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**“A Master’s Care and Dilligence Should Never be Over:” the British Government and
Slave Shipboard Insurrections¹**

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Summer Term 2009

Dr. Charles R. Foy

EIU Honors Thesis

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Captain Francis Messervy, first time captain on the slave ship *Ferrers* and perhaps overly ecstatic after his most recent successes at sea, maneuvered unprotected below deck to inspect his newly-purchased Africans. As he lurched further down into the slave ship, Messervy would have seen the sailors whose duty it was to guard against insurrection and the three hundred or more Africans that he had recently purchased following a war between two neighboring polities near Cetre-Crue. What Messervy perceived as good fortune, fellow captain William Snelgrave perceived as a cause for concern. Snelgrave noted that controlling “many Negroes of one Town and Language” had its inherent risks and these suspicions, borne from his experience as a slave ship captain, proved correct a few months later when the news circulating the Guinea coast highlighted a large-scale insurrection aboard the *Ferrers*. Captains and mariners alike shared tales of Africans who “beat out his [Messervy’s] brains with the little Tubs,” and of the ensuing battle in which nearly eighty Africans died.²

Despite perceptions among the British public concerning the transatlantic slave trade, slave insurrections such as that on the *Ferrers* in 1722 occurred quite frequently. The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database (“*TASD*”) documents twenty-seven slave insurrections occurring on British ships during 1713-1743, as well as an additional five instances in which Africans attacked British slave ships near the coast—amounting to just over one instance per year. To be sure, the number of reported insurrections would increase as the century went on, in part due to an increase in slaving in regions “associated with exceptional levels of revolts or shore-based attacks on ships;”³ however, the number of insurrections in the early eighteenth-

² William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1971), 185-191; Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 213, 287; Eric Robert Taylor, *If We Must Die: A History of Shipboard Insurrections During the Slave Trade* (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell, 2000), 145; Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 103-4.

³ David Richardson, “Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (“*WMQ*”), Vol. 58:1 (Jan., 2001): 77.

century was enough to significantly inhibit the profits of slave traders.⁴ What is more, the captains, officers, crew, and financiers of slaving voyages were aware of such insurrections and took considerable measures to prevent them. Captain William Snelgrave in his *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade*, published in London in 1734, wrote extensively about slave shipboard insurrections. Snelgrave's autobiographical account of his career as a slave ship captain discussed four slave insurrections over a period of less than two decades: the *Eagle Galley* in 1704, the *Henry* in 1721, the *Elizabeth* in 1721, and the *Ferrers* in 1722.⁵ Moreover, in response to resistance by enslaved Africans, slave traders had by the early eighteenth-century adopted numerous defense mechanisms. These included fortified settlements, forts and castles scattered along the African coast, increased crew members aboard ships and guarding forts, and the barricado, a wooden barrier notorious on slave ships for providing a barrier to protect seamen from rebelling slaves.⁶ The public, too, had access to descriptions of insurrections at sea in their papers, including an incident in which "the Negro Slaves rose, killed the Master and eight Men, leaving alive only his Deponent and two Boys, of all the crew."⁷ Most importantly, those who wrote about slave insurrections, including Royal Navy surgeon John Atkins, emphasized the importance of limiting slave insurrections, and suggested methods of prevention. In fact, Atkins soberly notes in his reflections: "there has not been wanting

⁴ David Eltis, David Richardson, and Stephen Behrendt estimate that nearly one in ten slaving vessels from 1698-1807 experienced a slave revolt; Stephen Behrendt, David Eltis, & David Richardson, "The Costs of Coercion: African Agency in the Pre-Modern Atlantic World," *Economic History Review* 54-3 (2001), 456.

⁵ William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade*, (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1971), 165, 168, 174, 185.

⁶ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 70. Pretexat Oursel's lithograph "Transport des Negres dans le Colonies," depicts a barricado on a French slave ship. *The Slave Ship*, Illustration insert, p. 5; Behrendt, Eltis, & Richardson, "The Costs of Coercion," pp. 467-9.

⁷ *Weekly Register*, Saturday, October 17, 1730, Issue 28, p. 104, British Periodicals, <http://britishperiodicals.chadwyck.com/home.do>.

Examples of rising and killing a Ship's Company...but once or twice is enough to Shew, a Master's Care and Dilligence should never be over till the delivery of them."⁸

While many eighteenth-century slave ship captains may have been diligent about preventing slave insurrections, the frequency, impact, and transparency of slave insurrections have evaded the eyes—and pens—of historians until the last decade or so. This should be no surprise as British government papers, a significant source for historians studying the slave trade, are largely silent on the issue. Undeterred by this, historians Eric Taylor, David Richardson, David Eltis, Stephen Behrendt, Joseph Inikori and Stephanie Smallwood have begun to tackle the issue of slave shipboard insurrections directly.⁹ Moreover, the newest generations of historians have shifted away from European-centered studies of the slave trade, opting instead for inquiries that focus on the victims, thus introducing a new perspective on the slave trade.¹⁰ For instance, historian Eric Taylor has carefully examined the frequency, magnitude, and success of shipboard insurrections, while David Richardson and Joseph Inikori have assessed the economic effects of such insurrections and Stephanie Smallwood has provided a nuanced analysis of women's roles in slave ship insurrections. Lost in this maelstrom of historical analysis is the British government's reaction to slave shipboard insurrections and attacks by Africans on the coast and how, if at all, the status of race and anti-slavery in the early eighteenth-century Britain relates to this silence.

⁸ John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies* (London: Ward and Chandler, 1737), 175.

⁹ Eric Taylor, *If We Must Die: A History of Shipboard Insurrections During the Slave Trade* (Ann Arbor: Bell & Howell, 2000); David Richardson, "Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade," *WMQ* 58-1 (Jan., 2001), 69-92; Joseph Inikori, "The Volume of the British Slave Trade, 1855-1807," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 32-128 (1992), 643-688; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 33-34, 56-56, 102-103, 162; Behrendt, Eltis, & Richardson, "The Costs of Coercion," 454-476.

¹⁰ Anne C. Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Sylviane A. Diouf, ed., *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

The British government's limited involvement in controlling shipboard insurrections is anomalous considering these incidents directly threatened the profits of influential British merchants and politicians. Instead, the British government discussed taxing slaves, financing forts and castles on the coast of Africa, preventing insurrections in its Caribbean and American colonies, suppressing piracy, and competing with the other European powers. In each of these instances, we see the British government concerning itself with issues that inhibited the profits of its increasingly influential slave trade financiers. Managing duties, financing forts, preventing piracy, and competing with Europeans all helped decrease the risk of shipping slaves while containing landed slave insurrections in the Americas helped preserve the livelihood of British colonial settlements (and the profits they generated). What emerges is a situation in which the British government failed to investigate shipboard insurrections while simultaneously investigating the multiple enemies, both at home and abroad, that made similar attempts to lessen the profits of the slave trade. In the end, the British government's silence on the issue of shipboard insurrections reflects a silence in the greater society on the issue of slavery and the slave trade. To be sure, while some individuals rebuked the slave trade in the early eighteenth-century, they limited themselves to moral criticisms, rather than acting on their written assertions or questioning the Empire's policies.¹¹ While accounts of these instances were made available to the public, the lack of concern given by the British government reflects an inability by early eighteenth-century Britons to make meaningful enquiries into the slave trade.

The Slave trade and the Early Eighteenth-century

Marcus Rediker, reflecting on sailor-led mutinies in the eighteenth-century, defines mutiny as any "collective effort, planned or spontaneous, to curtail the captain's power and, in

¹¹ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2-3.

the most extreme case, to seize control of the ship.”¹² While Rediker refers to white sailors (of a diverse number of trades) and their attempts to resist the rigid class distinctions of the maritime world, his definition in many ways parallels attempts by Africans to resist the slave trade. Surely, both seamen mutinies and slave insurrections were collective efforts. Occasionally, slaves planned their acts of insurrection, but often times, insurrections grew spontaneously out of unpredictable windows of opportunity. Seaman mutineers desired to seize power from their captain, as did African insurrectionists, one important difference being that Africans desired a redistribution of power based on race while seamen desired one based on class.¹³ With this in mind, slave shipboard insurrections can be crudely defined as any collective effort by Africans, planned or spontaneous, to resist the power of Europeans or take control of slave ships.

Similar instances, albeit more ambiguous, involve free coastal African attacking Europeans slave ships. Soon after February 10, 1731, when the *Ruby* sailed from James Fort to the Gold Coast, she was “attacked by the natives and Captain Colwell was killed.”¹⁴ Often referred to as being “cut off,” attacks like the one experienced by the *Ruby* can be loosely defined as any collective attempt by Africans to violently resist the Europeans involved in the slave trade.

Unfortunately, the historical record falls short of providing complete and accurate details for every instance of being “cut off.” In the case of the *Ruby*, Francis Moore (a geographer employed as a writer, factor, and eventually chief factor of the Royal African Company (“RAC”))

¹² Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 227-8.

¹³ An example of captains’ behavior that could lead slave ship mariners to mutiny is vividly described by Thomas Vincent in a letter to New York’s Attorney General. Undated letter from Thomas Vincen to William Kempe, Kempe Papers, Box 16, Folio 1, New-York Historical Society (“he chained me down Between Decks among his Slaves and Suffered [Negro] Boatmen and Boys to use me ill”).

¹⁴ Francis Moore, *Travels*, in Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America, Volume II: the Eighteenth-century* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1965), 399n; Christopher Fyfe, ‘Moore, Francis (*hap.* 1708, *d.* in or after 1756)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

at James Fort) considered the events that took place an attack by native Africans; however, the *New England Weekly Journal* on March 20, 1732 noted that the captain was “purchasing Negroes” when they “finding an opportunity rose on the ship’s company, kill’d Capt. Collwell, and run the ship on shore.”¹⁵ One possible explanation for this discrepancy holds that the *New England Weekly Journal* and Francis Moore had conflicting definitions of “natives” and “slaves.”¹⁶ Whether this is true or false, however, does not erase the ambiguity of many accounts. Instead, these conflicting accounts are emblematic of the ambiguity surrounding instances of being “cut off.” However, because the government similarly ignored these instances and because of the ambiguity surrounding these attacks, shipboard attacks and attacks by coastal Africans are combined for the purposes of this study.

The early eighteenth-century provides an effective arena for examining shipboard insurrections. Broadly, the slave trade in this period was increasing exponentially and, although it was a shadow of what it would later become, the slave trade was already an integral part of British economic and political life.¹⁷ Additionally, 1713 brought the Treaty of Utrecht that ended the hostilities of the War of Spanish Succession, ushering in a quarter-century of relatively uninterrupted peace—a rarity for eighteenth-century Britain. On the surface, the coming of peace would appear to liberate Parliament from issues of war and international competition, allowing other domestic and imperial issues to be discussed. In addition, one year prior to the treaty Parliament ended RAC’s monopolist control over the trade. In terms of the slave trade, this

¹⁵ *New-England Weekly Journal*, March 20, 1732, Issue 261.

¹⁶ Accounts of the slave trade in the half century after 1688 seem to prefer the term “native” when referring to a free African not in the service of Europeans while reserving the term “negro” or “slave” for enslaved Africans or Africans employed by Europeans. With this in mind, there still remains some degree of uncertainty in many instances.

¹⁷ Inikori, “The Volume of the British Slave Trade, 1655-1807,” 651.

meant that a Parliamentary “vacuum,” in the words of Christopher L. Brown, was created.¹⁸ Furthermore, with the burden of the free trade debates lifted, it would appear again that Parliament would have more opportunities to discuss the nature, effects, and prevention of shipboard insurrections. Put another way, lacking the immediate threats of war and issues of how the slave trade would be run, the years after the Treaty of Utrecht appear to open new doors for Parliament to deal with threats to the slave trade, such as shipboard insurrections.

