According to Equiano's account, Annis's master gave him his freedom, yet later his master attempted all manners of deceptions to recapture him. The master eventually hired a crew of six men to capture Annis from the ship. Equiano contacted Granville Sharp, the famous abolitionist and friend to blacks, who advised him on how to retrieve Annis, but his efforts failed as unscrupulous lawyers took his money and did not help in any way to secure Annis. Annis faced the horror of reenslavement on Saint Kitts, and torture by his former master. He died shortly thereafter. Equiano stated that he was despondent

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<sup>228</sup>Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*, ed. Werner Sollors (London: 1789).

over the situation of his friend and the deplorable acts of the master.<sup>229</sup> This example of how Equiano attempted efforts to help a fellow black whose status possessed some fluidity between freedom and servitude clearly shows that some blacks still faced a legal ambiguity in spite of pronouncements of freedom in British society.

Ignatius Sancho also spoke out against the enslavement of black people. Sancho was born on a slave ship in 1729; the ship was bound for a plantation in Grenada. He became an orphan after his mother died of an unknown disease, and his father, like so many enslaved Africans, committed suicide rather than live in servitude. The Duke of Montagu, whom Sancho served, recognized his quick mind, gave him books, and encouraged his learning. Sancho spent most of his life as a footman and ultimately as a butler. After leaving the service of the Montagu family, he set up a grocer's shop in Charles Street, Westminster.<sup>230</sup>

Sancho's book of letters appealed to his many literary friends to oppose slavery. He also adopted the cultural nuances of an Englishman. Sancho opposed the institution of slavery, but his letters were more satirical than strident. It was a voice of hushed tones rather than fiery denunciations against slavery. In a 1778 letter to a Mr. Fisher, Sancho wrote, after receiving some books from Mr. Fisher about the subject of slavery, describing the practices as an "unchristian and most diabolical usage of my brother Negroes-the illegality- the horrid wickedness of the traffic."<sup>231</sup>

Sancho was in many respects an English black man who did not have the lived

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<sup>229</sup>Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 136-137.

<sup>230</sup>Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, ed. Joseph Jekyll (London: J. Nichols, 1782).

<sup>231</sup>*Ibid*, 111.



experience of a slave. Sancho's letters portrayed a man familiar with literary culture and an expanded grasp of reasoning marked of the age in which he live. In The writings of Ignatius Sancho contained elements of British patriotism and civic pride. His displeasure with the mob during the 1780 Gordon riots without a doubt identifies him not as one of the common people, but rather as an assimilated black who carved out a place for himself in the fabric of British society.

Quobna Ottobah Cugoano was born on the West coast of Africa to the Fantee ethnic group. After being kidnapped at age thirteen by African raiders and sold to European slave traders, he subsequently entered plantation slavery in Grenada in the Caribbean. In 1772, after Cugoano had spent two years as a slave in the Caribbean, his owner, Alexander Campbell, took him to England. In 1773, he was baptized as John Stuart in St. James's Church, London, perhaps in an attempt to confirm and guarantee his liberty. It remains unclear how Cugoano obtained his liberty, whether by running away, purchasing his freedom, or maybe being emancipated by Campbell, but Cuogano did perform the normal routine of most blacks who entered London. He was advised by "a group of good people" to receive baptism as a means to prevent capture and a bulwark against reenslavement. Cuogano mentioned in his narrative that the group of servants who advised him to receive a baptism were turned out by their masters.<sup>232</sup> Cugoano's exact meaning of the phrase "turned out" is a matter for discussion. Cugoano never stated the color of the servants. Presumably, these

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<sup>232</sup>Ouobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa*, ed. Paul Edwards (London: 1787), viii-ix.

servants were not blacks and perhaps faced discharge from their master; nonetheless, they suffered for aiding him and inducing him to receive baptism. Cugoano's narrative confirms the pattern revealed in runaway advertisements, whereby blacks entered London, received help from others, and routinely received baptism as a mechanism to secure their freedom.

Cugoano, similar to Equiano, took personal interest in the case of a black runaway. In 1786, Cugoano came to the aid of Henry Demane, whose owner forcibly took him onboard a ship headed to the Caribbean. Cugoano went to Granville Sharp, the same well known abolitionist approached by Equiano, who took legal action to rescue Demane. Sharp helped to secure the liberty of Demane, but only after Cugoano alerted him to a fellow black need for support.<sup>233</sup>

He joined with his friend Equiano to speak out against slavery and the slave trade. They were both instrumental in forming the Sons of Africa, to lobby on behalf blacks in London and in fighting to end the trafficking of their fellow Africans.<sup>234</sup> Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's work was perhaps the most strident of the three discussed here. His style was much more polemical and held more religious overtones than either Cugoano or Equiano.

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<sup>233</sup>Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 22; Granville Sharp, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp, Esq. Composed from his own Manuscripts and Other Authentic Documents in the Possession of his Family and the African Institution*, ed. Prince Hoare (London: Henry Colburn, 1820), 247.

<sup>234</sup>Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Humbly Submitted to the Inhabitants of Great Britain, by Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa*, (London: 1787), in *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the Eighteenth Century*, Vincent Carretta, ed., Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 145-184.

These three writers' highly acculturated lives symbolize the great variety of the black community. Each individual assumed the cultural patterns of Englishmen. All were articulate and posited agency through their writing to survive in England. Their writings indicate racial and political awareness of the larger plight of blacks. The examples of Equiano and Cugoana working to secure the liberty of fellow blacks showed a collective solidarity with the plight of other blacks, although both were literate and held a socially superior life. Their associations with organizations that helped blacks attest to recognition of black suffering. All three writers were part of the well-traveled Atlantic community of blacks who entered London. Each of the writers engaged in the practice of receiving baptism upon arrival in London. Although there were limits because of cultural origins and skin color, each individual attained a privileged state inside London. Yet, these writers also indicate that by some "accidents" of chance or benevolence they became exemplars in the black community. The advertisements for runaways and other sources depict many other talented blacks whose circumstances did not allow such "accidents" to befall upon them. Each individual narrative of these three elucidates a larger narrative and diversity of the black British community.

Parish registers provide biographical data on blacks often hidden from the historical record. These records of black births, baptisms, marriages, burials, and important settlement examinations about blacks seeking Poor Law parish relief help to extrapolate some narrative of black life in London. An examination for settlement provided a means for the poor to have support from a parish to which

they belonged if they could demonstrate residency within the parish for one year. An example of this was the 1790 parish settlement examination of Hannah Owen, a black woman born in Philadelphia who entered London from Charlestown, South Carolina, with her master. Hannah, under oath, claimed that a Chief Justice Gordon had brought her as a servant to London in 1783. She served as his servant in two parishes, first Saint Martin in the Fields for twelve months, and the second parish Saint Margaret, in the City of Westminster. She claimed that she had received no wages, only food and lodging, and thus she quit her service. At the settlement examination, Hannah acknowledged that she had been without a settlement in one place over twelve months, since she had quit as her master's servant. She subsequently bore a child named Andrew in 1789, fathered by a black man named James Gordon in the parish of St. Martin in the Fields. According to her testimony, Hannah Owen never wed James Gordon.<sup>235</sup> The settlement examination source contains no mention of the outcome of her plight, but her case depicts important facts about black poor people in eighteenth-century London. Although Hannah Owen's testimony did not include reference to her baptism, Hannah Owen, "a black" was baptized, according to the parish records at St. Margaret, in the City of Westminster in 1784,<sup>236</sup> which is one year after her stated arrival from South Carolina. Her baptism confirmed a practice among

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<sup>235</sup>City of Westminster Archives Centre, Registers of St. Martin in the Fields, Settlement examination of Hannah Owen [Folio 5073, p. 239], 12 October 1790.

