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Enslaved Women's Fugitivity

SIX MONTHS AFTER SELF-EMANCIPATED CRISPUS ATTUCKS, whom many consider the first casualty of the American Revolution, was killed by British troops in the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770, a twenty-three-year-old woman, her eight-month-old daughter, and her husband escaped from bondage in Leacock Township, a farming community with over 11,000 acres of arable limestone land that had been settled by emigrants from northern Ireland, two-thirds of whom owned slaves.¹ It was a relatively warm Thursday, the 13th of September, and the trio had been planning their evening escape since February, when the young mother had given birth, and dreamed of a time when she and her daughter would be free. She wore “good clothes,” carried “two long gowns, and had new low-heeled shoes.”² There were no free Blacks in Leacock at the time.

This unnamed fugitive slave and her daughter and husband made plans to escape to Philadelphia. The Philadelphia–Lancaster Old Road would have been a risky route for the trio but was worth the risk if it brought them closer to freedom. The revolutionary spirit was alive in Leacock Township as early as 1770. David Watson, the enslaver of the fugitives, was one of sixty men elected from Lancaster County to represent Leacock Township in defense of American liberty. The fugitives found reinforcement of their belief that they had a right to freedom after overhearing Watson’s conversations that colonists were enslaved and had a right to liberty from Great Britain. For reasons unknown, Watson did not name the escaping trio. Perhaps he surmised that given the small Black population in Leacock Township (348 in 1790), a general description of their clothing would suffice. Their namelessness served as an erasure of their identity. Yet these

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revolutionary abolitionists provide a searing example of the ways in which freedom-seeking women advanced their liberation.³

Enslaved women ran away. Women in bondage were not content, and running away, or flight, was one of the ways in which they registered their protest. Slaveholders lived with this inescapable reality on a consistent basis, and they did everything they could to get their property returned. Posting advertisements in newspapers was the most pervasive method used to secure the return of runaway women. Runaway slave advertisements were a regular feature of print culture throughout the era of slavery. Newspaper advertisements leaned heavily toward the physical, offering detailed information about the facial and bodily features of slaves; their origin and ethnicity; where they may have gone; and rewards for their return. The advertisements also reflected on-the-ground collective transformations of names and ethnic changes and identities. In other words, the fugitive body became a living and moving text of victimization, protest, and personhood.⁴ As articulated by historian Marisa Fuentes, “fugitivity in this context denotes the experience of enslaved women as fugitives – both hidden from view and in the state of absconding. It also signifies the fragile condition of runaways who came into visibility through runaway advertisements.”⁵

Enslaved women and girls ran away as soon as they set foot in the Americas. Some escapes were collective; others were individual. While some newly arrived women escaped immediately, others did so within a few weeks of arrival and others escaped months later. On June 16, 1733, fifteen-year-old Juno arrived on the slave ship *Speaker* in Charleston, South Carolina. She had arrived from Angola along with 316 other enslaved men and women (out of 370; 54 died during the Middle Passage). Two weeks after being sold to a planter from Dorchester, she escaped.⁶ Similarly, fourteen-year-old Lucia, who arrived on a slave vessel in Savannah, Georgia and whose country marks were evident on each of her cheeks, escaped in 1766.⁷ Newcomers like Juno and Lucia were likely caught in the act of escaping days later. Despite the pervasiveness of the escapes, very little documentation exists about the personal experiences of women who attempted to flee.

Running from Bondage seeks to lift the veil on freedom-seeking women during the Age of Revolution. Although it is based on scores of cases in

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which enslaved women absconded or *attempted* to flee bondage, *Running from Bondage* neither attempts to relate all documented instances of fugitivity nor is it about all enslaved women in the British North American colonies. The individuals studied here share one key characteristic: they attempted to flee bondage. I argue that enslaved women's desire for freedom for themselves and their children propelled them to flee slavery during the Revolutionary War, a time when lack of oversight, and opportunity due to the presence of British troops, created spaces for them to invoke the same philosophical arguments of liberty that White revolutionaries made in their own fierce struggle against oppression. The desire for freedom did not originate with the American Revolution. However, the Revolution certainly amplified the quest for liberty. At stake in this discussion of fugitive women is demonstrating that Black women's resistance in the form of truancy and escape were central components of abolitionism during the Revolutionary Era. Thousands of women of diverse circumstances escaped bondage despite their status as mothers and wives. In fact, motherhood, freedom, love, and family propelled Black women to escape bondage during the Revolutionary Era, a time when, as historian Matthew Spooner argues, the chaos of war made women's flight possible due to the breakdown of oversight and colonial authority.⁸ The war produced chaos that preoccupied enslavers and diverted attention away from the daily full-time control of slaves. There were in fact two wars being waged: a political revolution for independence from Great Britain and a social revolution for emancipation and equality in which Black women played an active role. I therefore challenge Black women's lack of representation in studies of Revolutionary America and the ways in which Black women enter history. By excavating the story of fugitive enslaved women, Black women's integral role in the eighteenth-century abolitionist movement is manifest.

