

TACKY'S REVOLT

TACKY'S REVOLT

*The Story of an
Atlantic Slave War*

VINCENT BROWN

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TACKY'S REVOLT

Prologue: The Path to Rebel's Barricade

And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians, and they shall fight everyone against his brother, and everyone against his neighbor; city against city and kingdom against kingdom.

—ISAIAH 19:2

WAGER, ALSO KNOWN by his African name, Apongo, was a leader of the largest slave rebellion in the eighteenth-century British Empire. But long before taking his part in the great Jamaican insurrection of 1760–1761, commonly called Tacky's Revolt, he had been on a remarkable odyssey. Apongo had been a military leader in West Africa during a period of imperial expansion and intensive warfare there. During this time, he had even been a notable guest of John Cope, a chief agent of Cape Coast Castle, Britain's principal fort on the Gold Coast. Captured and sold at some point in the 1740s, Apongo became the property of Captain Arthur Forrest of HMS *Wager*, who renamed him for the Royal Navy warship. Wager came in bondage to Forrest's plantation in Westmoreland Parish, Jamaica, where he again encountered John Cope, who had retired to his own Jamaican estate. Occasionally, Cope would entertain his acquaintance from the Old World, laying a table for weekend visits, treating the slave as a man of honor, and insinuating that Apongo would one day be redeemed and sent home. Whatever understanding there was between the two men did not outlast John Cope's death in 1756. In the ensuing years Wager began plotting and organizing a war against the whites, and awaiting an opportune moment to strike.¹

Taking advantage of Britain's Seven Years' War against its European opponents, Wager and more than a thousand other enslaved black people on the island engaged in a series of uprisings, which began on April 7, 1760,

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and continued until October of the next year. Over those eighteen months the rebels managed to kill sixty whites and destroy tens of thousands of pounds' worth of property. During the suppression of the revolt and the repression that followed, over five hundred black men and women were killed in battle, executed, or driven to suicide. Another five hundred were transported from the island for life. Considering "the extent and secrecy of its plan, the multitude of the conspirators, and the difficulty of opposing its eruptions in such a variety of different places at once," wrote one planter who lived through the upheaval, this revolt was "more formidable than any hitherto known in the West Indies." According to two slaveholders who wrote histories of the conflict, the rebellion arose "at the instigation" of an African man named "Tacky, who had been a chief in Guinea," and was organized and executed principally by people called Coromantees (or Koromantyns) from the Gold Coast—the West African region stretching between the Komoe and Volta rivers—who had an established reputation for military prowess. Slaveholders knew these Africans to be rebellious, and their notoriety has endured to this day.²

Wager's involvement in the revolt might further justify this martial reputation, but it is also part of a less familiar story. Although we are accustomed to hearing about rebels reacting against their enslavement by rising up against their masters, and about elite people in Africa falling into the hands of slavers, rarely have these accounts acknowledged the complex patterns of alliance and antagonism over time and great distance that defined relationships like those among Apongo, John Cope, and Arthur Forrest.³ Recognizing how life histories like theirs—stories of displacement, belonging, and political predicament—were intertwined helps us understand how the slave trade triggered the diasporic warfare that both created and convulsed the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.⁴

Apongo's Atlantic odyssey spans the martial geography of Atlantic slavery, highlighting the entanglement of African and European empires with the massive forced migrations of the eighteenth century—and suggesting a new way to understand slave insurrection.⁵ Rather than a two-sided conflict between masters and slaves, the 1760–1761 revolt was the volatile admixture of many journeys and military campaigns. The people who took part in it traveled far and endured many turns of fortune, entangling their numerous episodes into a single story. In its causes and consequences, what we know as Tacky's Revolt combined the itineraries of many people: merchants, planters, imperial functionaries, soldiers and sailors from Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, and enslaved men, women, and children, all engaged in life-and-death struggles to accumulate wealth, build state power, strike for freedom, or merely survive.

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FIGURE 0.1. Attack on Fort Haldane. This depiction of Tacky's Revolt appeared in *The Story of Jamaica*, a graphic illustration of the island's history from the fifteenth century until its independence from the United Kingdom in 1962, by the great comic artist Robert Fujitani. The image and its caption helped to define the insurrection for generations of Jamaicans.