Peace, however, lacked staying power. By 1739 Britain was again at war with Spain and, later, involved in the War of Austrian Succession. Yet the War of Jenkins’ Ear (1739-1743) provides an important glimpse into the slave trade and the issues surrounding it during times of war. Being limited in nature (before it blossomed into the War of Austrian Succession) and at least partly growing out of international competition with the British and Spanish in the 1730s, the War of Jenkins’ Ear therefore allows for a comparison between Parliamentary enquiries into shipboard insurrections during both war and peace.

In contrast, traditional studies of the slave trade and its abolition have focused on the last half of the eighteenth-century or later. There are a number of reasons for this, most notably, the fact that the 1720s and 1730s are some of the least documented decades of the slave trade. However, most historians relish a good challenge, so the lack of documentation does not fully explain the lack of historiographical emphasis. More importantly is the lack of a popular, sustained, and well-organized enquiry into the slave trade. In contrast, the decades surrounding 1700 saw organized debate concerning the organizational nature of the slave trade and the latter eighteenth-century saw the organization of the abolition movement. By this overview, the period 1713-43 seems like a period in which the slave trade was of little relevance to British authorities.

¹⁸ Christopher L. Brown, “The British Government and the Slave Trade: Early Parliamentary Enquiries, 1713-83,” *Parliamentary History* 26 (2007, Supplement), p. 41.

Yet the slave trade did matter. And it mattered to more people than just the Jamaican merchant who wrote an MP in 1709, using words like “barbarous” and “inhuman” to describe the “African trade.” True, the merchant was arguing in favor of increasing the productivity of the slave trade, but he also argued that “it has never yet throve, nor do I believe ever will, till ‘tis manag’d with more Justice and Humanity.”¹⁹ Similarly, William Snelgrave and a host of other captains and sailors wrote about the slave trade and the inherent dangers which threatened its well-being and profitability, including slave insurrections, which in many cases, “occasioned a terrible Destruction.”²⁰ Moreover, historian Christopher L. Brown notes that “Anti-slavery sentiment did circulate in the early eighteenth-century,” while conceding that “organized efforts to abolish the slave system would not develop until much later,” a statement echoed by English professor Philip Gould.²¹ As these accounts suggest, the burgeoning slave trade of the early eighteenth-century, despite Westminster’s inattention and the lack of organized movements dedicated to its abolition, played a pivotal role in British society. Thus, the early eighteenth-century, rather than being a barren historical period in terms of the slave trade, may prove to be the best place to examine the relationship between how both government officials and individuals working on slave ships regarded the threats that accompanied the slave trade.

The volume of the British slave trade in the early eighteenth-century experienced many hills and valleys. The *TASD* identifies 2,053 British slave ships during the period 1713-43—an average of 68.4 ships each year. When broken into smaller periods (1713-1715, then five successive five year periods followed by 1741-1743), we uncover that the late 1720s and the late

¹⁹ *A Letter from a Merchant at Jamaica to a Member of Parliament in London, Touching the African Trade*, (London, A. Baldwin, 1709), 11-13.

²⁰ William Snelgrave, *A New Account of some Parts of Guinea, and the Slave Trade in Donnan, Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, 361. Additionally, Francis Moore and John Atkins wrote about slave insurrections aboard slave ships in great length.

²¹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, p. 36; Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 15.

1730s experienced the highest yearly averages, with 76.6/year and 80.8/year respectively. On the other hand, the years 1713-1715 reveal that an average of only thirty-two slave ships sailed each year.²² Taking into account the two years prior to 1713 and the years after 1739, the data suggests that war had at least some effect on the volume of the slave trade. Overall, the number of embarked slaves accelerated significantly after 1713, slowed from 1715 until 1718, and slowed again significantly in the early 1720s. A short boom in 1724-1726 was followed by another shrink in volume, which in turn was followed by a sharp rise in 1729-31. 1736-38 revealed another sharp increase, followed by a general decrease after war broke out (with the exception of 1741, which ironically saw one of the highest single-year figures). In all, the volume of the slave trade during this period appears to be one characterized by alternating 2-4 year periods of increase and decline. Analyzing the cause of these periods is problematic—at the very least, insufficient record keeping during this period renders it impossible to gain an accurate figure on the number of ships sailed or slaves embarked. Moreover, threats from other European powers, pirates, and natural disasters figure prominently into the number of slave embarked each year. With this in mind, however, the average recorded number of slaves embarked during the last four years prior to war in 1739 indicates that nearly 26,000 slaves were transported each year compared to a paltry 15,000 per year during the first four years of our period, showing significant increase in slave trading during the early eighteenth-century.

Detailing Shipboard Insurrections

The *TASD* notes nineteen instances of slave shipboard insurrection and five instances of ships being “cut off” between 1713 and 1743. An additional nine instances of slave shipboard

²² This figure does not include slave ships whose period is known, but whose exact year not. There were 72 examples of unknown dates during 1711-1715. By assuming that the real figure for the years 1713-1715 is somewhere within the middle 50% of the 72 cases (or, between 18 and 54 instances) the figure jumps from 32/year to between 38 and 50 per year, the latter of which is still considerably lower than the rest of the years in this study.

insurrection have been found in British and colonial newspapers, as well as in Eric Taylor's *If We Must Die: the Queen Caroline* (1728), *Restoration* (1729), *Ann* (1729), *Cape Coast* (1721), *Dove* (1733), *Princess Caroline* (1737), *Martha* (1725), *Dolphin* (1735), and *George* (1727).²³

In total, thirty-three instances of shipboard insurrections or attacks by coastal Africans have been uncovered by contemporary research, meaning that 1.6% of British slave ships during our period experienced a recorded slave insurrection or attack by coastal Africans—a figure that corresponds with “The Costs of Coercion,” a collaborative effort by David Eltis, David Richardson, and Stephen Behrendt, which estimated the economic effects of insurrections. However, in their estimation, they note that much of the data available concerning specific voyages (*TASD*) comes from port and financial records—records which “are biased against information about what happened during the voyage itself, particularly if the voyage was terminated prematurely.”²⁴ Similarly, as historian Eric Taylor has pointed out, incidents of slave shipboard insurrection likely went underreported.²⁵ This is not surprising. In a world where sailors made between 77-101% less than their superiors, ship captains added to these benefits by enjoying near authoritarian rule over their inferiors (certainly more power than they would have in Britain).²⁶ Captains, therefore, had a vested interest in protecting their reputation. For many, this may have included covering up incidents of ship insurrection. While agents in the Atlantic world as well as ship captains often relayed information back to London concerning other ships (particularly if the ship was owned by the Royal African Company), agents of correspondence

²³ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 162, 206, 273, 275-6; *American Weekly Mercury*, January 11, 1733 (680); *Boston Gazette*, November 8, 1725 (310); *New England Weekly*, September 30, 1735 (443); *Maryland Gazette*, April 22, 1729 (85); *Daily Journal* (London), January 23, 1729, (2510); *Weekly Journal* (London), January 25, 1729 (192); *Daily Journal*, August 31, 1725 (1443); *Weekly Journal*, September 4, 1725 (19); *London Journal*, September 4, 1725 (219); *British Journal* (London), September 4, 1725 (155); *Daily Journal* (London), June 9, 1727 (1998); *Parker's Penny Post* (London), June 12, 1727 (329); *Daily Post* (London), June 9, 1727 (2406); *British Journal* (London), June 10, 1727 (246); *Weekly Journal* (London), June 10, 1727 (169).

²⁴ Behrendt, Eltis, & Richardson, “The Costs of Coercion,” p. 455.

²⁵ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, p. 4.

²⁶ Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p. 124.

were sparse while at sea. Under these circumstances, successful—or unsuccessful but non-deadly—slave insurrections might never be reported. In all, any concrete figures gathered by historians on slave ship insurrections can never be fully accurate. Despite these murky waters, Behrendt, Eltis, and Richardson hazard a guess at the true percentage of slave shipboard insurrections. They postulate that, based on more detailed records taken by officials at Nantes from 1715-1777 which include accounts of entire voyages, the figure is likely closer to 10% than 2%.²⁷ What is accurate, therefore, is the prevalence of slave insurrections on British slave ships in the early eighteenth-century.

If slave insurrections occurred on nearly one in ten slave ships, where then did they occur? For hundreds of years, ship captains and historians have concluded that insurrections were most likely to occur near the African coast, with sights of their homeland propelling Africans into insurrection. While discussing the process of enslavement, Snelgrave notes that he would, “couple the...men together with irons...and soon after we have sail’d from the coast...undo...irons.”²⁸ The rationale behind these actions lay in the contemporary beliefs concerning when slaves would rebel. Additionally, Francis Moore advised that, “all the Time he [the captain] lied there [on the coast of Africa] he runs the Hazard of the Sickness and Rebellion of those Slaves he already has, they being apter to rise in a Harbour than when out at Sea,” echoing the words of John Atkins, who asserts that revolts occurred at sea “not so often as on the coast.”²⁹ In response, ship captains often rushed their slaving procedures to prevent the “increased” risk of mutiny near the coast of Africa.³⁰ In the face of such convincing assessments

²⁷ Behrendt, Eltis, & Richardson, “The Costs of Coercion,” 456. Because slave ships that experienced insurrections often experienced increased mortality among mariners, both due to African disease and the violence of the insurrections itself, it is likely that insurrections were underreported by sailors as well as captains. Rediker, *Slave Ship*, 173.

²⁸ William Snelgrave, *A New Account of Guinea*, 163.

²⁹ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, 402, 281.

³⁰ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 86.

of the slave trade, recent historians have differed on the issue. Historian Eric Taylor has emphasized that reduced manpower near the coast, both due to sickness and European activity on the coast of Africa, led slave ships to become increasingly susceptible to rebellion.³¹ Others have disagreed. David Richardson notes that slave ships often spent nearly twice as much time on the coast than at sea, providing a possible explanation the centuries-old notion that insurrections occurred more frequently near the coast.³²

Another dimension of the location of slave shipboard insurrections manifests itself in the ethnicity of Africans involved in revolts. After reflecting on his many decades of service in the slave trade, Snelgrave concluded that, “sometimes we meet with stout stubborn people amongst them [Africans]...and these are generally some of the Coromantines, a nation of the Gold Coast.”³³ Snelgrave met these particular Coromantines in 1721, when they were enslaved on the ship *Henry*—a ship on which they later revolted. Snelgrave further pondered the ethnicities of revolting Africans when he conversed with Captain Messervy, the novice captain of the slave ship *Ferrers* in 1721. Noticing Messervy’s naiveté in the region, Snelgrave “took the liberty to observe to him, ‘That as he had on board so many Negroes of one Town and Language, it required the utmost Care and Management to keep them from mutinying.’”³⁴ Moreover, John Atkins hints at the magnitude of ethnicity and location, noting that “Slaves differ in their goodness, those from the Gold Coast are accounted best...an Angolan negro is a proverb for worthlessness.”³⁵ Exactly why the Angolans were described as worthless is uncertain; however, with Atkins’ previous experience with slave insurrections, it is possible that their tendency to rebel affected their worth. Further concerns for the slaves’ origins are manifest in the *Royal*

³¹ Ibid., 105, 110.

³² Richardson, “Shipboard Revolts,” 75.

³³ Snelgrave, *A New Account of Guinea*, 168.