<sup>236</sup>City of Westminster Archives Centre, Registers of St. Margaret: Hannah Owen, a black baptized, 6 July 1784.

blacks that began as early as the mid-eighteenth century, in which blacks sought baptism upon entering London.

Criminal reports posted in newspapers and the Old Bailey trial sessions offer other pertinent information about blacks in London. One account solicited in the *Public Advertiser* in 1767 sought to apprehend an individual with the surname of “William Lewis, also known as Sambo, a Negro, with a deep black complexion.”<sup>237</sup> He faced charges of stealing a £25 bank note from his master. A reward of five guineas was offered to whomever brought Lewis to Sir John Fielding. The notice included a description of his body stature and clothing and reference to his ability to speak English, French, and Spanish, to dress hair and to play the French horn. William Lewis, according to the notice, was a very talented man who possessed remarkable skills.<sup>238</sup>

Blacks accused of crimes in the trial reports of London’s central criminal court, the Old Bailey, gave evidence of everyday black life and what types of criminal activities involved blacks. Some examples of the trial reports included a Joseph Brown, a black indicted for violent theft during a highway robbery. Brown, nicknamed Black Joe was accused of stealing a clasp knife from one Christopher Fernando. He was acquitted during the trial.<sup>239</sup> In 1783, a black named William Penn faced indictment of shoplifting a waistcoat, valued at 5 shillings from the property of William Ridgway, a shopkeeper. Ridgway’s servant, a George Baynes testified at

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<sup>237</sup>Public Office, Bow-Street, *The Public Advertiser*, 17 July 1767.

<sup>238</sup>Public Office, Bow-Street, *The Public Advertiser*, 17 July 1767.

<sup>239</sup>Old Bailey Proceedings ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 9 August 2008), 7 September 1774, trial of Joseph Brown (t17740907-22).

trial that he saw Penn steal the waistcoat. In addition, also present in the shop was a constable, William Marden, who swore after examining Penn that he discovered the stolen waistcoat on William Penn. In Penn's testimony, he stated he had recently arrived from abroad and was stranger in London. He claimed his master had sent him to the city to retrieve some money owed to Penn. Penn further added that someone from the shop had convinced him to buy clothes at that shop after he received his money. After the first purchase, he was asked to come again and buy clothes. After coming back to the store, a man induced him to carry off clothes without the knowledge of the owner. If Penn's testimony represents the truth, he was the victim of a fraud by the proprietors of the shop. William Penn's trial resulted in a guilty verdict, and he received a punishment of transportation to Africa for seven years.<sup>240</sup>

By the 1780s, the black population's most common occupation was as domestic servants. Others were identified as blacks, beggars, criminals, sailors, and runaways and faced the same poverty as many English laborers. This body of unprotected and harmless objects of poverty grew in number with the arrival of the Black Loyalists from the Americas after the Revolutionary War ended in 1783. Lord Dunmore, governor of Virginia, in an effort to aid British war aims issued a political as well as military proclamation stating:

I do hereby declare all indentured servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining his Majesty's troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this colony to a proper dignity.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup>Old Bailey Proceedings ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 9 August 2008), 29 October 1783, trial of William Penn (t17831029-37).

<sup>241</sup>Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From The Rock: Black Resistance In A Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 63, and John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss,

These Black Loyalists were the thousands of former slaves who fought alongside the English during the war. The British had promised them freedom in exchange for their military service in the Revolutionary War. Blacks in America recognized their strange position in a land proclaiming freedom from tyranny yet exercising slavery. Britain exploited this issue for their military and political gain. The British rewarded the Black Loyalists by evacuating them to Canada, the West Indies, and England in return for their assistance in the Loyalist cause.<sup>242</sup> A few Black Loyalists who entered London applied for their government pensions and property compensation. The claim and pension examiners made no secret of their discrimination against blacks, stating on several occasions: “blacks ought to think themselves very fortunate in being in a country where they can never again be reduced to the state of slavery.”<sup>243</sup> This passage very clearly reflected some understanding of the tenets of the *Somerset Case*, which indicated in some minds there was no slavery in England.

Black Loyalists, upon their arrival, would later become part of the Black Poor. This is not to suggest that there were not any black indigents living in England prior to the arrival of the Black Loyalists, but this label became synonymous with the Black Loyalists. The Black Poor assumed a status of indigence, unemployment, and

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Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1994), 74-75.

<sup>242</sup>Stephen J. Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786-1791* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 23; John W. Pulis, *Moving On: Black Loyalists In the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1999), 87; Mary Beth Norton, “The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution,” *Journal of Negro History* 58 (1973), 403-404.

<sup>243</sup>Norton, “The Fate of Some Black,” 404.

rejection. They were an alarming sight in the streets of late eighteenth-century London.<sup>244</sup> They had to contend with poor laws, inadequate housing, racism, and poverty. They remained a visual reminder of England's losses in North America.<sup>245</sup> A constant companion of the Black Poor was poverty. Faced with these hardships, the Black Poor, dressed in rags and reduced to begging in the streets, represented a stark contrast to black liveried servants. Like many poor whites, blacks became involved in crime. Blacks committed mostly crimes of housebreaking, pick pocketing, and grand larceny.

The beggars were nicknamed the Saint Giles blackbirds by white Londoners because many resided in the parish of St. Giles Parish along with other poor blacks.<sup>246</sup> Also known as Seven Dials District, St. Giles was located on the northern outskirts of the city. It became a site of unsanitary conditions where beggars, whores, criminals, and other outcasts congregated. They did not receive the support of Poor Laws, because they could not establish settlement in a parish without employment.<sup>247</sup> Some black beggars like Billy Waters, or "Black Billy" had served in the Royal Navy. Walters had had his lower leg amputated after an accident at sea. Charles M'Gee, was a famous beggar from Jamaica, and Joseph Johnson was known for sporting a model of the ship *The Nelson* on his head, and singing sea-shanties to obtain money.

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<sup>244</sup>Norton, "The Fate of Some Black," 407.

<sup>245</sup>Pulis, *Moving On*, 91.

<sup>246</sup>Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 75, and Stephen J. Braidwood, "Initiatives and Organisation of the Black Poor 1786-1787," *Slavery and Abolition* (1982): 214.

<sup>247</sup>Braidwood, *Black Poor*, 32



Black beggars were rogues and vagrants, but facing unemployment with few job skills, they had no choice but to survive as they could.<sup>248</sup>

The Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor formed in 1786 to alleviate the conditions of misery and poverty for some blacks in London's streets. The Committee sought monetary relief, started a hospital for blacks, and provided clothing and food support for the black poor. The large presence of blacks created a response that they should be sent somewhere and no longer left to suffer and infest the streets of London.<sup>249</sup> This led to the creation of the Sierra Leone colony in order to expedite an overseas resettlement to rid the streets of this idle knot of beggars. This was an attempt to repatriate blacks, but only about 400 blacks were actually involved in the venture to return to Africa. This venture was disastrous for those who did embark on the voyage.<sup>250</sup>

Equiano accepted an appointment as Commissary of Provisions and Stores for the Black Poor. He favored the scheme to return Africans to their native land, but expressed concern over the continued slave trafficking in the surrounding regions of West Africa. Equiano stated that the expedition failed because of mismanagement. The ship's arrival in Sierra Leone coincided with the rainy season, and it was nearly impossible to cultivate the land. The black settlers exhausted all their provisions before replenishment.<sup>251</sup> Cugoano was more critical of the experiment. He believed that a show of good faith before arrival was the creation of a treaty with the African

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<sup>248</sup>Braidwood, *Black Poor*, 31.

<sup>249</sup>Norton, "The Fate of Some Black," 407.

<sup>250</sup>Stephen J. Braidwood, "Initiatives and Organisation of the Black Poor 1786-1787," *Slavery and Abolition* (1982): 211-227.