From *The Story of Jamaica* (Kingston, 1962). Courtesy of *The Gleaner Co. Limited*.

The transatlantic slave trade extracted people from a vast region of Atlantic Africa and spread them throughout the Americas. People who had been administrative or military leaders suddenly found themselves uprooted from sustaining landscapes, scattered by currents and trade winds, and replanted in strange territories where they labored to build new social lives and regain a level of influence. Inevitably, some of them concluded that only war could end their enslavement. Mostly it was common people who found themselves caught up in slaving raids and expansionary wars, cast across the ocean, and set down in alien lands where slaveholders exploited and brutalized them. When new conflicts promised to liberate them or offered rewards for serving their masters, slaves might take up arms for whichever faction presented the prospect of a better life.

This process of dispersal from a native land, transplantation, and adaptation to a new and strange one is familiar to students of cultural change, who pull African, American, and Atlantic history into one large, common frame to see large-scale patterns of transformation in African religion, expression, and identity.⁶ A similarly expansive approach can reveal how the turmoil of enslavement and the daily hostilities of life in bondage ignited a militant response that erupted in widespread rebellions reverberating across the Americas and back to Europe. The effect when Africans from the Gold Coast staged a series of revolts and conspiracies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—most dramatically in Cartagena de Indias, Surinam,

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St. John, New York, Antigua, and Jamaica—was to form an archipelago of insurrection stretching throughout the North Atlantic Americas.⁷ The Jamaican insurrections of 1760–1761, and further uprisings there in 1765 and 1766, were among the largest and most consequential of these.

The aims and tactics employed by the rebels made it clear to observers that many had been soldiers in Africa. As John Thornton has argued, “Africans with military experience played an important role in revolts, if not by providing all of the rebels, at least by providing enough to stiffen and increase the viability of revolts.” Beyond one or two exceptional leaders, whole cadres of people had military training and discipline, or had at least gained knowledge of defensive tactics in Africa. Indeed, many American slave revolts might be seen as extensions of African wars. Casting them as such does more than assert the importance of Africa in the making of the Atlantic world; it helps to reveal how complex networks of migration, belonging, transregional power, and conflict gave the political history of the eighteenth century some of its distinctive contours. Recognizing slave revolt as a species of warfare is the first step toward a new cartography of Atlantic slavery.⁸

The former slave and veteran of the Seven Years’ War Gustavus Vassa, now commonly known by his African name, Olaudah Equiano, famously defined slavery itself as a perpetual “state of war.” This was not war in the conventional sense, however, involving disciplined armies directed by the rulers of states. Rather, it was the simmering violence inherent in mastery, by its nature a forceful assault, and the slaves’ countervailing resentment of slaveholders’ “fraud, rapine, and cruelty.”⁹ Equiano echoed the English philosopher John Locke, who argued in the late seventeenth century that the “perfect condition of slavery” was nothing “but the state of war continued, between a lawful conqueror, and a captive.”¹⁰ To be sure, while Locke extolled freedom as humankind’s natural condition and consent as the basis of all government, his theory clashed with his practice; he invested in slave-trading and slaveholding enterprises, and looked upon war captives as a legitimate source of slaves who would remain outside of political society.¹¹ Equiano, by contrast, pointed directly at the practical, daily war that defined any society afflicted by slavery.

To the slaveholders, Equiano asked, “Are you not hourly in dread of an insurrection?” It was not a rhetorical question. Since the early years of Jamaica’s slave society, slaveholders had often considered the enslaved as “Irreconcilable and yet Intestine Enemies,” subjected to the colonists’ will only by the rule of the whip. The prospect of slave rebellion was a perennial anxiety, “a War always the more terrible,” one slaveholder wrote, “by how much there is no Quarter given in it.”¹² Equiano visited Jamaica in