³⁴ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative : Volume II*, 360.

³⁵ Ibid., 282.

African Company: Committee Report on the State of the Trade, which reflects a new energy brought into the Company by the Duke of Chandos. The report calls for, among other things, thorough inquiries into the societies in which various slaves were acquired from. More specifically, it advises factors to “make as strict and enquiry as possibly to find out what sort of country they came from...What form of Government they have?...how many fighting Men their Armys generally Speaking Consist of...Their manner of making Slaves?”³⁶ Once again, while these questions fail to explicitly connect insurrections with specific African ethnicities, the RAC’s increased interest different African cultures reflect a desire to better understand the behavior of Africans, with the ultimate purpose of preventing insurrections and the “better regulation of the Trade, and the Supplying the plantations with Negroes at more easy and reasonable rates.”³⁷

This interest, from both a personal and economic perspective, in the rebellious nature of various African ethnic groups represents the subject of David Richardson’s “Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.” Richardson articulates that many slave ship captains believed the location of slaving significant; “European shippers of slaves believed that members of some ethnic groups were more prone to rebel than others.”³⁸ While cautioning that his research is tentative, Richardson postulates that the breakdown of political economies may influence the rebelliousness of Africans toward their European captors. Specifically, his analysis of the slaving activities and politics of the Senegambia region suggest that increased slave trading may have contributed to “a breakdown of political authority,” which induced groups within Senegambian society to lash out against slave ships.³⁹ These assertions remain

³⁶ Ibid.,254-5.

³⁷ Ibid.,250.

³⁸ Richardson, “Shipboard Revolts,” 79.

³⁹ Ibid.,89.

tentative; however, they nonetheless underline one of the key features of slave shipboard insurrections: regional differentiation.

In addition to location of the ship and ethnicity of its slaves, ship captains and modern historians alike have desired knowledge of the specific circumstances of rebellion. Eric Taylor supplies the most comprehensive assessment of these circumstances.⁴⁰ To begin, attacks from pirates or other warships could provide enough of a distraction for slaves to revolt. In the case of the *Elizabeth* in 1721, Snelgrave notes that the Captain and Mate were dead and the ship, “had afterwards been taken to Cape Lahoe...by Roberts the Pirate,” until order was finally restored to the second mate.⁴¹ Realizing that this turbulent course of events could lead to rebellion, Snelgrave attempted to force his way with the new captain, suggesting that he hand over all his slaves to Snelgrave. Fearing a mutiny from his sailors, the new captain refused Snelgrave’s advice. Mutiny would come, however, but from slaves rather than seamen. Snelgrave’s account of the *Elizabeth* thus illustrates that political instability, brought on by skirmishes with pirates or other European ships, could incite a group of slaves to rebel.

Attacks from pirates and warships were not the only forces that could interfere with the political stability of a slave ship. Bad weather, which often forced sailors on deck to navigate and repair damage, could provide a sufficient distraction to incite to a revolt. In addition, slaves often took advantage of a calm night to occasion a revolt. An article in the *Boston Gazette* on November 8, 1725 describes the ship *Martha*, whose “Negroes had form’d a Design to surprise the Crew in the Night Time.”⁴² Moreover, many slaves took advantage of the relaxed atmosphere at mealtimes to revolt. On the *Ferrers* in 1721, the slaves rose while eating, using

⁴⁰ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 112-117.

⁴¹ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, 356.

⁴² *Boston Gazette*, November 8, 1725 (310).

“little Tubs” that held the slaves’ food to assault the sailors.⁴³ This incident speaks to the dangerous nature of mealtimes; slaves were not only unchained and congregated together, but given instruments that could be used as weapons as well.

Despite the plethora of precautions taken by ship captains, their crew, and the owners of slave ships, negligence on the part of the captain and crew of the ship hastened numerous ship insurrections. In fact, historian Eric Taylor contends that crew negligence the most common factor in slave shipboard insurrections. On the *Ann and Pricilla* in 1716, the crew, forgetting that they left pieces of wood lying on the deck, brought slaves on deck to hoist the vessel’s boat near Gambia. The slaves, taking advantage of their situation, used the pieces of wood to kill the captain, Richard Sayers, and take control of the ship.⁴⁴ Five years later, aboard the *Cape Coast* near Annamaboe, slaves took advantage of Captain Wilson venturing ashore to kill a seaman and a boy, all while running the ship ashore. Of the 17 slaves who escaped, 10 were caught by locals and returned to British Officials. Moreover, in a letter from Cape Coast Castle to London, agents criticized the Captain’s foolishness, declaring that “it would be a very unaccountable history that Thirteen men & four boys Slaves should attempt to rise upon Seven White Men was it not that it seems they were all out of Irons by ye Master’s orders.”⁴⁵

William Snelgrave expressed similar criticisms of captains’ relaxed attitude toward guarding slaves. Reflecting on the instance aboard the *Elizabeth*, Snelgrave recalls advising the captain “not to rely on the Friendship of the Slaves,” warning that he would “have reason to repent of when too late.”⁴⁶ Additionally, commenting on the incident aboard the *Ferrers*, Snelgrave assigns blame to the captain, “who by his over-care, and too great kindness to the

⁴³ Snelgrave, *A New Account of Guinea*, 185-191.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 117.

⁴⁵ “CCC to London, 30 September 1721,” T70/7 ff. 30-31v, British History Online (“BHO”), <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>

⁴⁶ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, 357.

Negroes on board his Ship, was destroyed by them.”⁴⁷ In short, the captain’s lax procedures, absence from the ship, and “over-care” toward slaves all commonly led to slave shipboard insurrections.

While relaxed rule of a ship could bring cause for rebellion, attempts to assert excessive control over the slaves could similarly cause revolt. Snelgrave sums up this threat, announcing “These mutinies are generally occasioned by the Sailors ill usage of these poor people.” In order to prevent mutinies, Snelgrave declared it “my principle care, to have the Negroes on board my ship kindly used.” Snelgrave does not end there, using terms like “humanity” and “tenderness” to evoke a sense of benevolent rule of these “poor people.”⁴⁸ Likewise, rumors frequently spread through the slaves’ quarters about how far their white masters were likely to take their violent control. To be sure, some slaves suspected that they may be eaten by whites, a fear which could propel slaves to rebellion. *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* authored by William Bosman, chief factor at the Dutch castle of St. George d’Elmina, describes slaves who, “resolve and agree together to run away from the ship, kill the Europeans, and set the Vessel ashore.” The motivation, according to Bosman, was “to free themselves from being our food.”⁴⁹ Moreover, Captain Japhet Byrd of the *Prince of Orange* informs readers of the *Boston Weekly News Letter* of an attempted insurrection on board his ship, which was caused by “one of their Countrymen, who come on board and in a joking manner told the Slaves that they were first to have their Eyes put out, and then to be eaten.”⁵⁰ These “nonsensical Falsities,” as Byrd terms them, emphasize the ability for preemptive strikes by the slaves if they perceived an imminent

⁴⁷ Snelgrave, *A New Account of Guinea*, 185.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁹ William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Account of the Coast of Guinea* (London, James Knapton, 1705), 365.

⁵⁰ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative : Volume II*, 460.

threat to their safety. Moreover, these fears further emphasize the cycle of violence characteristic of the slave trade.

Explaining attacks by coastal Africans is a slightly more complicated problem to assess. Because these attacks were often planned on land, they tend to reflect personal issues and commercial disagreements. For example, Captain Thomas Stoneham, a separate trader from London and captain of the *John and Anne*, ventured ashore in 1730 and was “seized by the Natives, for anchoring at the Port of Gillyfree, and not paying his Customs.”⁵¹ Moreover, the *Ruby*, discussed earlier, had similar problems with natives (although the exact meaning of “natives” in the account is somewhat unclear), who erupted to kill Captain Colwell.

What is more certain, however, is that slaves aboard slave ships often revolted due to their desire for freedom. In their quest, nearly one quarter of slave insurrections resulted in freedom for at least one slave, according to historian Eric Taylor.⁵² In 1729, the slaves aboard the *Clare Galley* revolted near the Gold Coast and took control of the gunpowder and firearms. This was enough to convince the captain and crew that defeat was inevitable, ultimately forcing them to flee in a longboat. Exactly what occurred after this is subject to debate, however, we do know that some slaves found the freedom they were looking for and that the ship was eventually blown up.⁵³

Each of these possible explanations of slave shipboard insurrections—desiring freedom, exacting personal, political, or commercial revenge, taking advantage of the time, location, or relaxed control—fails to acknowledge the elephant in the room: the violent nature of the slave trade system. To be sure, the violence employed by Europeans to buttress the slave trade system provides the clearest explanation for the violence employed by Africans in their attempts to

⁵¹ Ibid., 397.

⁵² Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 258.

⁵³ Ibid., 192, 275; Rediker, *Slave Ship*, 298.

destroy the slave trade system. Arguably the best evidence to support this claim comes not from instances of slave insurrection but from methods employed by Africans on shore to resist the slave trade. The Balanta people migrated from the hinterland to the coast to escape the grasp of the Muslim slave trade, where the marshland terrain and coastal diseases served as a defense. Similarly, Tabancas, or high-walled villages were built by many African societies to resist the slave trade.⁵⁴ Historian John Oriji identifies a number of measures of resistance, including poisoning the food, water, and wine of slave traders, building walled cities, engaging in armed combat, erecting elaborate road blocks, and banding together in common defense.⁵⁵ Additionally, Sylvaine A. Diouf mentions panyarring (attacking white slave ships and, in some cases, kidnapping its inhabitants) as one attempt that Africans used to secure control of a ship or to retrieve an enslaved family member.⁵⁶

As these examples show, Africans responded similarly to a variety of different encroachments. They fortified their cities, poisoned food, and engaged in armed combat to discourage not only European, but African and Muslim slave traders as well. In short, the commonality in each of these instances is the encroachments and violence of the slave trade, not the other factors described above. True, acts of slave shipboard insurrections could depend on issues such as the time, the location, and the presence—or absence—of Europeans, but the underlying cause of rebellion was the violence of the slave trade system, not the immediate factors preceding each act.

⁵⁴ Walter Hawthorne, “Strategies of the Decentralized: Defending Communities from Slave Raiders in Coastal Guinea-Bissau, 1450-1815,” in Sylvaine A. Diouf, ed., *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 156.

⁵⁵ John Oriji, “Igboland, Slavery, and the Drums of War and Hedonism,” in Diouf, ed., *Fighting the Slave Trade*, 125.

⁵⁶ Diouf, “The Last Resort: Redeeming Family and Friends,” in Diouf, ed., *Fighting the Slave Trade*, 112.

With this in mind, slave shipboard insurrections could end any number of ways. The most common outcome for slave shipboard insurrections was a failure to take control of the ship. The *Sylvia Galley* (1715), *Robert* (1721), *Elizabeth* (1721), *Ruby* (1723), *Industry* (1729), and countless others suffered this fate. On the *Industry*, a slave woman was found attempting to smuggle gun powder and ammunition through a small hole in the wall separating the men's and women's quarters. After her capture, the captain, James Williamson, decided that, because she was worth less on the market, she would be made an example of. In the end, the woman was shot multiple times and dropped into the sea.⁵⁷ Eight years earlier, on the *Elizabeth*, William Snelgrave gathered the captains of nearby slave ships together for a conference. The council of slave ship captains was to decide on the fate of a slave who confessed to an insurrection and murder of the ship's cooper. The captains decided that Snelgrave should "put him to death; arguing, 'That Blood required Blood, by all Laws both divine and human.'" Snelgrave noted that the other captains thought "this would in all probability prevent future Mischiefs." In accordance with their decision, Snelgrave allowed "all their Negroes upon Deck at the time of Execution," at which time the slave was beheaded and thrown overboard.⁵⁸

A much more gruesome scene occurred on the *Robert* in 1721. A local African ruler by the name of Captain Tomba gathered together a group of villagers and began harassing those who cooperated with European slave traders. In response, John Leadstine, the European in charge of the factory at Sierra Leone, captured Tomba and sold him to Captain Richard Harding. Tomba then convinced one male and one female slave to accompany him in his attempt to seize power of the ship. Their plot failed. Harding now had to decide how to handle this "tall, strong, defiant man." After some deliberation and citing the slave's potential economic value, Harding

⁵⁷ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, p. 156.