<sup>251</sup>Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 285-286.

inhabitants of the land. This treaty proposal never arose in any discussion in the Sierra Leone expedition. He felt that the black settlers could face eventual re-enslavement.<sup>252</sup>

The scope of the black community encompassed black runways, black sailors, criminals, Black Loyalists, and literate blacks. Their narratives shared similar origins and a shared arrival into London. Their stories depicted the ambiguity of their status. A few blacks became free from service and achieved great fame as the benevolence whites and their own abilities afforded them opportunities that were out the reach of most of their fellows. Many blacks left London under emancipation plans to alleviate their plight. Others left as the result of criminal proceedings. Several achieved self-emancipation from service by fleeing their masters and becoming part of the London working class. This examination of a larger spectrum of the black community informs this study and sharpens the lens of understanding the lived experience of blacks in eighteenth-century London.

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<sup>252</sup>Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments*, 145-184.

## CHAPTER V

### FREEDOM: RIGHTS OF BRITISH LIBERTY

London during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century was a society marked by great change. The city boasted grand elegance. These traits fostered the convergence of art, science, literature, music, and philosophy. Enlightenment ideas about liberty and individuality served as conduits between the different classes that represented Georgian England. The liberal ideals encapsulated in the Age of Reason promised every Briton, regardless of station or birth, the rights to happiness and the right to the ideals promised underneath the rubric of British liberalism.

London swirled with radical ideas about the tradition of liberty within British rule of law. This chapter will attempt to set forth the relationship between English radicalism and the black community. During the late eighteenth century, the emerging industrialization of England stood alongside the Atlantic Slave Trade. The working class was a creation of the Industrial Revolution, and blacks entered English cities via the slave trade and slave ships. The outcome of these experiences shaped the social history of England. English workers and black people shared this world. The long tradition of the freeborn Englishman intertwined and overlapped as the experiences of English radicals, poor white workers, black slaves, ex-slaves, sailors, and domestics collided in the social climate of London.

Turn-of-the-century England experienced many economic changes, which often led to political and social unrest. James Watt's steam engine (1764) was a factor in the birth of the English Industrial Revolution, which dramatically altered many facets of life in England and abroad. The Industrial Revolution eliminated traditional mores.

The practice of enclosure, whereby a particular group of people transformed common agricultural land into private property, owned reached its peak during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. As food production increased, there were fewer farmers due to the efficiency of new farming methods, new machinery, and new fertilizers. Displaced farmers became masses of migrant workers moving toward cities to work in new industries. Industrialization radically changed way the population lived and worked.

Prior to the mechanization brought about by industrialization, the textile trade and similar occupations were restricted to "weaver families" mainly inhabiting rural districts.<sup>253</sup> Industrialization interrupted this traditional way of life. In addition to the steam engine, the spinning frame and spinning jenny, invented by Richard Arkwright and James Hargreaves, respectively, influenced the shift in manufacturing from rural areas to cities. Consequently, wealthy investors acquired the necessary capital to enter into textile manufacturing, workers readily migrated from the rural areas of England into the industrial centers as demand for employment increased over time. These economic and social conversions eventually led to the development of a self-

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<sup>253</sup>Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1830* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23-26.

conscious working class.<sup>254</sup> The Industrial Revolution helped to coalesce diverse groups of the working population. This unity originated from working-class institutions and movements.<sup>255</sup>

E.P. Thompson suggests that the development of the working-class consciousness was not spontaneous. Thompson recognized the influence that industrialization brought to the shaping of this consciousness. Once the factory system reached maturity in England, rural laborers were no longer in control of the means of production. Weaver families did not determine the prices and quality of manufactured goods and became entirely dependent on industrial wages.<sup>256</sup> When workers lost control of the means of production, employment in the newly created industrial centers was inevitable. Exploitation was an undeniable factor determining the progress of industrialization and the grievances expressed by the industrial workers

Blacks entered the eighteenth-century world as the concept of English citizenship rights was undergoing a slow but radical transformation. The notion of an inherited birthright to freedom originated in the belief that any freeborn Englishman should be protected from arbitrary imprisonment or unwarranted arrest or entry upon private premises. New ideas emphasized the ideals of freedom of the press, speech and conscience, rights of assembly, and freedom to travel, trade, and sell one's own labor. Also included in these rights was a moral consensus that authorities were

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<sup>254</sup>E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 9-10.

<sup>255</sup>Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution*, 204.

<sup>256</sup>Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 197.

bound to respect the rights of freeborn Englishmen.<sup>257</sup> Black runaway slaves, servants, and sailors would encounter these ideas of liberty amongst free blacks and white workers who helped them avoid their masters in the streets of London. Radical thinkers such as Thomas Hardy, who founded the London Corresponding Society, and Thomas Spence, who promoted a system of land nationalization, were very active in disseminating radical ideas throughout London. Blacks would become involved with these two individuals, and they would participate in the Gordon Riots of 1780.

The tradition of liberty amongst English people helped to usher in a culture that produced, within the lower orders, in the eyes of their social superiors and foreign visitors, an ungovernable and disorderly crowd. Some turned to rioting to demand their perceived rights as English citizens and as wage earners. Blacks who encountered these groups brought with them their own traditions and techniques of resistance and subversion to their masters' will. This was a setting conducive to resisting authority. The liberty of the English custom existed under the rule of law, and many educated Englishmen promoted the idea that their land was one of liberty.

The radicalism that eighteenth-century London witnessed was not a new phenomenon. It was a resurgence of ideals of the previous century where a struggle for power between the King and the Parliament ushered in the Glorious Revolution. It harkened back to the Levellers, Diggers, and others claiming their rights as freeborn English citizens. It was a revival of the spirit behind the Putney Debates of 1647, which witnessed a demand for law in the English language, the right to call

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<sup>257</sup>Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 79-80.

witnesses in court, the right to speedy trial by jury, equality under the law, freedom from impressments, religious toleration, abolition of slavery and end of property rights over the poor. This tradition experienced a resurgence with new radicalism emanating from below.<sup>258</sup> It was an expression of the concept of the freeborn Englishmen.

### **The Gordon Riots**

As these ideas flourished in London, blacks like other lower orders became involved politically and socially in many cases through with working-class networks. It was these associations that fueled black participation in the momentous 1780 Gordon Riots. The Gordon Riots drew their name from Lord George Gordon. He attempted to persuade Parliament to repeal the Catholic Relief Act of 1778. The Relief Act emerged from efforts to revoke some prohibitions on Roman Catholics established by William III's Popery Act of 1698, which parliament passed in 1700. George Gordon served as president of the London Protestant Association. His method to gain appeal was to start a petition drive, which resulted in some 40,000 signatures. His supporters marched to Parliament to serve the petition. The petition was defeated in parliament, and this failure sparked a week-long cycle of riots. The scale of civil unrest was unlike any other disturbance witnessed in London up until that time.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup>Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 104-112.

<sup>259</sup>George Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 270.

The crowd destroyed Catholic schools and chapels and burned their contents in the streets. The rioters also tore down the prison at Newgate and set the prisoners free. Other symbols destroyed by the riotous crowd included crimping houses (where impressed men lived prior to embarkation). Sponging houses that held debtors at the pleasure of their creditors also became part of the destruction. The crowd destroyed the home of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield by fire.<sup>260</sup> In the early stages of the riots, the sentiment was anti-Catholic. Yet, the object of the throng's anger eventually turned to the symbols of authority and repression. The military killed an estimated 285 rioters; they wounded hundreds, and took 450 prisoners.<sup>261</sup>

The crowd of the rioters included journeymen, laborers, sailors, and blacks who sought to find some sense of social justice against a social order that sanctioned brutal floggings, torture of prisoners, and public executions. Frustrated workers and servants saw it as an occasion to settle the score with the rich and powerful. Links of communication helped to pass along the ideas among the rioters, demonstrating that a network of some capacity must have existed for such a prolonged attack to continue. Radical elements in the lower strata of English society brought various groups together to liberate the working class.<sup>262</sup>

George Rudé examined the make-up of the crowd and challenged the traditionally held belief that criminals constituted the great body of the rioters. In fact, according to Rudé, the majority of those who took part in the disturbances were

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<sup>260</sup>George Rudé, *Hanoverian London: 1714-1808* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 2. George Rude, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century*, 272-273.

