Black Pirates in the Golden Age of Piracy: Men Seeking Escape and Transformation

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Black mariners represent a very specific group of individuals among those who sought to board pirate ships. Blacks joined pirate crews for a variety of reasons. Some, like many whites who became pirates, wished to escape the harsh lifestyle they had experienced while serving aboard merchant, naval or slaving ships. Others were slaves trying to escape the harsh realities of slavery on land. But no matter what their motivation each of these blacks sought new, independent lives, and was not choosy about the means by which they accomplished this goal. As a result, pirate ships became places where transgressors, such as former slaves, sought sanctuary from the restrictions of life ashore.

There were a variety of Africans and African-Americans aboard ships in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all having their own distinct statuses. Runaways comprised one distinct subset of black pirates. Fugitives often fled from their masters without a clear plan other than escaping the life they knew.[1] They did so because they understood that ships offered a way for them to physically distance themselves from their former masters, thus making permanent escape more likely than through most other means of resistance. As far as their status on pirate ships, former colonial slaves most likely made up the majority of African pirates,

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[1] Charles Foy, "Ports of Slavery, Ports of Freedom: How Slaves Used Northern Seaports' Maritime Industry To Escape and Create Trans-Atlantic Identities, 1713-1783" (PhD diss., Graduate School-New Brunswick Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 2008), 286-287.

so it varied more with their status on each boat itself.[2] On other ships, such as ones used for slaving, they could be hired as employees and therefore had a higher status than the African slaves themselves who were on board.[3] Although they likely enjoyed a higher status than the slaves on slaving ships, blacks did not always have the same experiences at sea as whites. For example, whaling ships were ideal to maritime fugitives as whalers' long voyages allowed them to distance themselves greatly from their masters; however, the very reason why blacks were often employed on whalers was they would perform backbreaking labor with the risk of low or no pay that dissuaded many white seamen.[4] The status of black mariners on most ships was likely somewhere between the low status of a slave and the respected status of a white seaman.

Even though they would likely not be seen as equal to any of the pirate captains, black mariners were sometimes seen as having some sort of commonality with the white mariners that they sailed with on pirate ships. If, as Hugh Rankin contends, "a substantial number of the unruly [slaves] 'went off to join those pirates who did not seem too concerned about color differences,'" there must have been some other identifier of status aboard pirate ships if race was not an absolute bar to blacks serving as pirates.[5] It appears that pirate captains were most interested in finding crews that were dedicated to the ship than to finding an all-white crew.[6] Black and white mariners found commonality in "common oppressors" and opposition to "traditional authority," since "[pirates] were far less divided by national, religious and racial differences than were Europeans caught in a web of institutionalized dynastic, national, religious, and racial hatreds."[7] With black, able-bodied seamen

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[2] Kenneth J. Kinkor, "Black Men under the Black Flag," in *Bandits at Sea: A Pirate Reader*, ed. by C. R. Pennell (New York, London: New York University Press, 2001), 199.

[3] Foy, "Ports of Slavery, Ports of Freedom," 287-288

[4] Ibid., 287.

[5] Marcus Rediker, *Villains of all Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 55.

[6] Rediker, *Villains of all Nations* 55.

[7] Kinkor, "Black Men under the Black Flag," 196-197.

being seen as especially "valuable pirate recruits" runaways with maritime skills who sought berths would have been valued, regardless of their race. The ability of black mariners to be seen as valued members of a pirate's crew after being viewed as lowly slaves for so long meant that the pirate ship signified a site of metamorphosis for them.

Another way in which the status of black mariners changed aboard pirate ships was their status in relation to their white fellow crewmembers. For one thing, voluntary or involuntary boarding of a pirate ships was not always based on race. White men were forced into impressments on pirate ships the same way that black mariners were.[8] They were also treated in a similar fashion to how the impressed black mariners were treated, meaning that their skin color did not necessarily afford them any privileges while aboard.[9] Black mariners also were not always stinted when it came to benefits and pay. Blacks enjoyed similar rewards to the ones their white counterparts received in some cases, which likely gave them near-equal status aboard the ships.[10] Since they were still able to relate to their white crewmembers, blacks enjoyed a transformation from being a slave to one of being nearly equal to them aboard some pirate ships.

One argument against this idea of upward mobility would be the poor treatment of black mariners by some pirates. There were limits to the status black mariners could achieve; few black pirates appear in the pages of *A General History of the Pyrates*.[11] There was also a division of labor on some pirate ships that leaned unfairly on black mariners; the slaves on board Bartholomew Roberts' ship were "probably forced to do the pumping and other hard labour for their lawless masters."[12] One of Bialuschewski's arguments against

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[8] Ibid., 199.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 200.