⁵⁸ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, pp. 356-9.

chose to spare Tomba. Moreover, he chose three other slaves to punish, which he did by killing the first and feeding him to the other two.⁵⁹ Such ghastly displays of violence often followed unsuccessful attempts to gain control of the ship.

Slave insurrections occasionally ended in the complete destruction of the slave ship. For example, the *Mary* sailed in the Gambia River on September 4, 1742, when Captain Nathaniel Roberts and his crew of twenty-three men were killed in a slave insurrection that resulted in freedom for the slaves and left the ship entirely destroyed.⁶⁰ Additionally, slaves aboard the *Dolphin* revolted in 1735 off the coast of Africa. Shortly after, the ship exploded resulting in death for everyone on board.⁶¹ Astonishingly, seven crew members survived the 1713 explosion of the *Victorious Anne* near Cape Coast after her slaves rose in rebellion.⁶² In all, there are four cases in which slave insurrections led to the destruction of the ship in our period. By these numbers—which are admittedly incomplete—we can surmise that over one in ten slave shipboard insurrections led to the complete destruction of the ship.

In spite of this, not all insurrections led to failure. In fact, as noted earlier, Eric Taylor estimates that nearly one-quarter of insurrections resulted in freedom for at least one slave; however, not all successes were similar.⁶³ In an August 28, 1717 letter from Drewry Ottley to William Coleman, Ottley gives a “melancholy acc’t of that unfortunate ship,” the *Anne Galley*. The letter notes Captain Benjamin Clarke’s untimely death in June 1717 in the Gambia River. Taking advantage, the slaves rose in July, resulting in the deaths of all but sixteen slaves. Nonetheless, six slaves later managed to jump overboard and escape to freedom near the island

⁵⁹ Rediker, *Slave Ship*, pp. 15-6.

⁶⁰ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 280.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 258.

of Montserrat.⁶⁴ On September 6, 1721, slaves aboard the *Cape Coast* took advantage of Captain Wilson's absence, running the sloop ashore and escaping to Annamaboe. For seven of the seventeen who left the ship alive, freedom was gained, while the remaining ten were recaptured.⁶⁵ Running a ship ashore after wresting control from the whites represents another common outcome of slave shipboard insurrections. Just as slaves occasionally gained control of a vessel, they could subsequently lose control of the vessel. While little is known about the insurrection aboard the *Expedition* in 1739, we do know that slave deaths were substantial, and that the ship was eventually re-captured by the crew near Gambia.⁶⁶ Thus, declaring slaves the "victor" in their rebellions would give little indication of events that transpired. Even when slaves did gain complete control of the vessel, many could have died during the struggle or could be subsequently re-captured by surviving crew or local Africans.

In reality, these examples roughly canvass the spectrum of possible outcomes of slave shipboard insurrections. For contemporary historians, however, the picture is less precise. To be sure, insufficient information remains a reality for a number of known instances of slave shipboard insurrections. For example, on August 30, 1739, slaves aboard the *Princess Carolina* revolted, killing three members of the crew, however, the subsequent fate of the remaining slaves, crew, and captain are unknown.⁶⁷ Moreover, Captain Richard Sayers of the *Anne and Pricilla* (1716) allowed slaves on deck to assist the crew. After finding pieces of stray wood lying on the deck, they rose, killed the captain, and took control of the vessel. Even though the ship was near Gambia (and not in the middle passage), the fate of the crew, the ship, the slaves,

⁶⁴ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, 232n ; Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 272.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 273; Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 33-4.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 279.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

and their endeavors for freedom are unknown.⁶⁸ So, while slave insurrections resulted in myriad outcomes, the fates of many confirmed cases of slave insurrections are shrouded in mystery.

Major Publications and Slave Shipboard Insurrections

As we have seen, slave shipboard insurrections came in a number of forms, resulted from a multitude of situations, and had a variety of diverse outcomes. This is evident from the accounts of slave shipboard insurrections by various Britons in their personal correspondence, official business correspondence, publications, and periodicals discussed above. However, these few examples do not represent fully the entire scope of knowledge that Britons received between 1713 and 1743 concerning insurrections. For that, we look deeper into the world of publications, newspaper articles, and RAC and South Sea Company (“SSC”) correspondence.

The most detailed accounts and discussions of slave shipboard insurrections can be found in major publications by men involved in the slave trade. While they provide detail and specificity, these reports are few in number, with only three major published works during 1713–1743 that deal at length with slave shipboard insurrections. Arguably the most detailed, William Snelgrave’s *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave-Trade*, was published in 1734 and has proved immensely useful for slave trade historians, both in the eighteenth-century and the twenty-first century.⁶⁹ The son of a slave ship captain, Snelgrave enjoyed relative success in his slave trading ventures—surviving nearly three decades in the violent world of slave trading and being alive and well enough to publish his accounts counts. A separate trader, Snelgrave seemed to be popular among his peers and merchants in London (he dedicated his

⁶⁸ Ibid., 117, 272.

⁶⁹ Archibald Dalzel [formerly Dalziel] (1740–1818), who published *The History of Dahomy* in 1793 drew from Snelgrave’s work; James A. Rawley, “Dalzel [formerly Dalziel], Archibald, Historian and Slave Trader,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

work to the London Merchants). Even if Snelgrave was not popular, he thought he was—a fact that becomes abundantly evident throughout his work.

A New Account of Guinea takes the reader on an epic journey through the violence of the transatlantic slave trade. Snelgrave's account begins with his first voyage to Old Calabar in 1704, details his service on the *Anne* in the last year of the War of Spanish Succession, followed by his capture by pirates in 1718, and describes his trading at Whydah in 1727 and 1729.⁷⁰ Snelgrave incorporates a detailed discussion of slave mutinies, including methods of prevention. Additionally, Snelgrave places mutinies at the center of his discussion by providing a small anecdote as a preface to his accounts. He recalls an instance while on the coast of Africa in which, appalled by the Africans' attempt to sacrifice a small child, he buys the child. Upon returning to his ship, the ship captain notices that one of his slaves is the child's mother. The mother—and the rest of the slaves—see this reuniting as an act of goodwill on the part of Snelgrave, who notes that following this act, the slaves held “a good notion of white men; so that we had no Mutiny in our ship, during the whole voyage.”⁷¹ By initiating his work with this tale, Snelgrave embraces the centrality of rebellion (and the importance of preventing rebellion) in the life of the slave ship captain.

Following a general discussion of slave trading ventures, Snelgrave arrives on the topic of mutiny once again, declaring that slave mutinies were generally brought on by “ill usage” of the slaves. In contrast, treating the slaves with “humanity and tenderness” would limit the possibility of mutinies as well as preserve the health of slaves.⁷² Snelgrave's first mutiny on the *Eagle* in 1704 seems quite unsurprising to the contemporary historian. The ship contained less than ten healthy crewmen, many of which were on shore gathering wood. At supper, the slaves

⁷⁰ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, 342n.

⁷¹ Snelgrave, *A New Account of Guinea*, Introduction.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 162.

seized the opportunity to revolt. Ultimately, the revolt ended in failure, mainly due to the “Officers care in keep a good watch.”⁷³

Tenderness and humanity would not always suffice, however. Occasionally, Snelgrave would meet with “stout stubborn people,” who despite “being kindly used” “nevertheless mutinied.” This was the case in 1721 aboard the slave ship *Henry*. When the crew discovered slaves attempting to mutiny, Snelgrave opted for leniency, agreeing not to punish them. A few days later, however, one of the ship’s linguists (an African employed by Snelgrave to serve as a connection between the slaves and the crew, sometimes referred to as a ‘Grometto’) unearthed another plot to revolt. After this, Snelgrave admits “uneasiness, for I knew several voyages had proved unsuccessful by Mutinies.”⁷⁴

Snelgrave’s accounts of mutinies aboard the *Elizabeth* and *Ferrers* have already been detailed to some degree; however it would prove helpful to revisit them briefly. In the case of the *Elizabeth*, Snelgrave observed the turbulent power struggle between Captain Thompson, the pirate Roberts, the Second Mate, and Snelgrave himself. In short, after the pirates’ realization that Captain Thompson was a just captain, a debate ensues regarding who should be awarded control of the slaves. Snelgrave unabashedly promotes himself as the rightful commander of the ship, but the Second Mate eventually wins the bid for control. After Snelgrave’s repeated, condescending warnings to the Second Mate concerning his relaxed guard of the slaves, a rebellion breaks out. Snelgrave sees his opportunity, quells the rebellion, takes control of the *Elizabeth*, and arranges for the public dismembering and execution of the slaves involved.⁷⁵ Snelgrave provides another example of the consequences of ship captains refusing his advice with his account of the *Ferrers* rebellion. After disregarding Snelgrave’s advice, Captain

⁷³ Ibid.,168.

⁷⁴ Ibid.,168-173.

⁷⁵ Ibid.,174-183.

Messervy is killed by his slaves during a rebellion. When near Jamaica, the slaves again attempted to mutiny (twice!), but were eventually sold.⁷⁶

In all, Snelgrave's accounts of the "several [mutinies] that have ended in a very tragical manner" had the potential to serve both as self-promotion as well as a gentle warning to his fellow traders and merchants. Additionally, while Parliament focused on attempts to maximize profits by dealing with pirates, international European competition, and exerting influence over the duties imposed by African traders, personal accounts, like Snelgrave's, take a starkly different stance, instead focusing on the ability to manage the slave population and prevent rebellion. For Snelgrave, duties, European traders, and even pirates posed little threat to the slave trade regime when compared to the threat of slave mutiny. To be sure, Snelgrave even refers to the Pirate Davis as a "generous friend."⁷⁷ While one should not confuse these sentiments with overall goodwill toward pirates (Snelgrave earlier notes that "next to murder & cruelty...nothing could make them more odious to the World, than their destroying...so many ships and cargoes"), Snelgrave clearly places the threat of slave shipboard insurrection on par with, or above, the threat posed by piracy.⁷⁸

Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa, a work by Francis Moore, geographer and writer for the RAC, offers a similar dynamic between threats posed by pirates, duties, Europeans, and slave shipboard insurrections. Moore essentially writes to articulate the importance of government funding of RAC forts and castles in Africa to the continued well-being of the slave trade. Yet unlike other RAC writers, Moore takes account of slave shipboard insurrections. On November 14th, 1730, for example, Moore notes that "about midnight our Ensign was called down by the Centinels, who were then on Duty, in order to prevent the Slaves from making their

⁷⁶ Ibid.,185-190.

⁷⁷ Ibid.,280.

⁷⁸ Ibid.,265.