<sup>261</sup>John Archer, *Social Unrest and Popular Protest in England 1780-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57-59.

<sup>262</sup>Rudé, *Paris and London*, 291.



“sober workmen” who held jobs but were beneath some poorer sections of the working class.<sup>263</sup> He pointed out that the poor, working-class Catholics did not suffer. The victims were wealthy merchants, publicans, and representatives of authority.<sup>264</sup> As revealed in several court records, the idea that individual rioters harbored anti-Catholic sentiments was a view held by multiple defendants. At the trial those who were believed to hold anti-Catholic opinions received a sentence of death.<sup>265</sup> There is a social protest interpretation evident within Rudé’s views of the crowd, but the crowd followed its pro-Protestant course as the rioters attacked prominent Catholics who occupied important positions as teachers, shopkeepers and publicans within the community.

While Rudé has posited a crowd imbued with anti-Catholicism blended with class hostility, Nicholas Rogers argues that Rudé overstated the crowd’s orderliness and discipline.<sup>266</sup> In Rogers’ estimation, in the later of stages of the riot, the direction changed, and the targets became more specific, local and traditional, such as the attacks on the crimping and sponging houses and the much-hated Blackfriars toll bridge. Although the rioters were spurred by the efforts of Lord George Gordon to seek repeal of the Relief Act, their goal was to exert political pressure upon Parliament and draw attention to laws they viewed as detrimental to English liberty and its sense of national identity. There was a fear that popery was growing.

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<sup>263</sup>Rudé, *Paris and London*, 280.

<sup>264</sup>Rudé, *Paris and London*, 285-289.

<sup>265</sup>Old Bailey Proceedings (oldbaileyonline.org 10 October 2010), 28 June 1780, trials of William Laurence and Richard Roberts (t17800628-1), James Bulkley (t17800628-24), Thomas Haycock (t17800628-34), George Staples (t17800628-37), William McDonald (t17800628-38).

<sup>266</sup>Nicholas Rogers *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998), 31.

Although the Protestant Association orchestrated the riot, the crowd did operate on its own autonomy. The Gordon riots were a protest against “the religious urbanity of the cosmopolitan establishment which arrogated to itself the right to determine the future growth of British Catholicism.”<sup>267</sup> The establishment betrayed the British Protestant and libertarian heritage regarding the Catholic Relief Act. The court trial records from the Old Bailey demonstrate that anti-Catholicism was a real thrust of the riots, but so was antipathy toward the upper strata of society. In many respects the focus and aim of Rudé’s scholarship that the riots were more than anti-Catholic in nature posits perhaps the most accurate description of rioters.

In the aftermath of the Gordon Riots, three blacks, Charlotte Gardiner, Benjamin Bowsey, and John Glover, along with fifty-nine whites, faced capital charges and convictions. These three blacks received death sentences, along with twenty-one whites. The two male black servants, Benjamin Bowsey and John Glover, were part of the group that freed prisoners at Newgate Prison during the riots. Glover lived in Westminster, where he was reputed to be a quiet, sober, honest man. He worked as a servant to one John Philips, Esq., a lawyer who, during the afternoon of the Gordon Riots sent Glover to his chambers in Lincoln’s Inn to retrieve some papers. Instead of collecting the papers, Glover joined one of the crowds heading towards Newgate. He was part of one of the earliest groups seeking to tear down the gates at Newgate. One of witnesses at his trial claimed that Glover actively participated in piling up combustible materials against the door to keep the fire

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<sup>267</sup>Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, Politics*, 172.

burning. At his trial, there were discrepancies in testimony concerning his identity. Witnesses agreed that he wore a rough, short jacket and had a round hat with dirty silver lace upon it, but there was some confusion about the color of his skin. One turnkey doubted he was black, another preferred to call him a “Copper Coloured Person,” and a third said he had seen “Several Blacks and Tawnies.” Nonetheless Glover who did not testify, according to the trial reports, was sentenced with a guilty conviction punishable by death.<sup>268</sup> Some accounts offer that the lawyer John Phillips, for whom Glover worked, petitioned the king on his behalf and disputed the credibility of the witnesses against Glover. Glover was granted a pardon and sentenced to three years absence from the kingdom. Phillip’s deposition posited that Glover joined a British man-of-war ship. What actually happened to John Glover is unknown.<sup>269</sup>

Benjamin Bowsey faced the same charges as Glover. He entered the home of Richard Akerman during the Gordon Riots. His accusers identified him as a black man wearing a hat. He was among the first to enter Ackerman’s house, where his accusers swore during the trial that he rummaged through drawers and placed stolen items in a bundle. Bowsey then allegedly left the house and joined the crowd headed toward Newgate. The individuals who testified against him included a black male servant and white woman servant. The woman, Ann Lesar, a washerwoman, had

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<sup>268</sup>*Old Bailey Proceedings Online* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 17 June 2008), 28 June 1780, trial of John Glover (t17800628-94).

<sup>269</sup>Marika Sherwood, “Blacks in the Gordon Riots,” *History Today* 47 (1997):27-29.

sewn Bowsey's initials in place of Richard Akerman's on stockings he allegedly stole from Akerman. Bowsey's verdict was guilty, punishable by death.<sup>270</sup>

While Glover and others were allegedly busy at Newgate, Charlotte Gardiner, a black woman, marched with a group toward the house of Mr. Levarty, a publican, in St. Katherine's Lane, near Tower Hill. Charlotte Gardiner according to witnesses' accounts was a leader of the march. Gardiner, according to the witnesses' accounts, was heard shouting out to the rioters "my boys, well done, down down, with it!" and she urged the crowd on: "More wood for the fire, down with it, down with it; more wood for the fire!"<sup>271</sup> She shouted encouragement to knock the house down, directed that more wood to be set on fire, and allegedly stole two brass candlesticks from Levarty's dining room. Like Glover and Bowsey, she did not attempt to defend herself at the Old Bailey, and on July 4, 1780, she was found guilty and sentenced to death. One week later she was hanged.<sup>272</sup> At Charlotte Gardiner's execution she was described as clothed "almost in rags," and she offered great penitence, according to the account. After her hanging the body was delivered to friends.<sup>273</sup>

These three cases do not clarify what specific grievances compelled blacks to join with others who perhaps shared their desire to extract some satisfaction by destroying objects of oppression. Possibly these blacks suggest a commonality of belief in English liberty with their white counterparts in the riots. The blacks

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<sup>270</sup>Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, 17 June 2008), 28 June 1780, trial of Benjamin Bowsey (t17800628-33).

<sup>271</sup>*The London Chronicle*, June 6 – June 8, 1780.

<sup>272</sup>Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, 17 June 2008), 4 July 1780, trial of Charlotte Gardiner (t17800628-65).

<sup>273</sup>*Public Advertiser*, 12 July 1780.

involved in the Gordon Riots were not skilled artisans or tradesmen but were domestic servants or slaves. Their motives in joining the crowd remain unexplained, but they likely felt some sense of anger at their circumstances or sought to change their situation that eventful day in 1780. Their occupations as servants may have produced some latent hostility to their position in English society, and once they witnessed the rioters in action something compelled them to make fateful decisions to strike at symbols just like their white working-class brethren. These actions taken by the three blacks clearly united them with white rioters who expressed their grievances during the Gordon Riots.