The boundaries of slavery and enslaved women's manipulation of space continue to generate interest. Enslaved women challenged enslavers' control of their movements through everyday acts of resistance such as truancy and through flight. Fugitive women pursued alternative physical environments in what historian Stephanie Camp terms a "rival geography, alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern [and northern] space that conflicted with [enslavers'] ideals and

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demands.”⁹ I have adapted the term “rival geography” to refer to the movement of bodies, objects, and information *away* from plantations and the spaces of enslavers. This rival geography threatened the system of slavery and provided fugitive women autonomous spaces to resist enslavers’ efforts to control their bodies and contain their movements. Containment, a principle of restraint, existed on farms, plantations, and areas controlled by enslavers. This geography of containment was elastic for enslaved women during the Revolutionary Era when more opportunities to leave farms, plantations, and enslavers’ homes existed.¹⁰ Running away was a strategic act and represented a central expression of human agency. Flight served as a method of fighting against an oppressive system.¹¹

To understand women’s lives in, and resistance to, slavery requires examining their efforts to escape bondage, and symbolically how what they wore and carried with them in the process of absconding were political acts that challenged enslavers’ powers. Political acts of resistance, such as flight, and women’s thoughts about resistance are in constant dialogue. Although the flight of enslaved women was one of institutional invisibility in that there was no formal organization, no leaders, no manifestos, and no name, their escape constituted a revolutionary social movement in which fugitive women made their political presence felt. In fact, fugitive women displayed a radical consciousness that challenged the prevailing belief that enslaved women could not gain their freedom through subversive actions. The wars that enslaved women waged during the American Revolution grounded the Black radical politics that informed their postwar struggles.

As a consequence of slave flight, many colonies passed laws to control the movement of enslaved women and men. Between 1748 and 1785 Virginia, for example, passed laws prohibiting and punishing “outlying” and “outlawed” activity. In 1748, Virginia distinguished between outlying runaways and outlawed escapees by making truancy (or outlying runaways) a capital offense.¹² In Williamsburg, Virginia, Rachel, who was “big with child,” had experience with both truancy and escape. In November 1771, she fled from bondage to ensure that her child would be born free.¹³ Similarly, eighteen-year-old Lydia ran away twice, seeking to reach Williamsburg.¹⁴ The movements of Rachel and Lydia away from

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plantation spaces illustrates the creation of a rival geography in which both women moved through southern spaces to attain freedom. Through flight, they created spaces for private and public expressions of freedom.

Colonial Black resistance in the form of self-emancipation was a form of abolitionism. In “mining the forgotten” women who appear in runaway slave advertisements, historians recover Black resistance. Historian Manisha Sinha’s study of abolitionism, *The Slave’s Cause*, has advanced new perspectives on Black abolitionism that challenge the idea that White philanthropy and free labor advocates were responsible for the abolitionist movement. Key to her book is the argument that “slave resistance, not bourgeois liberalism, lay at the heart of the abolitionist movement.” Sinha revives the early perspectives advanced by scholars such as C.L.R. James and Benjamin Quarles, who viewed runaway slaves as the “self-expressive presence [without whom] antislavery would have been a sentiment only.”¹⁵

AN UNDERSTUDIED PHENOMENON

This book builds on the histories of how the American Revolution impacted slavery and freedom by highlighting the experiences of enslaved and fugitive women. Although numerous books have been devoted to the Revolutionary Era and its impact on slavery, none focus singularly on fugitivity by enslaved women in the thirteen colonies and their links with the wider Atlantic world. The first historian to seriously study the issue of slave resistance during the Revolutionary Era was Herbert Aptheker in *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943). Aptheker’s research was groundbreaking because it illuminated the colonists’ fear that the British would wage war under an anti-slavery banner that would lead to “20,000 slaves” running to the British lines within a few weeks.¹⁶ Benjamin Quarles in his classic study *The Negro in the American Revolution* (1961) makes clear the contradiction of the colonists’ fight for their liberty from Great Britain while maintaining the institution of slavery when he states, “In the Revolutionary War the American Negro . . . personified the goal of that freedom in whose name that struggle was waged.”¹⁷ Quarles argued further that the American Revolution