Escape [from the *Guinea*], they having got an Iron Bar out of the Slave-House Window.” On the following day, “the Ringleader of them being found out, and proving to be an old Offender, he was ordered one hundred Lashes.” Additionally, on the 31st of December, the *John and Anne* was “seized by the Natives, for anchoring at the Port of Gillyfree, and not paying his Customs to the King of Barrah.”⁷⁹ Then, on April 15th, 1732, after leaving Yanimarew, Moore heard tales of a “New England Scooner...cut off by the Natives,” at which time Captain Major was killed.⁸⁰ Finally, on February 5th, 1733, Captain Williams’ slaves rose, “killed a great Part of the Ship’s Crew; the Captain himself had his Fingers cut by them in a miserable Manner, and it was with great Difficulty he escaped being killed, which he did in swimming ashore, by which means he got safe to James Fort.”⁸¹ *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa*, therefore, argues in favor of government funding to RAC castles and forts and uses instances of slave shipboard insurrection and attacks by coastal Africans as evidence. What is more, by employing Moore, the RAC in some way sanctioned the use of such instances as evidence—an interesting decision, especially considering that fact that MPs (whom this work is no doubt directed towards) rarely, if ever, acknowledged these threats to the slave trade.

Finally, John Atkins echoes some of Snelgrave’s and Moore’s themes in *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies*, published in 1737. To begin, Atkins characterizes the relations between Europeans and Africans on the coast as one of “mutual distrust;” in fact, he duly notes the “foolishness in trusting Natives.”⁸² In Snelgravian fashion, Atkins explicitly warns captain and crew to “have a diligent Watch on their [slaves] Actions...to treat them with

⁷⁹ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative : Volume II*, 397.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 409.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁸² John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies*, 2nd ed. (London : Ward and Chandler, 1737), 58; Donnan, *Documents Illustrative : Volume II*, 271.

all Gentleness and Civility.”⁸³ In the case of the *Dove*, Atkins notes the commonplace occurrence of Panyarring, in which the natives “surprised and murdered a whole ship’s company.”⁸⁴ To add, Atkins, like Snelgrave and Moore, leaves the reader with a grim reminder of the dangers of insurrection. Atkins debunks the common assumption that “the Negroes Ignorance of Navigation will always be a safeguard,” warning instead that “there has not been wanting examples of rising and killing a Ship’s Company.” Finally, Atkins concludes that “once or twice is enough to Shew, a Master’s Care and Dilligence should never be over till the delivery” of the slaves.⁸⁵

In short, Snelgrave, Moore, and Atkins provide their readers (from the London Merchants to MPs to everyday Britons) with astounding accounts of the danger associated with the slave trade. In each example, the author provides both warnings and suggestions to prevent such acts of violence. Moreover, each characterizes the threats of insurrections and attacks from coastal Africans on par with the threats acknowledged by Parliament (Piracy, European competition, and African coastal duties). In Moore’s case, the RAC implicitly sanctioned his use of insurrections and attacks by coastal Africans as evidence to support government funding of forts and castles. With these three examples in mind, popular publications regarding the slave trade tended to emphasize insurrections and attacks by coastal Africans as a central feature of the slave trade system.

Periodicals and Slave Shipboard Insurrections

The publications detailed above appealed to diverse audiences. Snelgrave wrote for London Merchants. Moore wrote for MPs and influential members of government. Atkins, in all likelihood, wrote for both. And while the ordinary Briton may occasionally stumble across

⁸³ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative : Volume II*, 281.

⁸⁴ Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea*, 152.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 173-5.

one of these three accounts, the main avenue for the acquisition of information about the slave trade was periodicals. To be sure, periodicals published numerous accounts of slave shipboard insurrections—although not as numerous as accounts of piracy or international competition—and represent the most likely place for Britons to learn about such instances.

Accounts of slave shipboard insurrections in periodicals often reached the level of detail apparent in published accounts of the slave trade; however, periodicals rarely presented the insightful discussions apparent in published accounts. A typical newspaper account of a shipboard insurrection might be as short as the account of the *Queen Caroline* in the *London Daily Post* on September 15th, 1730: “Our Merchants receiv’d Advice, that the Ship Queen Caroline was lately lost of the Coast of Guinea.”⁸⁶ On the other hand, as we shall see, some accounts could run for paragraphs, providing incredible narratives and succinct historical detail. Moreover, accounts of shipboard insurrections often appear not in one, but many different periodicals contemporaneously. In the example of the *Queen Caroline*, editors of the *Maryland Gazette* received news of the revolt over a year before the *London Daily Post* printed theirs. Moreover, the *Maryland Gazette*’s account stands out from others due to the extraordinary level of detail it provides. Readers of the *Maryland Gazette*, therefore, could read of the Grometto who betrayed Captain Halladay by persuading the “purchased Negroes to rise.” When the slaves set out to take over the ship, “One [slave] took an Iron Bar out of the Fire-Hearth, with which he killed the Captain, and all the rest were soon murdered.”⁸⁷ And while many Britons likely left the *Maryland Gazette* off their reading lists, the level of detail given to the revolt aboard the *Queen Caroline* speaks to the level of detail some periodicals provided for slave shipboard

⁸⁶ *London Daily Post*, September 15, 1730 (429).

⁸⁷ *Maryland Gazette*, April 22, 1729 (85).

insurrections. Moreover, the dual accounts of the insurrection in both London and colonial periodicals speak to the “Atlantic” nature of some slave shipboard insurrections.

An equally detailed account of shipboard insurrections appears in London’s *Daily Journal* on July 4, 1729. After receiving a letter from aboard the *Industry*, the *Daily Journal* readily published the detailed account, which outlined the slaves’ plan “to rise upon the Ship’s [Martha] Crew.” In order to do so, the slaves “made themselves Masters of Gunpowder, Muskets, Shot etc.” Unfortunately for the slaves, the rebellion failed, and the female slave caught providing male slaves with weapons, being unfit for the market, was made an example of. The crew “hoisted her up to the Fore Yard Arm, in View of the other Slaves (who they had disarm’d) and fired half a Dozen Balls thro’ her Body; the last Shot that was fired cut the Rope which she was slung by, so that she tumbled...into the Sea at once.” Naturally terrified, the remaining slaves arrived at Barbados without any major disturbances.⁸⁸ Like most other accounts of shipboard insurrection in London’s papers, this account appears in not one, but many different periodicals, including the *London Evening Post*, the *Weekly Journal*, and the *London Journal*.⁸⁹

Like the *Queen Caroline* discussed above, the insurrection aboard the *Martha* was echoed throughout eighteenth-century periodicals in the Atlantic world. On August 31, 1725, the *Daily Journal* broke the story, relaying that Captain Stephen Bull died on the way to Africa, possibly providing sufficient instability for the slaves taken on board later to formulate “a Design to surprise the Crew in the Night-Time.” Although this plan was “timely discovered” by the crew, readers of the *Daily Journal* would be left with a strange feeling—the sense that the rigid racial hierarchy onboard slave ships might not be as rigid and previously thought. Moreover,

⁸⁸ *Daily Journal* (London), July 4, 1729 (2649).

⁸⁹ *London Evening Post*, July 3, 1729 (246); *Weekly Journal* (London), July 5, 1729 (215); *London Journal*, July 5, 1729 (518).

this account was re-printed by the *Weekly Journal*, the *London Journal*, and the *British Journal* on September 4th and a similar account appeared in the *Boston Gazette* in November of that year.⁹⁰ Similarly, news of the *George* resonated in London papers in early June, 1727. The “unhappy Accident,” as the *Daily Journal* described it on June 10, 1727, involved slaves who “barbarously murdered all the Crew, except the Mate and a sailor, by knocking their Brains out with Billets.” This particularly brutal insurrection, which left the two survivors badly wounded and the ship in a “leaky” condition, found itself printed in *Parker’s Penny Post*, the *Daily Post*, *British Journal*, *Weekly Journal*, and twice in the *Daily Journal*.⁹¹ With this in mind, it would be unlikely that a more-than-casual reader of periodicals in London could miss such a prolific story.

The *Queen Caroline* and the *Martha*, however, only represent two of the many slave insurrections aboard British ships that found their ways into colonial newspapers. The insurrection aboard the *Ruby*, for example, appeared in the *New England Weekly Journal* in March 1732.⁹² Similarly, the *Dove*, “was surprised by the Negroes they were trading with, who destroyed the ship, and murdered all her crew, except one of her mates,” an account of which appeared in the *American Weekly Mercury* in early 1733.⁹³ Moreover, the interesting case of the *Princess Caroline* was printed in Boston in 1737. Slaves aboard the ship “rose, and had possession of the ship three hours; but after a long engagement in which 20 of them were kill’d, the captain regain’d the Command of the Ship.”⁹⁴ Not surprisingly, then, accounts of insurrections aboard colonial ships often reached London papers. In October, 1730, an extract of

⁹⁰ *Daily Journal* (London), August 31, 1725 (1443); *Weekly Journal* (London), September 4, 1725 (19); *London Journal*, September 4, 1725 (319); *British Journal* (London), September 4, 1725 (155); *Boston Gazette*, November 8, 1725 (310).

⁹¹ *Daily Journal* (London) June 9, 1727 (1998); *Daily Journal* (London), June 10, 1727 (1999); *Parker’s Penny Post* (London) June 12, 1727 (329); *Weekly Journal* (London), June 10, 1727 (169); *Daily Post* (London), June 9, 1727 (2046); *British Journal* (London), June 10, 1727 (246).

⁹² *New-England Weekly Journal* (Boston), March 20, 1732 (261).

⁹³ *American Weekly Mercury* (Philadelphia), January 11, 1733 (680).

⁹⁴ *Boston Evening Post*, February 14, 1737 (79).

an affidavit of Peter Harlee, who served on the *William* of Boston, appeared in the *Weekly Register*. In the affidavit, Harlee states that “the Negro Slaves rose, killed the master and eight men.” In fact, Harlee was left alive with two boys in order to sail the ship back to Africa. Harlee, however, managed to gain the upper hand by feeding the slaves “Opium in Wine and Water, which put them to sleep.” With the slaves asleep, Harlee signaled for help. Captain Chapman of the *Mary* responded, the slaves were overrun and the leaders were executed.⁹⁵ Again, these various accounts show insurrections in a decidedly Atlantic light; Britons, both in Britain and its colonies, read about issues relating to slave shipboard insurrections. Furthermore, given the “cumbrous and complex, loosely-knit, and frequently undependable” system of communication and reporting during the eighteenth-century, it is significant that some accounts of shipboard insurrection can be seen in both London and colonial papers.⁹⁶

One peculiar account found in the *Universal Spectator* in September 1729 allows us to examine the validity of periodical accounts of insurrections. The *Spectator* affords the reader an account of an unknown ship cut off by “Negroes, and the said Master and all his Men eaten by them.” The *Spectator* then concedes that the “person of credit” who provided the account “may have been mistaken in his Intelligence,” because “any Canibals, or Man-Eaters there...are up in the Country, and not on the Sea-Coast.”⁹⁷ Such an appalling account calls into question the validity not only of this account, but of all accounts appearing in periodicals at the time. There is no doubt that many details of these insurrections may be somewhat fabricated—the level of autonomy that individuals had over their stories by the lack of communication at sea almost ensures that such fabrications existed. While these accounts surely reflected the biases of their

⁹⁵*Weekly Register*, October 17, 1730 (28), 104.

⁹⁶K. W. Schweizer and M. Schumann, “Anglo-American War Reporting 1749-63: the Press and a Research Strategy,” *Canadian Journal of History* 153 (Fall, 2008), 269.