These are the only three blacks known to have participated in the riots, but the cross-examination of the witnesses during Benjamin Bowsey's trial implies that other blacks possibly took part or joined the crowd. At least one witness identified another black in the crowd of rioters.<sup>274</sup> During the execution of Charlotte Gardiner, a newspaper account listed a separate prisoner, William McDonald, executed alongside her July 11, 1780, described as having a face almost resembling a mulatto.<sup>275</sup> It is possible that the numbers of blacks participating in the riots exceeded the three whom historians have identified.

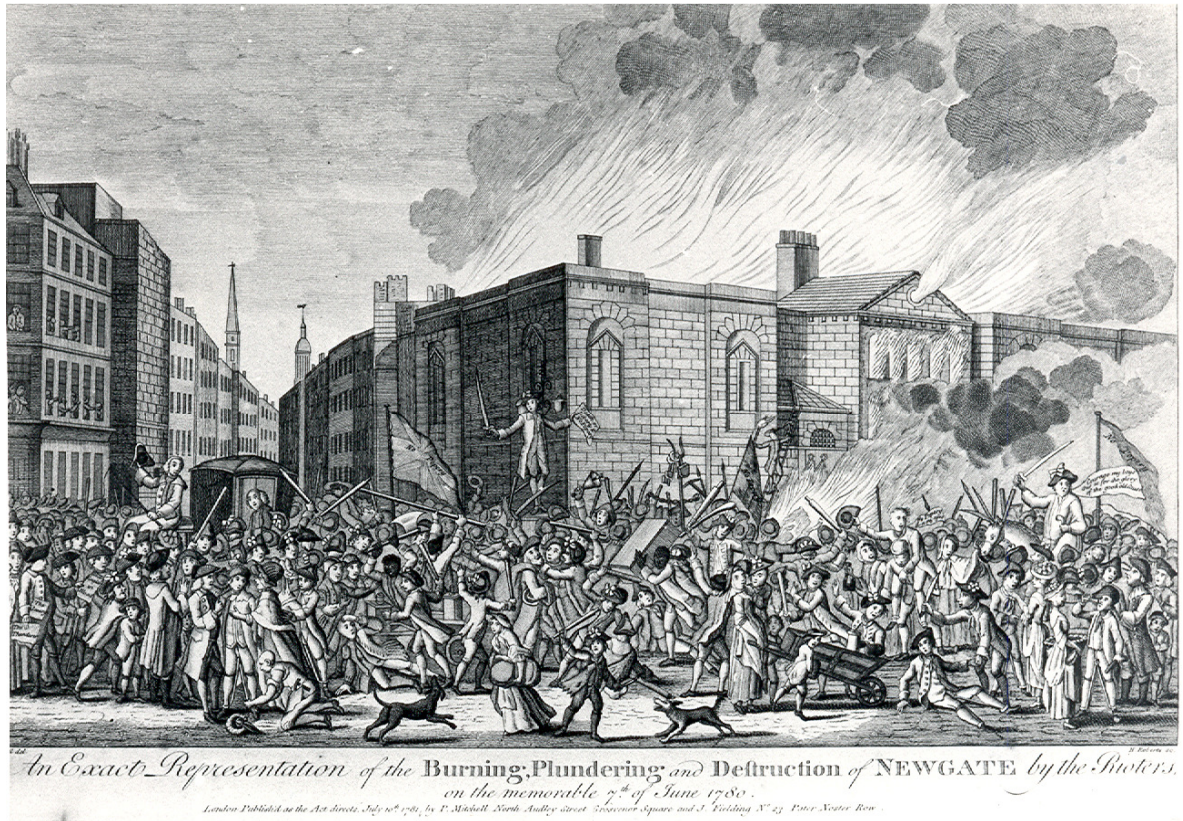
Black participation in the Gordon Riots was not only reflected in trial proceedings, but also part of the popular iconography of the riots. A 1781 painting of the Gordon Riots by Henry Roberts, known as *An Exact Representation of the*

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<sup>274</sup>Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 17 June 2008), 28 June 1780, trial of Benjamin Bowsey (t17800628-33).

<sup>275</sup>*Public Advertiser*, 12 July 1780.

*Burning, Plundering and Destruction of Newgate by the Rioters, on the Memorable 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1780* (Figure 1), depicts the Gordon rioters in front of Newgate Prison, which is in flames.



**Figure 17 Henry Roberts, An Exact Representation of the Burning, Plundering and Destruction of Newgate by the Rioters on the Memorable 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1780 (1781). © Trustees of the British Museum**

The figures in the crowd crystallize the momentous event and grant agency to the people who took part in the riots. A man on a ladder holds up a torch and a hammer. There are three “No Popery” flags. A man on horseback on the right exhorts the crowd with a sword drawn with the phrase “Courage my boys this for the glory of the good old Cause.” On a platform stands a rioter holding up a sword and a

paper inscribed “Death or Liberty & No Popery.” The keys of the prison are held up on a pitchfork. The image captures the black participation in the Gordon Riots with two images of black men. One black wields an axe, another carries off a large box. An enlargement of the image (Figure 2) created by Roberts a year after the Gordon Riots, confirms the idea that blacks played a role in the Gordon Riots. Roberts posits direct evidence of black participation in the riots in which three blacks were charged. The painting reveals that in the popular imagination of the time blacks were part of the body politic who took to the streets and joined the radical underbelly of English society to assert their rights to resist.



**Figure 18 Enlargement of “The Exact Representation” © Trustees of the British Museum**

## Free Blacks

Unlike Benjamin Bowsey, John Glover, and Charlotte Gardiner, other blacks such as Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, Robert Wedderburn, and William Davidson lived lives not at all in servitude. Ignatius Sancho, an educated black who owned a grocery store, witnessed the Gordon Riots from his window. He did not participate, and he offered a strong rebuke to the rioters. Sancho did not approve of the rioters' actions. He clearly identified with the ruling elite in his eyewitness account of the mob action. Sancho described the situation as the "maddest people and the maddest times London was ever plagued with."<sup>276</sup> He considered Lord George Gordon insane and lamented "the worse than Negro barbarity of the populace."<sup>277</sup> He noted that "there is about a thousand mad men, armed with clubs, bludgeons, and crows, just now set off for Newgate, to liberate, they say, their honest comrades."<sup>278</sup> He lamented that it is thought by many who discern deeply, that there is more at the bottom of this business than merely the repeal of an act.'<sup>279</sup> Sancho offered a perplexing observation of the riots. He sided with English authority and compared the rioters to the worst of black behavior. Sancho represents a split identity of an acculturated black Englishman disdainful of the riotous actions of the crowd, but who saw whites exhibiting behavior he associated with the worse actions of blacks. He also confirmed that the crowd acted on motivation other than anti-Catholicism.

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<sup>276</sup>Ignatius Sancho, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African* (London: J. Nichols, 1782), 169.

<sup>277</sup>Sancho, *Letters*, 170.

<sup>278</sup>Sancho, *Letters*, 174.

<sup>279</sup>Sancho, *Letters*, 174.



From the start, opposition to slavery was central to radical beliefs and at the heart of radical agitation. Olaudah Equiano was a leading London activist, prodding Granville Sharpe and assisting the Sierra Leone expedition. His famous narrative does not mention the 1780 Gordon Riots. His linkage to radicalism came from his friendship with Thomas Hardy and the time he spent living in the home of Hardy. Hardy was a chief founder of the radical London Corresponding Society. The society became one of the foremost radical working-class organizations in the 1790s seeking reforms of parliament. The government eventually banned the London Corresponding Society and arrested Thomas Hardy for high treason. Equiano joined the society, and he put Hardy in touch with the provincial abolitionists whom he had met on his speaking tours. The society campaigned for the vote, arguing that liberty for working-class whites ran parallel to the struggle of the dispossessed, displaced, enslaved Blacks. Those forces that made their fortune from the slave trade held similar views to those who passed laws against trade unions and other forms of working-class political activity. When Hardy declared that liberty for blacks and liberty for whites was indivisible, he was offering more than a theoretical understanding of forces colliding.<sup>280</sup> The unity in struggle of black and white working people found practical expression on the streets of Great Britain in the 1790s.