[11] Daniel Defoe, *A General History of the Pyrates*, ed. Manuel Schonhorn (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc.: 199), 9-24.

[12] Arne Bialuschewski, "Black People under the Black Flag: Piracy and the Slave Trade on the West Coast of Africa, 1718-1723," *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 29, no. 4 (December 2008), 467.

upward blacks' upward mobility was pirates' treatment of local Africans at Annobon Island. One source described the pirates on the island and how they lived "very wantonly for several Weeks, making free with the Negro Women, and committing such outrageous Acts, that they came to an open Rupture with the Natives, several of who, the kill'd, and one of the Towns they set on Fire.'"[13] In another instance, out of anger, a group of pirates set fire to a slave ships while it was still full of slaves.[14] These examples make clear that one cannot deny pirates committed atrocities against blacks.

A few counterarguments can however be made against the assertions that pirates were unwaveringly racist against black mariners. One would be that pirates valued skilled labor, since life at sea was very difficult, and slaves that were not experienced at sea may have naturally been placed in harder labor that possibly required less experience.[15] It is simply the position that would have benefitted the ship most. Another would be that the pirate ships itself was a site of transformation and that the interactions on land disrupted the change in status. On a ship there obviously cannot be a lot of interaction with the outside world, therefore, pirates are able to construct their own societal rules. Once they reach land, they are thrust into the presence of people with different and possibly opposing ideals and therefore the transformation that took place for men of all sorts on board the ships would be considered null. It is not that the status changes did not occur, it is rather that they may have changed back once the crew reached shore. A third argument would be that the pirates may have seen a difference between slaves they captured at sea and those who ought to enter on board voluntarily. Many pirates came from the "proletariat... accustomed to treating Africans as human cargo."[16] As such, they would have seen slaves as subservient. However, the positive interactions between pirates and the black mariners they sailed with point to the idea that by joining their ships as workers and fellow

[13] Ibid., 464.

[14] Ibid., 467

[15] Ibid., 468.

[16] Ibid., 469

pirates, the black mariners may have been transforming their identities thoroughly enough that the pirates came to respect them.

One result of this increase in status for black mariners aboard pirate ships was newfound freedom. Since they operated independent of any nation, pirates had different freedoms than men on land. As one contemporary noted, pirates' self-government was a "form of rule which these wretches set up, in imitation of the legal government, and of those regulations there made to supply the place of moral honesty.'"[17] The pirates were not completely lacking in moral fortitude; they simply had more freedom to decide as a group what would and would not be permitted on board. As members of the crew, black mariners would likely have had a say in these rules as well, something inconceivable for an enslaved black in the Americas. Another form of freedom was the freedom to mutiny. Pirates were able to stage mutinies against their captains, as the captain's status was tenuous and dependent upon the approval of his crew. In one instance, free black men aboard a pirate ship mutinied because "'[they] had too many Officers, and that the work was too hard, and what not.'"[18] Whereas they were limited in their ability to resist while under slavery, black mariners had a greater freedom to do something about the conditions they were being subjected to. In addition, upon capture, the black pirates would have greater freedom as well. They were often sold back into slavery rather than be hanged. Although this might not be seen as freedom since they were forced back under the watchful eye of a master, it could be preferable to the absolute nature of death: one can escape slavery again, but not death. Black mariners were allowed far greater freedoms aboard the pirate ships, which transformed them from right-less people who were forced to live under the rules others had made to men who had the ability to change rules and have a say in who was in charge of their fates.

This newfound freedom was evident as black crewmembers became able to reach higher statuses on pirate ships. Black sailors were common on pirate ships. A description of pirates found on

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[17] Rediker, *Villains of all Nations,* 42.
[18] Ibid., 55.

one ship notes that multiple black crewmembers were aboard; a few listed are, "Richard Squires, an Englishmen…well made, dark complexion, short black curly hair… Stuart, a mullaato, says he was born in Boston… John Boadman… black complexion… They kept on board two negro boys."[19] This example is hardly uncommon. In some cases, blacks were even found to be leaders on board pirate ships. Diego de Los Reyes, Ipseiodawas, John Mapoo, and Diego Grillo are just a few examples of black mariners who were actually in charge of crews who were mostly white.[20] There are at least two instances of black mariners reaching the status of quartermaster, as in the cases of Hendrick van der Heul of Captain Kidd's ship and Abraham Samuel, as well as "Casear," who was a black officer under the tutelage of the infamous pirate Blackbeard.[21] While the numbers of black officers on pirate ships is admittedly not large, they are still an important indicator of how former slaves could increase in rank and status aboard pirate ships.