⁹⁷*Universal Spectator* (London), September, 1729, BP, Issue 48, p. 331.

writers, they nonetheless discussed slave shipboard insurrections in periodicals read by ordinary Britons. Historians K.W. Schweizer and M. Schumann buttress this point by noting “in whatever format,” writings of the press in the eighteenth-century were “generally considered a reputable source of information, eagerly pursued by king, nobleman, and commoners alike.”⁹⁸ What is more, they appeared frequently enough that ordinary Britons would have some knowledge of insurrections and their relative frequency.

Company Correspondence and Slave Shipboard Insurrections

While published accounts of the slave trade and periodicals often featured discussions of slave shipboard insurrections, the RAC and SSC, in their official papers, dealt with insurrections on a much more implicit level. If, for the purpose of this argument, we envision British slave trading society as a hierarchy with those directly involved with the slave trade (captains, crew, etc.) at the bottom, government-affiliated companies (the RAC and SSC) in the middle, and MPs and government officials at the top, those nearer the bottom acknowledged slave shipboard insurrections far more often than those nearer the top. In layman’s terms, insurrections deeply troubled captains and seamen enough to lead them to publish their accounts or send news of insurrections to London and colonial periodicals. Moreover, the RAC and SSC, while concerned with insurrections, discussed them much less explicitly. Likewise, MPs rarely acknowledged these incidents.

Instructions to slave ship captains often provided a useful arena to discuss insurrections; to be sure, many RAC letters of instruction hinted at the possibility of insurrection. Instructions to the captain of the *Oxford* in March, 1712, emphasized the secure placement of the ship’s

⁹⁸ Schweizer and Schumann, “Anglo-American War Reporting,” 269.

gunpowder, as well as advised the captain to “take good care of the Negroes.”⁹⁹ From these two suggestions, one might be able to logically infer that RAC officials feared someone, crew or slave, breaking into the ship’s armaments and using them for ill. Moreover, humane treatment of slaves serves the dual purposes of ensuring that slave would be sold and guaranteeing the safety of the crew. One year later, in instructions to the captain of the *Joanna*, RAC officials cautioned the captain to “always keep a good guard both at sea and in port to prevent surprise.”¹⁰⁰ Once again, RAC officials fell short of explicitly discussing a slave rebellion, yet their warnings infer that the RAC considered slave insurrections a pressing issue. A month later, in April 1713, RAC officials again warned Captain Samuel Foot to take good care of his slaves, however, this time they added that, “the neglect of which has sometimes occasioned a great mortality amongst the negroes to the utter ruin of the voyage.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, instructions to the *Royal Anne* reminded the captain to “show a good example of piety, sobriety, and virtue.”¹⁰² More explicitly, *Pindar Galley* records evidence that RAC officials counseled the captain to keep “a watchfull eye over the negroes you receive on board that they do not want anything and be prevented from doing any mischief.”¹⁰³

Broadly, RAC instructions to their captains seemed to follow a loose pattern from 1704 to around 1720, which often included individualized warnings to captains of the dangers of the voyage. The cases of the *Oxford*, *Joanna*, *Royal Anne*, and *Pindar Galley*, documented above, represent examples of these; each captain was warned about various dangers, most notably ensuring the docility of their crew and slaves. Around 1720, however, ship instructions begin to

⁹⁹ Royal African Company, “Copies of Instructions From the Royal African Company of England to the Captains of Ships in their Service No. 4 From August the 3rd 1704 to November the 4th 1719,” National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom (‘TNA’) T70/63, p. 115.

¹⁰⁰ RAC, “Copies of Instructions,” TNA T70/63, p. 116.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 150.

follow a much stricter pattern. In fact, many instructions, including the instructions to Charles Lansdell of the *Lady Rachell*, are not fully copied into the RAC record books.¹⁰⁴ Instead, they were abbreviated, suggesting that by this time, the RAC began to formalize its records. Further evidence of this increased formality comes in the form of an outline for all instructions at the beginning of RAC record books. After 1720, RAC instructions all began to follow this outline more strictly. Additional changes following this increased formality include an increased focus on documentation of the ship's progress. For example, the RAC initiated a requirement to captains to "take notice of all Negroes...on board your ship." Moreover, the captain was required to gather as many officers as possible to "number them [slaves], and enter every such number, with their quality, into the book."¹⁰⁵ Officers, too, were required to sign the book to ensure its validity. The RAC additionally required all captains to "render Us an account in writing of every particular taken on board your ship," and "within ten days after you return and arrival in the River Thames you are to deliver this book to the Sub Governor or Deputy Governor."¹⁰⁶ In short, the increased formalization of RAC instructions focused more energy on the documentation of events of the voyage. With this in mind, the RAC, in implicitly warning its captains of insurrections and requiring draconian documentation of their voyages, surely had significant knowledge of slave shipboard insurrections. Yet despite this, the RAC and SSC rarely, if ever, mentioned insurrections explicitly in their correspondence with factors and agents in the Atlantic world.

An examination of the RAC's Committee of Correspondence records provides further evidence of the RAC's implicit concern for slave insurrections and attacks by coastal Africans.

¹⁰⁴ RAC, "Copies of Instructions from the Royal African Company of England to the Captains of Ships in their Service, No. 5 From November the 4th 1719 to October 1744," TNA T70/64, p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ RAC, "Copies of Instructions given by the Royal African Company of England to Captain of Ships and Mates in their Service from May the 5th 1737," TNA T70/65, p. 3.

For example, in September 1713, the RAC sent Captain William Cooke to Gambia fort in order to “give security.” Additionally, thirty-two individuals were sent with him, thirteen of which were soldiers, representing the largest single group that was sent.¹⁰⁷ Nearly two years later, the RAC agreed to “Draught of a petition to her Majesty for some Naval Force to be sent to Africa.”¹⁰⁸ Moreover, an additional regiment of individuals was sent to Cape Coast Castle in February, 1716; once again, the largest portion of the sixty-eight men sent was a group of twenty-five soldiers.¹⁰⁹ To be sure, soldiers played an integral part of preserving order at RAC forts and castles. Of the nine salaried staff at Dixiecove, five were soldiers, a ratio which appears to be close to the norm. While the larger forts generally housed less military personnel as a proportion of total Europeans, the average fort had a military/non-military personnel ratio of 67:100 as of August, 1723.¹¹⁰

Despite the RAC’s implicit acknowledgment of slave shipboard insurrections and attacks by coastal Africans, some evidence of reported insurrections appears in RAC letters. On the 30th of September, 1721, factors at Cape Coast Castle wrote to the RAC in London, telling of “the night the Slaves took the opportunity of the Capt. Being on Shoar and the People’s Negligence to rise upon them.” The slaves killed one man and a boy, but managed to take control of the vessel and run it ashore. Captain Wilson, being on shore, “procured the assistance of the Towns People,” who aided him in re-capturing some of the slaves. In all, ten were re-captured while the

¹⁰⁷ RAC, “Minute Book of the Committee of Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England No. From January the 20th 1712 to April the 27th 1716,” TNA T70/120, 17 September 1713.

¹⁰⁸ RAC, “Minute Book of the Committee of Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England,” TNA T70/121, 15 September 1715.

¹⁰⁹ RAC, “Committee of Correspondence,” TNA T70/ 121, 9 February 1716.

¹¹⁰ RAC, “Carlyle: Journal, 1680-1681,” TNA T70/1216, 2 August 1723; Data was taken from the ten forts with available data: Dixiecove, Succondee, Commenda, Annamaboe, Agga, Tantomquerry, Winnebah, Accra, Cape Coast Castle, and Gambia. The total percentage of all military personnel was 39%.

others fled to freedom.¹¹¹ In other words, the RAC had at least some knowledge of slave shipboard insurrections on board their ships—knowledge that would not translate into explicit RAC, or governmental, concern.

Rather than establishing explicit concern for shipboard insurrections, the RAC, like Parliament, focused much of its efforts on eliminating or containing the disastrous effects of Piracy, European competition, and coastal duties. While instructing the captain of the *Oxford*, the RAC noted that pirates “frequently infest the Coast of Africa.”¹¹² To add, when factors requested an additional man of war patrolling the coast of Africa, they cited a need to protect English forts and ships from “pirates on the coast.”¹¹³ James Phipps and John Stevenson, both factors of the RAC, passed on the sentiments of a Mr. Baille, who “complains of the decay of Trade on that Coast by reason of the Pyrates,” to the RAC in London.¹¹⁴ Moreover, on January 25th, 1721, the RAC’s Committee of Trade and Correspondence took account of “the loss upon the Onslow,” which was captured by Pirates. The Committee of Trade and Correspondence also resolved to notify the “Offices of Insurance and That M. Neal & Mr. Lockwood be desired to settle that Affair.”¹¹⁵ The next year, the same committee considered Captain Stoakes’ (of the *Guinea Sloop*) “Sufferings when taken by the Pirates.” The committee likewise provided Stoakes with £50, in order to “account of his Wages to Equip himself for his Voyage.”¹¹⁶ The SSC engaged in similar actions regarding damages to its ships by pirates. On November 20th,

¹¹¹ RAC, “Letters and reports from Cape Coast Castle to the Court of the Royal African Company in London,” TNA C113/274, part 1, pp. 24-5.

¹¹² RAC, “Copies of Instructions,” TNA T70/63, p. 114.

¹¹³ RAC, “Committee of Correspondence,” TNA T70/121, 1 November, 1716.

¹¹⁴ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, 243.

¹¹⁵ RAC, “Minute Book of the Bye-Committee of the Committee of Trade and Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England No From June the 10th 1720 to January the 4th 1722,” TNA T70/123, 25 January, 1721.

¹¹⁶ RAC, “Minute Book of the Committee of Trade of the Royal African Company of England No From February the 6th 1722 to April the 7th 1725,” TNA T70/124, 27 March, 1722.

1717, the SSC declared that it was “not chargeable with Freight for the Twenty Eight negroes taken out of the *Royal Africa* Captn. Foott by the Pyrates.”¹¹⁷

Additionally, on the twenty-third of August, 1723, the RAC suggested that the Governor and Council near Cabenda “put the best Construction they can upon the misfortune which befell the King’s Son who was taken by the Pirates.” Moreover, RAC advised the Governor to assure the African King that the “Company are very much Concern’d” with the threat of piracy.¹¹⁸ In May of that year, the Committee of Trade resolved “some Acknowledgment Should be made by the Company to Mr. Ogle & Capt. Herdman for the Service they did upon the Coast in regard to the Pirates.”¹¹⁹ In other words, the RAC spent considerable efforts attempting to control the effects of piracy on the slave trade in the absence of explicitly tackling the problems posed by slave shipboard insurrections.

European competition, too, played a large role in the RAC’s efforts to maximize the slave trade. Instructions to William Parr in March, 1715 requested that he become informed on the “pretensions of the French to the sole Trade of Portodally.”¹²⁰ Additional enquiries into the trade at Portodally were made on February 28, 1715, when the Committee of Trade sought to debunk the French claims of the “sole right to trade” in the region.¹²¹ The threat of the French involved far more serious consequences. In late July, 1714, the Committee of Correspondence investigated accounts of the “ships & effects of this Company which were taken by the French in and about the River Gambia,” and resolved to “make a charge for the ships & effects and of her losses the Company sustain’d.”¹²² The RAC additionally instructed Martin Bladen, newly

¹¹⁷ Donnan, *Documents Illustrative: Volume II*, 229.

¹¹⁸ RAC, “Committee of Trade,” TNA T70/124, 23 August, 1723.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29 May, 1723.

¹²⁰ RAC, “Copies of Instructions,” TNA T70/63, p. 168.

¹²¹ RAC, “Committee of Correspondence,” TNA T70/121, 28 February, 1715.