These sentiments of the rule of law and the rights of freeborn Englishman circulated in London at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. While black participation in this climate remained thus far connected to the

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<sup>280</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 210.

Gordon Riots, there emerged amongst these radical formations a figure who embodied these new ideas permeating English society. The person who came to occupy this space was the black radical, Robert Wedderburn. The ideas swirling around London captured the imagination and energy of Wedderburn who met and learned from Thomas Spence for about a year before the death of Spence.

Many of the new radical movements of the early nineteenth century that emerged in response to political and economic oppression had their foundations in Jacobinism. The Jacobins were a radical group that surface during the French Revolution. These clubs fostered intellectualism and emphasized constitutional rights. The first two decades of the nineteenth century experienced increased activity from radical reformers. Emerging in this radical climate was the figure of Thomas Spence. Spence was the secretary of the London Corresponding Society and an editor of radical papers. He became intertwined with the radical sub-culture of the nineteenth century. Spence advocated for revolution, not reform. He believed in a new society based on free liberty, democracy, and common ownership of land. His ideas were an early form of socialism. He attacked the power of the state. Thomas Spence's scheme for local and democratic ownership of the land was eventually to find a receptive audience within sections of the laboring poor. After Spence's death in 1814, various Spencean societies emerged to carry on his radical ideas. Among the ranks of Spenceans who took to tavern radicalism were factory workers and shoemakers, ex-sailors and ex-soldiers. One of these Spencean adherents was Robert Wedderburn

Wedderburn, a Jamaican-born mulatto, became one of the more popular radical reformers of this time. Wedderburn was born in Jamaica in 1762 to a slave named Rosanna and a wealthy plantation owner named James Wedderburn, who owned Rosanna. He was also a doctor and the owner of many estates in Westmoreland.<sup>281</sup> James Wedderburn did not acknowledge his paternal bond to his son Robert. In fact five months into her pregnancy Rosanna was sold back to her original owner, a Lady Douglass. At the sale of Rosanna, there was a stipulation that the child she was carrying would be born free. That child, Robert Wedderburn, was not born a slave.<sup>282</sup>

Sexual relations between slaves and their owners were not uncommon, and many of these relationships were forceful, often resulting in children of mixed races who often held the social status of their mothers. Although Wedderburn was born free, his childhood may not have differed much from that of other mulatto children, if it had not been for his maternal grandmother, “Talkee Amy.” Wedderburn was sent to live with Talkee Amy in Kingston in 1766; this was the watershed in the development of Wedderburn’s personality and ideological make-up.<sup>283</sup>

The influence that Talkee Amy had on Wedderburn became evident upon his affiliation with various radical sects in England. What probably made her such an important person in Wedderburn’s life was her strong will and religious beliefs.

Wedderburn’s grandmother was well known in Kingston. She was a local merchant

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<sup>281</sup>Robert Wedderburn, “The Horrors of Slavery,” in *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings by Robert Wedderburn*, ed. Ian McCalman (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1991), 45-47.

<sup>282</sup>Wedderburn, “The Horrors of Slavery,” 48.

<sup>283</sup>Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 287.

as well as a smuggler for her owner.<sup>284</sup> Talkee Amy, a believer in magical powers, often incorporated her beliefs in various rituals and invoked spirits when necessary. Wedderburn's close relationship with his grandmother allowed him a nuanced view of life without rigidity. In essence, "Wedderburn grew up outside the boundaries of legal, social, and religious orthodoxy."<sup>285</sup> Wedderburn never forgot the mysticism that was such an important part of his upbringing as he incorporated it in his various religious beliefs throughout his lifetime.

Although Wedderburn was a free person, he was a product of the institution of slavery. Because his grandmother was a slave, he had close connections with the "peculiar institution," often witnessing her and his mother disciplined under the harsh tenants of plantation slavery.<sup>286</sup> Even after establishing himself on English soil, he carried abolitionist sentiments for his West Indian brethren who were enslaved. Wedderburn often noted similarities between the conditions of West Indian slaves and those of the English working class, finding inspiration in the St. Domingo Revolution in Haiti.<sup>287</sup>

Wedderburn's mingling of ideologies makes him an exceptional radical reformer. It is likely that Wedderburn's radical philosophies were festering in some form long before he made it to England. The time between his departure from Jamaica and his permanent association with the radical movement in England allowed his personal experiences to shape his future radical activities and his own

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<sup>284</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 221.

<sup>285</sup>McCalman, ed., *The Horrors of Slavery*, 6.

<sup>286</sup>Wedderburn, "The Horrors of Slavery," 48-49.

<sup>287</sup>McCalman, ed., *The Horrors of Slavery*, 19.

philosophies. Wedderburn did enroll in the British Royal Navy where he fought in the American Revolution. Wedderburn's radicalism was already manifesting itself prior to his association with any radical groups of the early nineteenth century. This earlier experience may have qualified Wedderburn to take a more active, leadership-oriented role in many of the radical sects he joined. Later Wedderburn recalled witnessing the inhumane treatment of many sailors, often equating their punishments or discipline with that of plantation slavery.<sup>288</sup>

After his discharge from the Royal Navy, Wedderburn found himself scraping a living amongst the poor laboring class of England. This was not unusual. After many sailors were discharged, usually without pay, they were cast among societies' poor and disrespected. McCalman notes, "Wedderburn presents himself rather as a social failure and victim who explains misconducts and misfortunes by his unfortunate origins"<sup>289</sup> According to Ian McCalman, Wedderburn's biographer, he learned the craft of tailoring at some point in his life. The details of how this process worked out remain murky.

*The Horrors of Slavery*, a book by Wedderburn published in 1824, differed from autobiographical books that focused on the slave narratives like Equiano's and Cugoano's writings. Wedderburn's efforts sought a different audience and aim. His readers were to be the lower class and those who opposed assimilation into the larger culture. Wedderburn was known as an extraordinary orator, and much of his influence resulted from his captivating presentations. Much of this charismatic

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<sup>288</sup>McCalman, ed., *The Horrors of Slavery*, 6.

<sup>289</sup>McCalman, ed., *The Horrors of Slavery*, 4.

energy was on display in Wedderburn's numerous publications that express his radical principles and depict his life experiences. In one such publication, entitled *Truth Self Supported*, Wedderburn discussed his religious views in a way that helps to clarify some of his radical political activities. The black radical was very critical of preachers who denied their followers the ability to examine their proposed doctrines.<sup>290</sup> Although Wedderburn changed his religious precepts from time to time, there were certain principles that he always kept. Wedderburn denounced the religious concept of the trinity expressing, "... for the Scriptures assert ONE GOD, who is the Universal Father, and one Jesus Christ, who is the Son and Mediator."<sup>291</sup>

This passage may explain why Wedderburn was suspicious of people in positions of authority. Wedderburn felt the aristocracy or upper class took advantage of the people under their authority. He expressed similar feelings about the socially fragmented industrial society, plantation slavery, and naval life. Wedderburn assumed that the clergy, as well as the established English government, did not consider lower-class sentiments. Wedderburn would not accept a demeaning and subservient role in society where he felt democracy should benefit all.

One of Wedderburn's more radically satirical publications was *Cast Iron Parsons, or Hints to the Public and the Legislature on Political Economy*. In this piece, the author suggested a solution to what he regarded as the corrupt church and political authority of England. Wedderburn, writing this essay from prison,

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<sup>290</sup>Wedderburn, "Truth Self Supported," in *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings by Robert Wedderburn*, ed. Ian McCalman (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1991), 67.