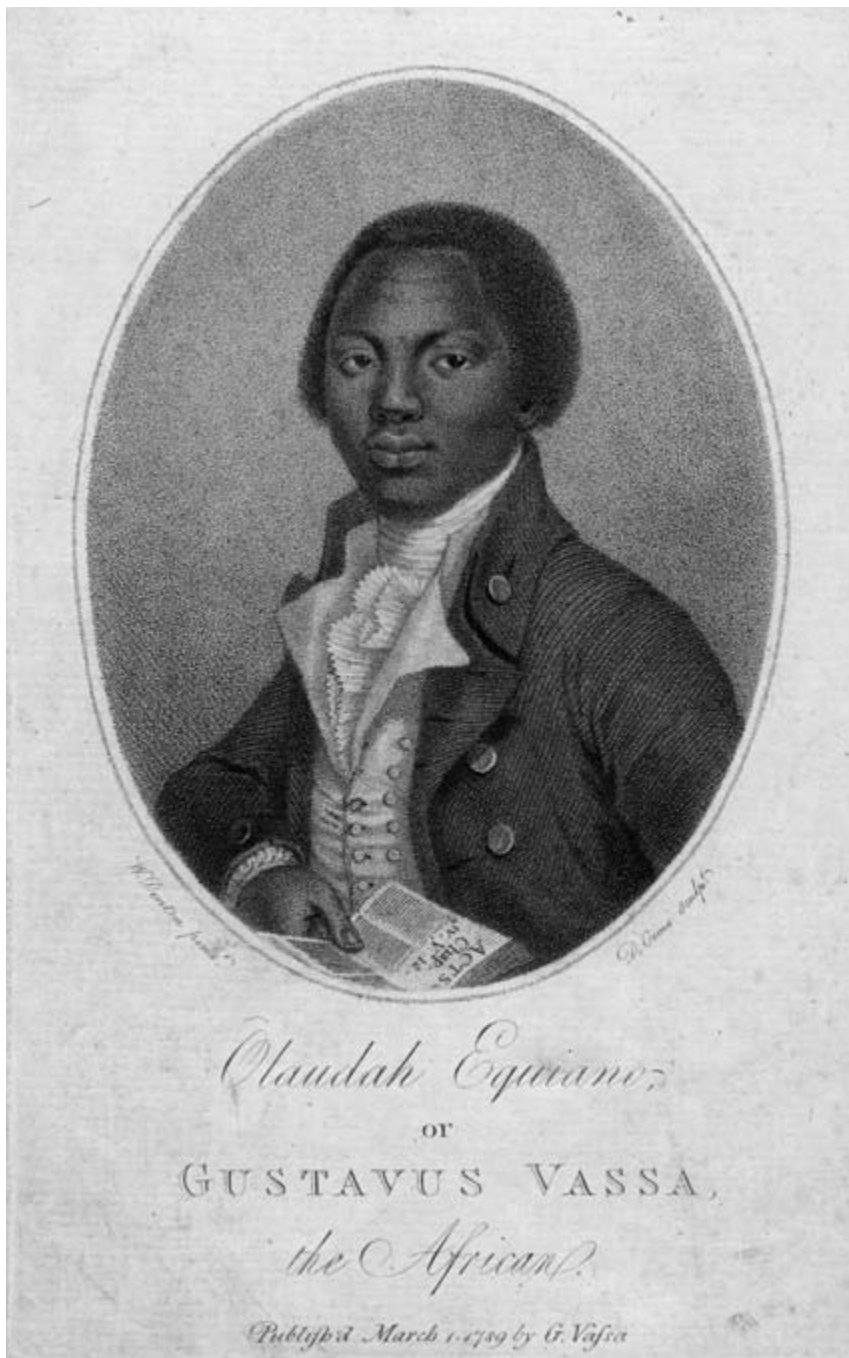


FIGURE 0.2. Olaudah Equiano.

Engraving by Daniel Orme, after a sketch by W. Denton. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

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1772, as a free man, and he found the island still reeling from the slave uprisings of the previous decade. There he saw how an entire society could be organized around violence and counterattack on every level from the quotidian to the epic.¹³ It was an observation shared by black people in other times and places; conditions of bondage were often characterized as a “permanent state of low-intensity war, with the enslaved regularly talking about how to wage that war.”¹⁴ The martial characteristics of Atlantic slavery deserve closer inspection.¹⁵