¹²² RAC, “Committee of Correspondence,” TNA T70/120, 29 July, 1714.

appointed Commissary to His Majesty, “to procure Satisfaction” for the “considerable Damages by the Depredations made by the French in time of peace.”¹²³

The Dutch and Spanish presented similar threats to the RAC and the slave trade as a whole. In 1722, the Committee of Trade and Correspondence ordered that affidavits be taken for men aboard the ship *Unity*, which was “taken by the Spanish Privateer.” Two years later, the RAC’s Committee of Trade wrote to the SSC enquiring “in relation to the Negroes taken in July 1722 in the Ship *Unity* by a Spanish Guard de Costa.”¹²⁴ The same committee, in 1721, discussed “part of the letter from Cape Coast Castle of the 8th April last,” which disclosed a description of a Dutch ship “seizing...the *Hanibal* & *Dispatch*, two of the Comp. Ships.”¹²⁵ With this in mind, piracy and European competition concerned the RAC to a considerable degree and may help to explain the near absence of explicit discussions of slave shipboard insurrections.

British Government and Slave Shipboard Insurrections

Like the RAC’s peculiar relationship with slave shipboard insurrections, the British Government rarely discussed these numerous and destructive incidents. In some sense, this should not be a surprise. In fact, Christopher L. Brown asserts that “From 1713-1787, when the British slave trade reached its apex, the traffic in African captives only rarely became the subject of sustained discussion in parliament.”¹²⁶ However, Brown’s article considers the slave trade as a whole, and concedes a number of exceptions to this rule. To be sure, while our period (1713-1743) revealed no sustained enquires into the *method* of trading slaves (which had previously been the major subject for contention), the British Government, including parliament, exerted

¹²³ RAC, “Instructions for Martin Bladen Esq. appointed His Majesty’s Commissary to treat with the Commissary or Sommissaries to be appointed by the most Christian King,” TNA C78/166, p. 16.

¹²⁴ RAC, “Committee of Correspondence,” TNA T70/123, 28 November, 1722; T70/124, 1 May, 1724.

¹²⁵ RAC, “Committee of Correspondence,” TNA T70/123, 15 August, 1721.

¹²⁶ Christopher Leslie Brown, “The British Government and the Slave Trade: Early Parliamentary Enquires, 1713-83,” *Parliamentary History* 26 (2007), 27.

considerable energy toward addressing threats to the slave trade. By and large, these included piracy, European competition, and, possibly as an extension of the previous two, funding for the support and maintenance of British establishments on the coast of Africa. With this in mind, the government's systematic failure to address slave shipboard insurrections, which impacted the profits of the slave trade on a massive scale, is very peculiar indeed.

Maintenance of forts and establishments in Africa and the West Indies provided the most common and direct avenue for the British Government to address the slave trade. On March 9, 1714, for example, the Colonial Office petitioned Lord Bolingbroke for continued support for the fort at Port Royal (in the amount of £100,000), citing its importance "for the security and defence by H.M. ships, of the Island, and the trade thereof."¹²⁷ Similarly, the Board of Trade informed the Colonial Office in March, 1726 that at the present time, "Forts and Settlements...are not capable of protecting the ships of your Majesty's subjects," thereby establishing a grave need for government funding.¹²⁸ Two months later, a Captain "Snelgrove" (possibly the William Snelgrave discussed earlier) addressed the Board of Trade and Plantations, asserting that the "present forts and settlements" remained in "bad condition," to the "great disadvantages" of the slave trade.¹²⁹ A few days earlier, a Captain Bonhan testified to the "mean condition of the forts."¹³⁰

Similarly, the House of Commons ("HOC") discussed issues relating to forts and establishments. On March 5, 1729, the HOC requested an account of the condition of the various forts and castles on the coast of Africa. Five days later the House received an account of

¹²⁷ "9 March, 1714," *Calendar of State Papers: Colonial, America and West Indies*, Volume 27, BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 606.

¹²⁸ "19 May, 1726," *Calendar of State Papers: Colonial, America and West Indies*, Volume 28, BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 150.

¹²⁹ 'Journal, May 1726: Journal Book C.C', *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations, Volume 5: January 1723 - December 1728* (1928), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 251-270.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 251-270.

the quantity and names of individuals employed at the African establishments. In February of the next year, the Commons requested an estimate for the maintenance and defense of the African forts, a request they repeatedly made in subsequent years.¹³¹ Moreover, in February, 1743, the HOC estimated that during the 1730s such costs averaged around £12,000 per year.¹³²

One of the main reasons for concern over the establishment and continued maintenance of forts and establishments—aside from the RAC’s attempts to stop hemorrhaging money—was the incessant attacks by pirates on slave ships, especially before 1726. In concordance with this, the secretary of the Colonial Office appealed for “one or more of H.M. ships” in order to protect Jamaica from “the great number of pirates that do at present infest those seas.”¹³³ The Board of Trade and Plantations, in an attempt to ascertain the number of ships needed to protect the African coast from pirates in October, 1716, asked Mr. Pierce and Mr. Benson of the RAC for their opinions. They responded, calling for six ships (costing between £40,000 and £50,000), to protect against “Sallee Rovers from whom the Company's ships might be in danger” and “several pirates on the coast of Africa.”¹³⁴ Ten years later, a captain advised the Board of Trade and Plantations that “ships of war will be the only proper and effectual protection to the trade.”¹³⁵

Likewise, the House of Lords chimed in on the issue of piracy in 1720, discussing a bill that would make the recent act of “effectual” suppression of piracy perpetual.¹³⁶ Further bills for suppressing piracy were introduced in the Commons in March, 1728.¹³⁷ Additionally, the Commons received several petitions, memorials, and representations claiming abuse from pirates

¹³¹ House of Commons, *Journals of the House of Commons*, UIUC, Vol. 21 (1803), 476, 631.

¹³² House of Commons, *Journals*, UIUC, Vol. 24, 552.

¹³³ “12 April, 1717,” *Calendar of State Papers: Colonial*, Volume 29, BHO, p. 526.

¹³⁴ ‘Journal, October 1716: Journal Book S’, *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations, Volume 3: March 1715 - October 1718* (1924), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 184-186.

¹³⁵ ‘Journal, May 1726: Journal Book C.C’, *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations, Volume 5: January 1723 - December 1728* (1928), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 251-270.

¹³⁶ House of Lords, *Journals of the House of Lords*, UIUC, Vol. 20 (1803), 315.

¹³⁷ “6 March, 1728,” *Journals of the House of Commons*, UIUC, Vol. 21, 251.

on February 20, 1717. Five days later, the HOC again discussed the “methods for suppressing pirates.” Then, on the 27th, Mr. Chetwynde of the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations presented his relevant papers concerning piracy.¹³⁸ Four years later a petition from numerous merchants argued that “Pirates do increase, and gather strength daily.” The merchants even claimed that the “British trade has already sustained greater losses by the said Pirates than were suffered during the late French wars.”¹³⁹ In response to these unending pleas for assistance, the Commons frequently sent instructions to ships of war “as they relate to their protecting of His Majesty’s Subjects for cruising against pirates.”¹⁴⁰ While this appears an exhausting list, the point remains, the government dealt with issues of piracy and its effects on the slave trade on fairly consistent basis.

And if incessant pirate attacks were not enough to grasp the government’s attention, European competition—mainly through acts of privateering—would. On March 6, 1731, the House of Commons called in numerous merchants to consider their losses at the hands of the Spanish. Richard Copithorne, owner and Captain of the *Betty*, related his story to his fellow countrymen in a plea for assistance. On June 29, 1727, the *Betty* was “attacked by a Spanish Privateer under Turkish Colours.” The privateer, according to Copithorne, “charged him with his whole Fire,” beginning a violent battle for control of the ship. After five hours of fighting, Copithorne watched his deck “blow up,” before he was carried off to the privateer ship.¹⁴¹ One of the more extreme cases of “Spanish Depredations,” the case of the *Betty* had significant implications for those engaged in the slave trade. More specifically, cases like the *Betty* provided merchants with apparitions of the dangers of the slave trade.

¹³⁸ “27 March, 1728,” *Journals of the House of Commons*, UIUC, Vol. 18, 750-1.

¹³⁹ “9 February, 1721,” *Journals of the House of Commons*, UIUC, Vol. 19.

¹⁴⁰ “31 March, 1729,” *Journals of the House of Commons*, UIUC, Vol. 21, 303.

¹⁴¹ “Introduction: Minutes of 1731, illustrative,” *The History and Proceedings of the House of Commons: Volume 9: 1734-1737* (1742), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, I-XIII.

A month before the Commons considered the *Betty*, Bristol merchants sent a petition “complaining of the Spanish depredations.” Moreover, Liverpool merchants seconded that notion later that month, sending their own complaints on February 25th, 1731. The Commons likewise considered both petitions the day before discussing the *Betty*, calling for a letter to the King requesting a continuance of “his Endeavours to prevent the Depredations of the Spaniards for the future.”¹⁴² Continuing in this manner, the Commons contemplated a petition from the *Ann Galley* relating to the “unjust capture and seizure of their ship...and her cargo by the Spanish.” Moreover, the Commons considered complaints of the seizure and detention of the *Scipio* by the Spanish.¹⁴³ Once again, the Commons responded to these complaints and others by relating them to the King in a series of “humble Addresses.”¹⁴⁴

The Board of Trade and Plantations dealt with similar issues. On November 24th, 1715, four members of the RAC addressed the Board, maintaining that “their trade was in great danger...from French and Dutch rivals.”¹⁴⁵ Likewise, in December of that year, the Board read a letter from Mr. Harris “relating to the sending any of His Majesty's ships to the coast of Africa.” In the letter, Harris posits that “the assistance of a ship of war was necessary to preserve the interests of the Company there.”¹⁴⁶ Similarly, the RAC sent Mr. Hopegood and others to the Board of Trade and Plantations in August, 1719 to inform the Board of “the ships taken from

¹⁴² “First Parliament of George II: Fourth session - begins 21/1/1731,” *The History and Proceedings of the House of Commons: volume 7: 1727-1733* (1742), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 69-86.

¹⁴³ *Journals of the House of Commons*, UIUC, Vol. 23, 297.

¹⁴⁴ “Second Parliament of George II: Fourth session (5 of 9, begins 3/3/1738),” *The History and Proceedings of the House of Commons: Volume 10: 1737-1739* (1742), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 96-159.

¹⁴⁵ “Journal, December 1715: Journal Book R,” *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations, Volume 3: March 1715 - October 1718* (1924), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 95-101.

¹⁴⁶ “Journal, October 1716: Journal Book S,” *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations, Volume 3: March 1715 - October 1718* (1924), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 184-186.

them by the French in the time of peace.”¹⁴⁷ With this in mind, merchants and RAC officials alike continuously pestered the Commons and the Board of Trade for assistance in dealing with European competition regarding the slave trade.

While piracy and European competition presented formidable threats to the slave trade, the government occasionally recognized other threats, including natural disaster, shipwreck, desertion, and, in one instance, mutiny. Dealing with shipwreck, the Commons received a petition for a bill for a “more effectual” recovery of ships and goods destroyed or driven ashore by “distress of weather.”¹⁴⁸ Similarly, the Commons took measures to prevent seamen from deserting merchant ships on the coast of Africa, while, at the same time, attempted to thwart mariners’ engaging in “private service” or taking any “craft” belonging to any merchant ship.¹⁴⁹ In other words, parliament sought to curb the hemorrhaging of both men and goods from slave ships. In fact, the House of Lords in 1717 announced a bill to make perpetual an act that called for the “preservation of all such ships and goods which shall happen to be found on shore, or stranded,” in parts of the empire.¹⁵⁰ Apparently, the government was concerned about the profitability of the trade so much so that they would resort to discussing and codifying bills aimed at scavenging stranded ships, both British and non-British. Finally, in one instance the House of Lords addressed ship mutinies—although whether the Lords directed this proviso toward slave insurrections or seamen mutinies is unclear. The specific proviso was added by the Earl of Clarendon to the act mentioned above in 1717 and called for anyone “who shall willingly destroy” a ship to be sentenced to death.¹⁵¹ In sum, the British Government exhibited a strong

¹⁴⁷ “Journal, August 1719: Journal Book V,” *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations, Volume 4: November 1718 - December 1722* (1925), BHO, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 88-103.