<sup>291</sup>Wedderburn, "Truth Self Supported," 69.

suggested: “Finding that the routine of duty required of the Clergy of the legitimate Church, was so completely mechanical . . . it struck me it might one day be possible to substitute a Cast-Iron Parson.”<sup>292</sup>

Wedderburn, in the essay, proposed replacing the clergy and the established English government with mechanical replicas that would be void of all corruption and oppressive tendencies. Such ideas made Wedderburn a potential threat to the established authorities. He was intent on exposing their oppressive behavior, and suggested their ouster. Wedderburn clearly understood the values associated with industrialization and the major role the upper class played in expropriation. He was stern opponent of expropriation and emphasized the conditions of those dispossessed by this process.<sup>293</sup> In Wedderburn’s view, the basis of the working-class problems emanated directly from industrialization and the resulting social change, which had a negative impact on his part of society. Wedderburn’s contributions to the radical discourse included his abolitionism, his argument that slavery in the West Indies was synonymous with exploitation of British laborers, and a blended Christianity shaped by African and European traditions.

The participation of black Londoners in radical circles during the nineteenth century continued with William Davidson. Davidson’s activity reached its crescendo with the 1820 Cato Street conspiracy, in which five men attempted to blow up the royal cabinet as they met for dinner at Grosvenor Square. All five men were subsequently arrested, and convicted of treason. The five were Arthur Thistlewood,

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<sup>292</sup>Wedderburn, “Cast Iron Parsons,” *The Horrors of Slavery*, McCalman, ed., 145.

<sup>293</sup>Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 313.

John Brunt, James Ings, Richard Tidd, and William Davidson. The original plan had been to blow up Parliament. William Davidson, the only black amongst the accused, was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1786. His father was the Attorney General of the island, and his mother a black woman. His father acknowledged his paternity and provided for William. He was educated in Jamaica until he was about fourteen years old. Then against his mother's wishes, his father sent him to Edinburgh to complete his education. Davidson departed for Liverpool, where his father had an agent who gained him an apprenticeship to a Liverpool lawyer, but after three years, he deserted and ran away to sea.<sup>294</sup> He was twice impressed into the naval service. After several years, at sea he returned once again to Liverpool. Davidson fought in several engagements in the West Indies. After his discharge from the navy, he studied mathematics in Aberdeen for a period and soon after served as an apprentice to a cabinetmaker. After failing as cabinetmaker with his own business in Birmingham, he came to London, worked for a Haymarket cabinetmaker, and taught in a Wesleyan Sunday school. During this time, he married Mrs. Sarah Lane, a poor widow with four sons. They had two sons, John born in 1816 and Duncan in 1819. An avid reader of Thomas Paine, Davidson joined the Marylebone Union Reading Society, formed in 1819 in response to the Peterloo massacre, in which eleven unarmed demonstrators had been killed and 500 injured. This society led Davidson on a path to becoming a Spencean adherent, like Robert Wedderburn. Members met weekly to

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<sup>294</sup> Arthur Thistlewood, *The Lives of Thistlewood, Davidson, Brunt, Tidd and Ings, The Leaders of the Cato Street Conspiracy, Who Were Lately Executed at the Old Bailey; Collected From the Most Authentic Sources: with Original Letters, & c.* (London: C.A. Madden, 1820), 9.



read radical newspapers and discuss political matters. Davidson called meetings, which were held in his home as his associations with radicals grew.<sup>295</sup>

John Harrison introduced Davidson to George Edwards. Edwards posed as a radical, but he was actually a government spy. The group decided that an attack on the royal cabinet would be prudent after it was announced that the whole body would be enjoying dinner at Lord Harrowby's house in Grosvenor Square. Davidson had worked for a time for Lord Harrowby. The group's plan was to kill all the ministers, initiate an insurrection, and form a provisional government. This attack would serve as larger signal for more insurrections in London in order to rally the country to their cause. The group designated Davidson to raise money and buy weapons. He was responsible for guarding homemade grenades, muskets, and pistols. The location of these materials was in a Cato Street loft. Before the group could make final plans, the police raided the loft and arrested the conspirators. Davidson and the co-conspirators faced trial for high treason.<sup>296</sup> Davidson pleaded not guilty at the trial and claimed that he was frequently mistaken for other black men. Davidson's understanding of race shaped his remarks to the jury:

if my colour should be against me, which perhaps, Gentlemen of the Jury, you may suppose it to be, and think that because I am a man of colour I am without understanding or a feeling, and would act the brute; I am not of that sort; I would wish to wipe off those impressions from those learned gentlemen who have so persecuted me.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>295</sup>Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984) 214-216.

<sup>296</sup>Fryer, *Staying Power*, 216-217

<sup>297</sup>George Theodore Wilkinson, *An Authentic History of the Cato-Street Conspiracy; With the Trials at Large of the Conspirators, for High Treason and Murder; a Description of Their Weapons and Combustible Machines, and Every Particular Connected With the Rise, Progress, Discovery, and Termination of the Horrid Plot* (London: T. Kelly, 1820), 321.

In response to Davidson's lament about his color, Lord Chief Justice addressed Davidson with this refrain:

You may rest most perfectly assured that with respect to the colour of your countenance, no prejudice either has or will exist in any part of this Court against you; a man of colour is entitled to British justice as much as the fairest British subject that ever came into a court of justice, and will always be sure to obtain it, and this case will be decided upon the facts given in evidence; God forbid that he complexion of the accused should enter, for a single moment, into the consideration of the Jury.<sup>298</sup>

The five men in the Cato Street Conspiracy after a verdict of guilty received sentence of death by hanging on May 1, 1820. Their dreams of revolution failed. Davidson gave an impassioned closing speech at his trial and invoked the Magna Carta to make his plea that he was not guilty and defend the English tradition of resistance to tyranny. Davidson, who was well read, had a sharp acumen and at trial cited scripture and poetry to gain his rescue from capital punishment.<sup>299</sup> His powerful words did not change the outcome. Davidson's words echoed the rights of freeborn Englishmen and maintained the right to claim that ancient custom:

I appeal to any man, whether it is upon such evidence the life of an innocent man is to be sacrificed? But even supposing, for the sake of argument, that the lives of his Majesty's Ministers were threatened, it did not follow that this was to extend to the King himself. In the passage of Magna Charta, it was ordained that twenty-five barons should be nominated to see that the terms of the charter were not infringed; and, if it was found that his Majesty's Ministers were guilty of such infringement, then four barons were to call upon them for redress. If this were not granted, then the four barons were to return to their brethren, by whom the people were to be called together to take up arms, and assert their rights. Such an act was not considered in old times as an act of treason towards the king, however hostile it might be towards the ministers. But this does not apply to me. I had not

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<sup>298</sup>Wilkinson, *An Authentic History*, 322.

<sup>299</sup>Thistlewood, *The Lives of Thistlewood*, 15.

intention of joining in any scheme whatever, either to put down My King, or to murder his Ministers. I was entrapped by Goldworthy and Edwards, in order for some private purposes of their own, that they might have any life sworn away. I have no objection to tender my life in the service of my country; but let me at least, for the sake of my children, save my character from the disgrace of dying a traitor. For my children only do I feel, and when I think of them I am deprived of utterance—I can say no more.<sup>300</sup>

Robert Wedderburn and William Davidson differed greatly from John Glover, Benjamin Bowsey, and Charlotte Gardiner. While the latter three were domestic servants and joined riots for reasons still not completely known, the former two were free blacks without ambiguity of status. All were black Britons but from two distinct social experiences, and, they expressed their radicalism differently. Glover, Bowsey, and Gardiner did it one way and Wedderburn and Davidson did it another way. Both Wedderburn and Davidson were able to learn trades, which clearly violated the 1731 law outlawing blacks from learning trades. This independence of status was also visible in the fact that these men were intellectually involved in radical circles and noted as committed members to their radical ideas. Their articulation of their rights as Englishmen knew no bounds and served as a linkage to black and white partnerships in the pursuit of freedom in nineteenth century English society.