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constituted the first large-scale slave rebellion. Post-Quarles, Gerald Mullin's research on Virginia for the period 1736–1801 uncovered 1,280 runaways, or an average of 19.7 per year, with the majority occurring during the Revolutionary War. Philip Morgan in his analysis of South Carolina from 1732–1782 collected advertisements describing the flight of 3,558 slaves, or 69.8 per year. Not only did these historians use all extant newspapers, but the slave populations of Virginia and South Carolina were comparatively large, with Virginia's slave population totaling 188,000 in 1770 and South Carolina's slave population totaling 57,000 by 1760.¹⁸

Given America's Revolutionary heritage it is not surprising that slavery has long captured the collective historical consciousness of the nation. Students and faculty alike continue to ponder the imponderable: the relationship between slavery and the kinds of freedom enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Historians Ira Berlin, Ronald Hoffman, David Brion Davis, Sylvia Frey, Woody Holton, Gerald Horne, Gary B. Nash, Simon Schama, and Cassandra Pybus have examined the transformations wrought by the American Revolution on the institution of slavery.¹⁹ In each of these studies, the agency of enslaved women and men is paramount. In his thought-provoking essay "On Agency," historian Walter Johnson contends that historians' overemphasis on agency, which refers to the self-directed actions of slaves, minimizes the brutality that enslaved people faced. In addressing the agency of enslaved women during the Revolutionary Era, in this study I present fugitive women as the architects of their own actions who challenged their enslavers' power and perceptions. Hence, I do not "give" agency to enslaved women, but simply recognize the agency that they created themselves. Recognizing how power shaped agency and vice versa, this study balances agency with manifestations of freedom.²⁰

The most salient examination of Black agency in the Age of Revolution is Sylvia Frey's *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*. Frey argues that the Revolutionary War in America's Southern colonies, rather than being merely a struggle between colonists and Englishmen, was a three-sided affair between Black slaves, White Americans, and the British, with each faction playing an independent and important role. She also concludes that republican political theory

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and Christian religious belief played huge, crucial roles in the thinking of African Americans as they struggled against slavery during this time. Frey notes that when the Revolution began, many slaves in the South took advantage of the situation to declare their freedom. They appealed to the British to guarantee their liberty, even though they realized that Britain was itself deeply involved in the slave trade, and large numbers of slaves fled to the “protection” of British armies. Also, some of them escaped to remote places to form maroon colonies, while others fomented full-scale rebellion. They continued into the next decades to resist slavery in the name of the liberation rhetoric of the Revolution and the individual dignity taught by Christianity. Taking Frey’s argument further, Woody Holton’s *Forced Founders* argues that slaves engaged in insurgency long before Lord Dunmore’s official offer of freedom and that their actions, along with the fear of general emancipation, united free Virginians in advocating for independence from Great Britain.

In his study, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution*, Gary Nash contends that one-third of all fugitives were women, a far greater number than in previous patterns. Who were these women? What obstacles did they face in attempting to flee bondage? Were they successful? The voices of enslaved women escaping bondage during the eighteenth century are silent, with few exceptions. As Marisa Fuentes has argued, these silences in the archive of bondswomen in slave societies bury the narratives of the most subaltern.²¹ The overall invisibility of fugitive women seems to be due in part to the fact that women in general are often overlooked in studies about the enslaved population. Such male-specific analyses do not correspond to the reality, whether in North America or in the rest of the hemisphere.

FUGITIVITY AND LINKS WITH THE ATLANTIC WORLD

Slavery, as Dale Tomich argues, was one “of the strands that wove the histories of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, creating at once a new unity and a profound and unprecedented divergence in the paths of historical development of these regions and their people.”²² Slavery was foundational to European expansion projects, and its growth became inseparable from inter-imperial competition that turned the Atlantic

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into a theater of war in the eighteenth century. With this process came opportunities for free and enslaved African populations who in most cases were clearly aware of, and central to, the political conflicts of the age. With increasing frequency scholars have recognized the impact that the Age of Revolution had on slavery. Latin American historians from Gilberto Freyre to Frank Tannenbaum to Herbert S. Klein and Ana Lucia Araujo have studied slavery in Spanish and Portuguese colonies, as have scholars of the Caribbean islands. Barbara Bush has commented of West Indian slave women that “popular stereotypes have portrayed them as passive and down-trodden work horses who did little to advance the struggle of freedom.” The “peculiar burdens” of their sex allegedly precluded any positive contribution to slave resistance.²³

However, enslaved women in the British Caribbean exasperated their enslavers in countless ways. They shirked work, damaged crops, dissembled, and feigned illness. They also ran away. Enslaved women ran away for a variety of reasons. They sought to put pressure on their enslavers to sell them or improve conditions. They also ran away to visit kin or friends. Many attempted to merge into the free Black and urban communities, where they often found employment. Historian Gad Heuman suggests that runaways were less concerned about freedom than with preserving some sort of autonomy within slavery itself, which raises the question of the degree to which enslaved women could control and affect aspects of their enslavers’ world.²⁴