Acts of resistance to slavery are commonly thought of as falling along a single continuum: at one end of the struggle for freedom are everyday assertions of independent will and volition, such as malingering in the fields, breaking tools, or pilfering from masters, while violent collective uprisings like the ones led by Tacky and Apongo lie at the other end. There is some value in seeing these insurrections as different in scale but not in kind from less dramatic refusals of slaveholders’ authority; it allows us to understand the variety and consistency of slaves’ opposition to slaveholders. At the same time, however, this framing is too reductive. It masks the complexity of large revolts, glosses over the multiple aspirations of rebels, confines the contest to circumscribed locations, and forecloses important questions about planning, strategy, tactics, and claims to territory—the very questions we ask about wars.¹⁶

The Jamaican insurrections that began in 1760 clearly constituted resistance. More concretely, they were acts of war. They featured a kind of fighting that has become familiar to military theorists—the kind that involves improvised militias dispersed over wide areas taking up arms against great powers, with largely undefined battle lines and blurred distinctions between civilians and combatants.¹⁷ Viewing the revolt as a war, as its combatants did, helps us to see connections and dynamics that signal far more than the insubordination and defiance of slave resistance. The struggle ranged well beyond the limits of plantations, colonies, or states to encompass and integrate entire regions. As much as it grew out of plantation slavery’s inherent, everyday violence, it was sustained by imperial militarism and broader transformations of commerce, governance, and cultural belonging. It was more than a local outburst, more than a continuation of prior experience, and it involved a far larger and more diverse cast of players than studies of resistance normally feature. It was the kind of event best narrated as a war story.¹⁸

WARFARE migrates. This has never been more apparent than in the era when the violence of imperial expansion and enslavement transformed Europe, Africa, and the Americas as they interacted across the Atlantic Ocean.

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European imperial conflicts extended the dominion of capitalist agriculture. African battles fed captives to the transatlantic trade in slaves. Masters and their captives struggled with one another continuously. These clashes amounted to borderless slave war: war to enslave, war to expand slavery, and war against slaves, answered on the side of the enslaved by war against slaveholders, and also war among slaves themselves. In this sense, the Jamaican slave revolt of 1760–1761 was a war within an interlinked network of other wars which had diverging and overlapping provocations, combat zones, political alliances, and enemy combatants. In effect, it was part of four wars at once: it was an extension of wars on the African continent; it was a race war between black slaves and white slaveholders; it was a struggle among black people over the terms of communal belonging, effective control of local territory, and establishment of their own political legacies; and it was, most immediately, one of the hardest-fought battles of that titanic global conflict between Britain and its European rivals that would come to be known as the Seven Years' War. Each of these four wars introduced different currents that converged and eddied in the Jamaican insurrections of the 1760s. To chart their flows, a new cartography of slave revolt is required—one that combines the histories of Europe, Africa, and America and makes room for new stories of place, territory, and movement.¹⁹

To map the hemispheric reach of a slave war, we must see the interlocking patterns of state, commerce, migration, labor, and militancy formed by a multitude of journeys. These patterns present themselves differently with changes in the scale and scope of our examination. A scale that encompasses large regions and historic transformations complements a narrower focus on the contingent experiences of individual captives, colonists, bureaucrats, soldiers, and seamen. Both are necessary if we are to understand how slaving raids, racial conflict, communal hostilities, and the Seven Years' War created a theater of combat as dynamic as the winds, currents, and weather patterns of the Atlantic Ocean itself.²⁰ Across vast distances, these wars within wars connected the constituent elements of empire, diaspora, and insurrection. An integrated history of slave revolt that considers its sources, circuits, and reverberations will take us far from the plantations, beyond relations between masters and slaves, and outside the conventional locations for observing racial violence. Vectors of slave war in Jamaica formed a knot in the intertwined itineraries of soldiers who fought in Europe, North America, and Africa; sailors who crisscrossed the Atlantic world for merchants and empires; and slaves who were swept up in many conflicts on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Mapping the movements of profiteers, warlords, workers, refugees, and ordinary fighters exposes the shape of a

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martial archipelago made up of peaks bearing witness to the great volcanic forces of world history operating below.²¹