¹⁴⁸ *Journals of the House of Commons*, UIUC, Vol. 22 <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>, 603, 805.

¹⁴⁹ *Journals of the House of Commons*, UIUC, Vol. 23, p. 310.

¹⁵⁰ *Journals of the House of Lords*, UIUC, Vol. 20, p. 598.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 642.

interest in addressing threats to the profitability of the slave trade. The Commons, Lords, and various committees and offices of the government directed their efforts toward suppressing piracy, securing reparations from the Spanish and French, and providing enough funding to adequately maintain African and West Indian forts to prevent attacks from the former. In all, every significant hazard to the slave trade with the exception of slave shipboard insurrections were directly and continuously confronted by the British Government.

Conclusions

As we have seen, slave shipboard insurrections played a fundamental role in the British slave trade. Because insurrections and other acts of African resistance endangered the success of individual voyages, ship captains and mariners found the prevention of such acts the key to continued safety and success of the slave trade. London and colonial papers, too, frequently printed accounts—often in great detail—of slave shipboard insurrection. Thus, those directly involved in the slave trade and occasional readers of periodicals in London and colonial port cities would not have been surprised by encountering descriptions of revolt. Others involved in the slave trade, such as factors and agents of the Royal African Company, recognized slave shipboard insurrections as well. Accounts by factors and agents of the RAC, however, occur much less often. Moving upward through the social hierarchy, influential members of the RAC rarely addressed insurrections explicitly. Nevertheless, the RAC implicitly acknowledged the need to protect against insurrections by frequently requesting assistance from the Royal Navy in defending their forts and settlements. Furthermore, ship captains could read between the lines of instructions from the RAC and infer that preventing a slave rebellion would be central to the success of their voyage. Like the top echelons of the RAC, government circles rarely—if ever—took notice of slave shipboard insurrections. Paradoxically, parliament and the various boards

and committees spent inestimable amounts of time dealing with piracy, European competition, and funding RAC forts and settlements—all of which posed threats to the profitability of the burgeoning slave trade.

The question thus remains: Why did the British government fail to recognize slave shipboard insurrections as a formidable threat to the well-being of the slave trade? While this question may be easily posed, answering it is problematic. To be sure, research may never uncover the true motives of those individuals involved with governmental decisions in the early eighteenth-century; but research can uncover the possible factors at play.

In all, a few essential conclusions may be derived from the evidence. First, one may conclude that the government simply had insufficient time to tackle the issue of slave shipboard insurrections because they were bombarded with other issues relating to the slave trade. In 1996, historian Joseph Inikori estimated that hazards to the slave trade fit into three categories: natural hazards, insurrections and battles with Africans, and conflicts with Europeans during war. In all, Inikori approximates that 65% of lost voyages occurred at the hands of Europeans, while roughly 18% at the hands of natural causes, leaving the remaining 18% to be the fault of slave insurrections and attacks by coastal Africans.¹⁵² While it is understandable that the government might focus its efforts on European attacks, it nonetheless fails to explain why they ignored events that put into jeopardy the success of nearly one-fifth of slave trading voyages.

Moreover, the efforts of the government and Royal Navy to eradicate piracy in the immediate post-war years (1716-1726) are well known. While Peter Earle criticizes the government's floundering efforts to eradicate pirates in the late-1710s, he acknowledges that the increased efforts in the 1720s—along with the self-destructive nature of pirates and the shift in

¹⁵² Joseph Inikori, "Measuring the Unmeasured Hazards of the Atlantic Slave Trade," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* Vol. 83-3 (1996), pp. 53-4.

public opinion—account for their eventual demise.¹⁵³ Likewise, Marcus Rediker, in *Villains of all Nations*, recognizes the efforts of the British government by noting that the increased violence of piracy and anti-piracy campaigns led to piracy's destruction.¹⁵⁴ In all, the decade of 1716-1726, and the flurry of pirate-led attacks on British slave ships that occurred during these years, absorbed much of the government's time.

Furthermore, concern for European attacks continued, if not increased, following the eradication of most Atlantic pirates in 1726, providing yet another distraction from slave shipboard insurrections. In the 1730s, as well, landed rebellions in the West Indies, most notably in Jamaica, Antigua, St. Johns, and Virginia deeply troubled the government. In March, 1736, the *Grub Street Journal* reported a letter from Antigua, which was under attack from revolting slaves. In it, the author reports that, "we are in a great deal of trouble in this island," citing the "burning of Negroes...takes up almost all our time."¹⁵⁵ Moreover, the *Universal Spectator* reported that on July 10, 1730, of an "insurrection of the Negroes about Williamsburg [Virginia]."¹⁵⁶ The government thus responded to calls from London periodicals and colonial officials regarding landed insurrections. In July, 1730, for example, the *Calendar of State Papers Colonial* notes the movements of "Capt. Soaper and Tho. Ascroft" and their attempts to quell the rebellion of runaway slaves in Jamaica. The Colonial Office, likewise, heard numerous tales of bloody skirmishes between British colonial forces and Maroon communities, including one in which "negros that lay in ambush" fired upon Captain Soaper, prompting a call for retreat. These accounts resulted in numerous calls on MPs to initiate acts "for the better suppressing and reducing the rebellious and runaway negroes." To be sure, "many depredations and violencys

¹⁵³ Peter Earle, *The Pirate Wars*, (New York, St. Martin's Griffin: 2003), p. 206.

¹⁵⁴ Marcus, Rediker, *Villains of all Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), p. 172.

¹⁵⁵ *Grub-Street Journal* 378 (1736:Mar.), BP, p. 1376.

¹⁵⁶ *Universal Spectator* 102 (1730:Sept.), BP, p. 370.

committed upon the frontier settlements,” felt the Colonial Office, led to the “great discouragement of new settlers.”¹⁵⁷ In other words, the government considered landed rebellions, which had a greater likelihood of spreading and destroying the colonial system than rebellion on board isolated ships, and European attacks in the 1730s to be more important than slave shipboard insurrections.

While this conclusion, that sundry issues sufficiently burdened the government during the early eighteenth-century to divert attention away from slave shipboard insurrections, has its merits, it not only fails to explain the complete lack of discussion for shipboard insurrections but overstates what may simply be an effect of the lack of discussion, not a cause. In other words, it is unclear whether the lack of discussion of slave shipboard insurrections allowed additional time for the discussion of the other threats to the slave trade, or vice versa.

The more cynical, the more pessimistic conclusion to be drawn from the paradox holds that government officials avoided acknowledging shipboard insurrections because acknowledging such acts would, in effect, concede that there were a significant and active “resistance movement,” against the slave trade. In other words, resistance to the British slave trade by pirates and other Europeans would not pose a moral threat to the slave trade because pirates and Europeans were motivated by self-interest and profit. Resistance from the victims of the slave trade, however, might be seen as an enquiry into the morality of the slave trade.¹⁵⁸ While this thesis seems alluring, it is significantly flawed. For example, the complete omission of slave shipboard insurrections would have required an unattainable conspiracy with the compliance of numerous individuals. Moreover, the government’s significant discussion of

¹⁵⁷ *Calendar of State Papers: Colonial*, BHO, C.O. 5, 1322. ff. 160–162, 163, 163v.

¹⁵⁸ This is not to say that slaves were motivated by a desire for just commerce or morality. Slaves who revolted, in all likelihood, did so out of necessity and, as discussed previously, were likely pushed to do so by the extreme violence associated with the slave trade system.

slave resistance in the West Indies counteracts, in some way, this thesis. Presumably, explanations for slave rebellions in the new world (which include the uncivilized heathen nature of the slave) could simply be superimposed as a justification of shipboard insurrections. Officials, therefore, would be able to discuss and help prevent slave shipboard insurrections without widespread moral enquiry into the slave trade.

Finally, the nature of British society, its conception of race, and its relationship with the slave trade help provide yet another conclusion. In *Moral Capital*, Christopher L. Brown characterizes the sudden indignation toward the slave trade by Britons in the second half of the eighteenth-century as a “decision to act” on a previously held conception of slavery as “abhorrent.”¹⁵⁹ While the failure to pinpoint the stimulus for this decision represents one of the limitations of *Moral Capital*, the stimulus that led individuals to question the morality of the slave trade—whatever it may be— may help us make sense the government’s lack of discussion about slave shipboard insurrections earlier in the century.¹⁶⁰ Put another way, the government’s failure to discuss slave shipboard insurrections (and the public’s failure to question the morality of the slave trade in the face of numerous accounts of slave resistance) reflects Britons’ relationship with the slave trade at the time, which was one of perceived moral injustice, yet reluctant acceptance of the system.

Lynn Hunt, author of *Inventing Human Rights*, provides yet another hint as to the factors underlying this paradox—and possibly a solution to the limitations of *Moral Capital*. Hunt ultimately concludes that a new sense of “empathy” developed in the mid-18th century, one that fostered from increasing connections between various groups of inherently different people. Novels played an integral role in this transformation by making “the point that all people are

¹⁵⁹ Brown, *Moral Capital*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ Some historians have proposed suggestions, including Richard Huzzey, who posits that a shift in the concept of providence led individuals to act of their inhibitions concerning the slave trade.

fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings.”¹⁶¹ Moreover, it was not until the 1760s that human rights—derived from this feeling of similarity to other humans—and “new attitudes about both torture and humane punishment first crystallized.”¹⁶² For the purposes of this study, these assertions carry enormous weight. They hint that in the early 18th century, Britons may not have held the capacity (which ultimately could be acquired over time with a new definition and meaning of “empathy”) to feel the equivalent to today’s definition of “empathy.” This means that individuals who ran operations in London, without significant interactions with Africans and with a definition of “empathy” that inherently excluded Africans, were unable to see actions made by Africans during the middle passage as individual actions legitimized through the common link of humanity. In fact, revolting Africans were not seen as individuals at all. Furthermore, members of the government and the RAC would not have equivocated revolting Africans with a moral challenge to their economic system. Neither grand conspiracy nor moral enquiry, it seems, could have occurred.

Considering the hierarchical levels of concern for shipboard insurrections and Lynn Hunt’s assertions concerning the British mindset and “human rights” issues, it is clear that this system arose from the inability of individuals (absent from direct contact with Africans) to connect acts of resistance with a moral challenge to the slave trade. Had they been able to do so, they could have either conspired to explicitly ignore these actions or they could have acted to reform their injustices. To the 21st century observer, these two choices appear the only viable options. Without a new meaning of “empathy,” however, early 18th century government officials likely failed to characterize acts of resistance as a moral challenge—a connection they *would* make later in the century—and therefore, failed to both conspire against or reform to

¹⁶¹ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 2007), p. 39.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

accommodate acts of African resistance. Thus, government officials continued to ignore—although not knowingly—acts of resistance in the middle passage until new definitions of empathy took hold of the popular consciousness, demanding an encompassing moral inquiry into the slave trade.

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