Young men without family ties predominated among runaways in the Caribbean; however, according to historian Barbara Bush, 40 percent of runaways in the Caribbean were women. Women took their children with them far more frequently than did men. However, if caught, both mothers and children were forced to wear collars, and running away with children meant that the women were more likely to be caught.²⁵ French historian Arlette Gautier suggests that women may not have had less desire to run away, simply less opportunity. Advertisements in the *Jamaican Mercury* and *Kingston Weekly Advertiser* (the *Royal Gazette* after 1790) provide important insights about women’s family connections and their status and value. A number of slave women ran away with their children or other close relatives, an indication of strong familial bonds. Other runaways were suspected of having fled to join spouses or

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other kin from whom they had been separated, and often the advertisers alleged that their runaways were being harbored by kin or friends in distant parts of Jamaica. Thus, a significant number of women, African and creole, were among the lists of runaways.²⁶

Slave imports from the Caribbean to the North American mainland increased during the eighteenth century. According to David Eltis's slave trade database, nearly 140,000 Africans were imported from Africa as well as the Caribbean between 1711 and 1740.²⁷ What is true about the Atlantic during this period is that absolute differences or actual boundaries were not real since we are talking about a deeply interconnected world. Illustrative of this is Margaret Grant, a fugitive slave from Baltimore, Maryland who had also experienced slavery in Barbados, Antigua, and the Grenadines and who escaped slavery at least twice.²⁸

REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN

During the American Revolution, one-third of runaways were women and more than half fled in groups rather than alone. By contrast, prior to the Revolution, nearly 87 percent of colonial runaways were male, and about two-thirds fled alone. Roughly 25 percent fled in family groups consisting of husbands, wives, and young children.²⁹ Enslaved women pursued multiple avenues to gain freedom during the Revolutionary Era. Some, like forty-year-old Sarah of Pennsylvania, made plans to reach New York City on the eve of the Revolution on October 24, 1769, where ships headed for other northern ports docked. Others, like twenty-three-year-old Bellow, who was born in Barbados, sought to find refuge away from her enslaver's home on Broad Street in New York City on April 28, 1770. Others, like "Free Fanny," claimed freedom by running away on Christmas Day 1770 from her enslaver's estate in Essex, Virginia.³⁰ To migrate to another city or colony may seem to have been an improbable proposition for women in bondage. Going to town or to another colony implied that they had knowledge of the geography and topography of the area.³¹ The enslavers of eighteen-year-old Lydia (mentioned earlier) remarked that she had traveled the road to Williamsburg several times and was familiar with the route since she had attempted escape on more than one occasion. The escape of many enslaved women was polycentric

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(having more than one center) in that they attempted to flee more than once.

Southern cities and Northern colonies were open spaces for freedom-seeking women during the Revolutionary Era. They could find refuge with the British, escape to Black enclaves in the cities and pass as free women, as well as find refuge with Native Americans. In some cases, women found refuge in the woods and swamps because “there was no other place of concealment and freedom for them.”³² They experienced what Damian Pargas describes as an “informal freedom,” spaces within slaveholding regions where enslaved people attempted to escape by blending in with the free Black population.³³ As they experienced this “informal freedom,” women truants in rural areas embraced the ecology. Women had knowledge of the fauna and flora, the animals and plants they would find, and what vegetation they should not eat. They also had familiarity with changes in the weather and had family and friends nearby.

In Virginia, 12,000 runaway slaves were with Lord Cornwallis’s army by the middle of June 1781. In total, it has been estimated that Virginia lost 30,000 slaves during the Revolutionary War.³⁴ Virginia’s fugitive slaves did more than serve soldiers as porters and body servants. They contributed substantially to Cornwallis’s new style of warfare. Cornwallis encouraged bondwomen and bondmen to leave their enslavers, thus threatening Virginia with complete economic ruin. Virginia’s fugitives also served Cornwallis in a more deliberate fashion. Runaways acted as spies and guides for the British. They frequently showed British soldiers where fleeing enslavers had hidden their valuables and livestock. In fact, African Americans delivered so many horses to Cornwallis that General Lafayette exclaimed, “Nothing but a treaty of alliance with the negroes can find out dragoon horses, and it is by those means the enemy have got a formidable cavalry.”³⁵ The militia was Virginia’s last remaining line of defense. The strength and speed of British forces terrified Virginia’s citizen-soldiers. Militiamen were reluctant to take up arms lest they provoke the British into destroying their homes. The militiamen also feared leaving their families alone with their slaves. “There were . . . forcible reasons which detained the militia at home,” explained Edmund Randolph, who had been a Virginia delegate to Congress.