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<sup>300</sup>George Theodore Wilkinson, *An Authentic History of the Cato-Street Conspiracy; With the Trials at Large of the Conspirators, for High Treason and Murder; a Description of Their Weapons and Combustible Machines, and Every Particular Connected With the Rise, Progress, Discovery, and Termination of the Horrid Plot* (London: T. Kelly, 1820), 339-341.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation seeks to determine the meaning of freedom and liberty in London society as it relates to blacks, during the period after the Somerset Case of 1772 and before the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. It also has the objective of illuminating the broader black experience in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century London. Black people occupied a significant space in the city of London. They answered white Londoners' doors, ran their errands, carried their purchases, cleaned their houses and stables, wore their livery, symbolized their status, imbibed their radical ideas, and appeared in their portraits, poems, diatribes, and plays. They often carried out these tasks under the guise of domestic servitude. They arrived, from throughout the Atlantic basin, aboard ships from many points of origin. This black community contained diverse groups of people. There was an elite, educated, free class who wrote their own narratives. There were sailors and criminals. Many were servants in elite white households. There were self-emancipated blacks, who had run away from their masters. Some blacks participated in the radical intellectual climate, and some chose to participate in demonstrations and riots. White British citizens constructed their own images of blacks, which often reveal more about English attitudes and values than about the black population. The black community of London endured an extremely ambiguous legal status.

On a fateful day in 1767, Granville Sharp encountered a badly beaten black slave, Jonathan Strong, in the streets of London, which changed his fate and that of the London black community. Sharp obtained medical attention for Strong, and out of this incident grew Sharp's quest for a legal means to remove the scourge of slavery from England. The involvement of Sharp in the Thomas Lewis case in 1771 and the Somerset Case in 1772 set the stage for the larger questions this study has sought to answer. These events created questions about black freedom and liberty in a location outside of Africa, North America and the Caribbean. They helped initiate an examination of slavery outside its frequently understood meaning and contribute to a new understanding of slavery, constructed in the metropole, from an English point of view. Three individual blacks, Jonathan Strong in 1767, Thomas Lewis in 1771, and James Somerset in 1772, created by their own actions new questions about slavery in England. Their agency produced the impetus that led to the legal trials.

The *Somerset Case* addressed the legality of removing a slave by force from England. On June 22, 1772, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield issued a ruling that made it illegal for masters to force their slaves to leave England. His ruling suggested that slavery had never existed in England, because there was no law sanctioning it. Mansfield's intention was not to outlaw slavery during the *Somerset* trial. All previous legal decisions governing the status of African slaves were common law rulings and opinions concerning property and commerce.

The findings in this dissertation provide answers to five fundamental questions raised in the introduction:

First, did the presence of black runaways, evidenced by numerous advertisements seeking their return indicate that some form of slavery existed after the 1772 *Somerset Case* in London? The numerous advertisements reveal a population striving to free themselves from a type of service akin to slavery in which they are not paid wages and suffer under indefinite service. The use of the terms, “indentured servant” and “apprentice,” to refer to black runaways indicates that the language of slavery, and indeed the institution itself, was under scrutiny after 1772. Masters may have been increasingly hesitant to use the term “slave” in seeking the return of blacks to a situation of unpaid and permanent servitude. Yet the advertisements reveal that masters regarded their black servants as property. This was the very situation from which the blacks sought to emancipate themselves. So many blacks endured a situation of de facto slavery, even though euphemistic terms substituted for the word “slave.” An ambiguous form of slavery, if not the language of slavery, existed after the *Somerset Case* and continued to survive at least until 1833. Second, what were the responses of the different social classes within the black community to slavery, domestic servitude, and English life? The responses varied widely, depending on social status and education. Some, especially literate and well-educated blacks, who were former slaves were able to approximate assimilation into the larger body politic of London society. Olaudah Equiano, for example, transcended his servant background to become a black abolitionist and published author who achieved prominence in the respectable class of English society. At the other end of the social spectrum, were the many blacks still held in bondage. Some of them responded by

running away from their masters and if captured to turn to abolitionists like Granville Sharp for relief from their subjection. James Somerset is an example. Other blacks found life in London just as strenuous as the English poor and sought aid under parish relief laws by settlement examinations. Many blacks resorted to criminal activities in order to alleviate their conditions. Benjamin Glover and Robert Wedderburn represent individuals who became involved in radical activities in London. In addition, countless unnamed blacks remained unfree and are invisible in the archives because they did not protest, did not run away, and did not get baptized.

Third, what did “freedom” and “liberty” mean to blacks after the 1772 *Somerset Case*? *Somerset* meant that a masters’ right to force blacks from England was restricted. Under the law a master could no longer forcibly remove a black servant from England as a slave. At its heart, the new judicial verdict created in the minds of some that slavery no longer existed, but slavery in London continued after the *Somerset Case*. “Freedom” and “liberty” proved to be tenuous concepts, even after 1772. The ruling of the Somerset Case did grant blacks the legal right of Habeas Corpus. This forced masters to find ways to circumvent the established verdict. They began to utilize indenture as a way to enforce their right to control their black slaves. This contract served to keep blacks in bondage while in England.

Fourth, what was the impact of radical English ideas on the black people of London? Radical ferment in English society affected some blacks for sure in English society. Blacks participated in the 1780 Gordon Riots and the 1820 Cato Street Conspiracy. Radical leaders such as Thomas Spence influenced greatly the activities

of Robert Wedderburn and William Davidson. Black participation in radical circles demonstrates that some blacks heard the rhetoric of radical language, acted upon the sentiments expressed in crowds and received the message of radical philosophers in the same manner as whites. Their beliefs about English liberty pushed them to join in the currents of emancipation that surrounded them. As they themselves personified questions about freedom, perhaps blacks found joining radical circles an outlet for their expressions of liberty.

Fifth, how did whites create their own images of blacks? Whites revealed their conception of black people in their writings, on the stage, and in pictures on canvas and paper. Whites ascribed to blacks characteristics they found suitable. The sensibilities of whites allowed them to justify their ideas about blacks from their own understandings of black people in London. Some whites viewed the black presence as a problem and threat to the social order. The presence of blacks in literature and on stage provided whites a mechanism to shape the black body from a white perspective. Whites utilized black images to bolster their own status, while others sought to use blacks as objects of humor and ridicule. Some whites expressed their fears of a growing black population and the threat to the social order, and some whites offered blacks a stirring defense in their words to the press.

This dissertation presents abundant evidence that people of African descent were very present and visible in eighteenth-century London society. In the eighteenth century, London was one of the largest cities in the world with a population that reached almost 700,000 in 1750 and over a million in 1800. Being the capital and a



major port city, London had an extremely diverse population, which consisted of not only Europeans but also black Africans, both enslaved and free. Great Britain was the leading slave trafficking nation in the world. It is no surprise that the debate concerning black freedom and liberty was center stage in one of the most important political and commercial centers in Europe and the Atlantic world. The question of the status of blacks, much like the development of slavery in eighteenth-century London itself, impacted British legal and social institutions.

This dissertation investigates the status of blacks from multiple perspectives and concludes that black Londoners, under the law and in broad cultural understanding existed in an uncertain state. Blacks were not slaves under the law, but they endured a status of enslaved servitude. Blacks were treated differently than white servants, because of their skin color and heritage. Nevertheless they shared common experiences, and sometimes radical ideas, with white working-class people. This dissertation adds to the scholarly understanding of the lives of black people in London as a trans-Atlantic phenomenon. While the context of life in London was different from that of the colonies, slavery nevertheless defined the existence of Londoners of African descent.

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