Slave revolt was race war to the extent that it concerned relations between masters and their vassals. From the fifteenth century onward, skin color was used as a primary index of social status, with blackness becoming increasingly synonymous with slavery over time. By the eighteenth century, in British America especially, white people had come to expect that blacks existed to serve their material, sexual, and psychic desires. In slave societies like those in the Caribbean and southern North America, whites thought of themselves as collectively belonging to a ruling race. Often outnumbered by their desperate slaves, the colonists developed elaborate regimes of terror to keep them in submission. On rare occasions, when opportunities arose, slave rebels responded in kind.²²

Slave revolts and conspiracies were usually put down quickly and brutally by slaveholders on the lookout for the total onslaught by angry black people they anticipated might come.²³ The 1760–1761 revolt in Jamaica was more exemplary than exceptional, because it represented the sum of their fears. Occurring three decades before the 1789–1804 Haitian Revolution destroyed Europe's most profitable colony in the Americas, neighboring French St. Domingue, this Jamaican conflict suspended life as colonists knew it, violating domestic order, halting business, and promising the end of their prestige. It threatened a remapping of colonial America as African territory where white rule would have no sway. The British devoted great energy and spent considerable sums to fortify their society against this prospect.

Enslaved Africans did indeed have their own designs on Jamaica's landscape, guided by their experiences of enslavement and their understanding of the possibilities for escape.²⁴ They envisioned moving freely through the terrain that lay beyond the slave masters' control, seeing in the forests and mountains a world apart from the plains and valleys stamped with agricultural estates, where communities of runaways might turn natural dangers to their defensive advantage. They also saw, even within the slaveholders' domain, chances to repurpose small spaces into places where they could protect their collective sense of self-worth from daily assault, and dreamed of building their own societies even on the sites of their bondage.²⁵ These visions for the island were shaped, as they were for whites, by the long history of violent transformations that attended the slave trade.

Wars were principal conduits and facilitators of Atlantic commerce, and created favorable conditions for proliferating aggression. Military conquests secured new markets and new captured and coerced labor forces, while troops guaranteed the viability of trade. The eminent scholar W. E. B. Du

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Bois clearly recognized how war laid the foundations of commercial production systems with hidden costs of “sweat, blood, death, and despair.”²⁶ Following Du Bois, historians writing on colonial slavery in the radical tradition—such as C. L. R. James, Eric Williams, and Walter Rodney—have insisted that the slave trade was the strongest cord binding the region together, the stimulus for economic growth, and a principal cause of enduring inequalities.²⁷ The slave trade linked European commerce and colonial development to the political history of African wars—which produced a majority of the captives sold on the coast, both by taking prisoners of war and by creating conditions such as drought, famine, and failed government that drove people from their homes and made them vulnerable to predation. Given this tight linkage of war, enslavement, and economic expansion, the history of Africa must be understood as an integral part of the development of European empires.²⁸

To do their work, slave traders on the Gold Coast needed at least some knowledge of African political territory. Early in their trade with Atlantic Africa, Europeans who knew little more than the coastal silhouette of the continent produced speculative maps of the polities they encountered or heard about from informants. They tried to discover which rulers to flatter, who controlled access to the best trade routes, and who was preparing for battle, since wars yielded human commodities. As the Europeans vied for trade, they took turns ousting each other from their forts, raising a series of flags to signal their shifting possession to local African envoys and to the ships bobbing offshore. Making up a jagged line along the coast, these little garrisons were the sites where captives marched from the interior met their European incarceration. From there they were wedged into the holds of slave ships for their journeys to the Americas. Already victimized by slaving wars and torn from their ancestral communities, now they faced the challenges of forging new ways of belonging suited to the New World’s race wars.

Black people’s struggles to order their communities in the Americas often turned violent. Historians have commonly cast Coromantee slave revolts as the quintessential “African rebellions”—the most spectacular examples of “national” or “ethnic” revolt—because they were organized and executed principally by people from a single, broad linguistic region. But these uprisings featured dynamics more fraught and complicated than this characterization allows. Far from a unified African ethnic group with a clear sense of identity, Coromantees were divided along multiple lines. There were political struggles among those Gold Coast Africans who had been pitted against each other in Old World wars; among strangers thrown together into colonial slavery’s crucible of misery; between black

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people born in Africa and those born in America; and among Coromantees with conflicting interests and beliefs.²⁹ Even in the context of a joint fight against enslavement, Coromantee insurrections featured all of these tensions. To assume the coherence of the Coromantee ethnic group is to obscure the internal turbulence that affected the course of their crusades.