Kenneth Kinkor also points to one very distinct signifier of status for black mariners aboard pirate ships, the right to bear arms. There are no known instances of pirates ships were blacks were banned from owning and using guns, and they were "frequently recorded as being active combatants."[22] In fact, on some ships, such as Edward Dondent's *Dragon,* black crewmen were "part of the pirate vanguard, the most trusted and fearsome men designated to board prospective prizes."[23] It is highly unlikely that pirates would have unanimously (as far as data has revealed thus far) given black mariners the right to own some of the most powerful personal weapons of the era if they did not respect and trust them a fair amount; that fact amounts to a greater sign of a higher status for blacks aboard pirate ships than almost anything else. Although there were still individual cases of pirates treating the blacks on

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[19] "United States of America. Massachusetts," *Massachusetts Spy, published as THOMAS's Massachusetts SPY: Or, The Worcester GAZETTE,* September 8, 1785. Issue 753, vol. XV, 2-3.
[20] Kinkor, "Black Men under the Black Flag," 200.
[21] Ibid., 200-201.
[22] Ibid., 201.
[23] Rediker *Villains of All Nations*, 54

their ship poorly, overall, Africans and African Americans enjoyed a much higher status on pirate ships than most other places in the Anglo-American world. This ability to achieve greater upward mobility was appealing to slaves who had few opportunities for such elsewhere.

The differences in statuses between pirate ships and other sea vessels point to the pirate ships as a potential site for the metamorphosis of black mariners. As slaves, blacks were valued for their labor as something separate from their individuality. In a poem about the struggles of being a "wandering sailor" starts out with "WOULD you hear of the life that is fuller of woe,/Than Negro Slaves in the tropics e'er know," signifying that people thought of slave work as horrible and woeful.[24] The very definition of "slave" identifies this: "slave: one who is the property of, and entirely subject to, another person, whether by capture, purchase, or birth; a servant completely divested of freedom and personal rights."[25] However, the possibility of upward mobility completely changed this idea for black mariners. They were no longer limited to the status of slave; they could be valued as skilled seamen aboard pirate ships. This effectively transformed them from lowly second-class citizens to esteemed members of the ship; the inclusion of black leaders on board ships is evident of this change of status.[26] The status of black mariners on a ship was just one of the ways in which pirate ships could be viewed as a site of transformation.

Sailors, and particularly pirates, were often looked down on and seen as outside the bounds of acceptable society. As was previously mentioned, a poem about the woes of being a sailor include the phrases, "To the storm and the tempest, the cold and the heat,/He's all expos'd, and they on his head beat;/And if he be ta'en, by pirates or foes,/Him they lash, or perhaps in a prison enclose-/Wretched life of a poor Wand'ring Sailor!/O think of this

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[24] "[No Headline]," *The Philadelphia Repository, published as Philadelphia Repository, and Weekly Register,* September 9, 1803. Issue 36, vol. III, 288.

[25] *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2ⁿᵈ ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford Press, 1989. Definition: slavery. Also available at http://www.oed.com/view/ Entry/181477 ?rskey=MDoqrY&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid

[26] Kinkor, "Black Men under the Black Flag," 200-201.

when you would be a Sailor!"[27] There is obvious prejudice against all seafaring activities in this poem, but it paints pirates in a negative light as those who would attack sailors.[28] This comparison exemplifies the commonality that black mariners would have held with pirates. They were both looked down upon and therefore would have had a "shared feelings of marginality,"[29] as they both sought to find a place where they could belong. This place would be aboard a multi-national pirate ship.

Black mariners and their changing statuses aboard pirate ships point to those ships as sites of transformation. Not only did their presence on the ships increase their own status, but also it gave them a value as human beings that had been missing from their lives as slaves. The freedoms that were allowed on pirate ships turned black mariners from people stuck in their lowly status as former slaves into valuable crew members who could gain wealth and higher ranking positions on a ship than almost anywhere else. As Kenneth Kindor concisely states: "It would seem that the deck of a pirate ships was the most empowering place for blacks within the eighteenth-century white man's world."[30] Although their fellow crewmembers were not race-blind, by becoming crewmembers on pirate ships blacks were, despite sometimes hostile, racial attitudes, able to change their identities and find freedom.[31]

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[27] "[No Headline]," 288.

[28] "[No Headline]," 288.

[29] Kinkor, "Black Men under the Black Flag," 202.

[30] Ibid., 201.

[31] Ibid., 202.