All the Africans brought to America were shaped by past societies and experiences; understanding these helps us to trace the influences of African history on America, and of American history on Africans.³⁰ Among the strongest of these influences were their experiences of warfare, dislocation, and social regeneration, which continued in the American slave societies. Slaves differed from and resembled each other along multiple axes including not only their languages, spiritual beliefs and practices, ideals for gender relations, and contingent political allegiances, but also the ways in which they were subject to the prerogatives of slaveholders, the social roles required by the labor regime, and the operations of colonial security. No single facet of identity determined how people responded to enslavement. They adopted various and conflicting positions, leading to political conflict among slaves and between slaves and free blacks. To appreciate how the African rebels in Jamaica managed to mobilize a scattered array of “co-nationals” to wage war against their era’s most powerful Atlantic empire—and why so many other black people stood against them or stood to the side—we must examine how they adjusted to their novel circumstances by making new identifications and affinities, regrouping together in new political communities.

Struggles over communal belonging were not only part of the larger enterprise of ethnic group formation, or what has been called ethnogenesis.³¹ They were also present in intimate spaces and close interactions. In slave quarters and slaveholders’ homes, at work and in the fields, in port towns and aboard ships, and along the pathways connecting parts of the island—in every place one could read and interpret signs of difference and similarity, of deference and disrespect—people created what the historian Stephanie Camp has termed “rival geographies,” engaging in the “politics of place” that would attach meaning to their surroundings.³² Across the island people maintained a “warring intimacy,” in which adversarial claims relating to shared territory arose from individuals’ deep and differing senses of privilege, morality, and justice.³³

Much easier to map than these communal struggles are the land claims of nation-states and empires. Having been Spanish territory before 1655, Jamaica was captured in that year by the English, and became one of the kingdom’s most valuable possessions. Throughout Britain’s frequent wars against the Dutch, Spanish, and French, the island presented a tempting

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target and was thus heavily fortified against attack. Yet the most serious challenge to British sovereignty in Jamaica came not from European rivals but from Africans and their descendants. Black rebels fragmented the territory of colonial control throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and were positioned to take the entire island during the Seven Years' War—or so the slaveholders feared.

The Seven Years' War was a global conflict with enormous consequences, but historians have barely noticed that the Jamaican insurrection was one of its major battles.³⁴ The most comprehensive accounts of the war focus mainly on the rivalry among Europeans, giving due consideration to Native American nations in North America but ignoring the Jamaican rebellion completely.³⁵ Historians of the British army during the period have expressed doubt that the military learned much from deployments in the Caribbean.³⁶ Even the most important interpretations of racial attitudes in Anglo-American warfare in the era neglect the suppression of slave uprisings.³⁷ The tendency is for chronicles to segregate the slaves' war from the British campaign for the West Indies.³⁸ The prodigious corpus of British military history includes scant reference to the suppression of slave revolts in Jamaica, despite the island's status as the most militarily significant colony in eighteenth-century British America.³⁹ Common combatants were more observant. Some of the very same soldiers, sailors, and marines who waged the most famous battles of the Seven Years' War in Quebec, Senegal, Martinique, and Guadeloupe went on to fight against Jamaica's rebels. There is nothing surprising about troops being deployed to multiple theaters, yet in this case the troops' experiences did not generate anything like a codified counterinsurgency strategy. Perhaps this is the reason that neither the military historians concerned with officially acknowledged wars nor the scholars of slave resistance focusing on local freedom struggles have devoted much attention to the way these small dirty wars epitomized the relationship between trade, labor, and imperial power.⁴⁰

EVERY slave revolt drew a congeries of participants into close engagements, but the rebels' stories must be learned mainly from the records left by their enemies. The powerful people of the time and their scribes were quick to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate combatants, and their documents treat slave insurgents with disdain. Likewise, the collecting practices of historical repositories, whether state- or family-owned, have traditionally been guided by patrons with settled understandings of the world; materials testifying to untidy popular politics rarely fit the established narratives of nations, peoples, and historic events. Slave revolts can look isolated and insignificant in retrospect because, with the exception of

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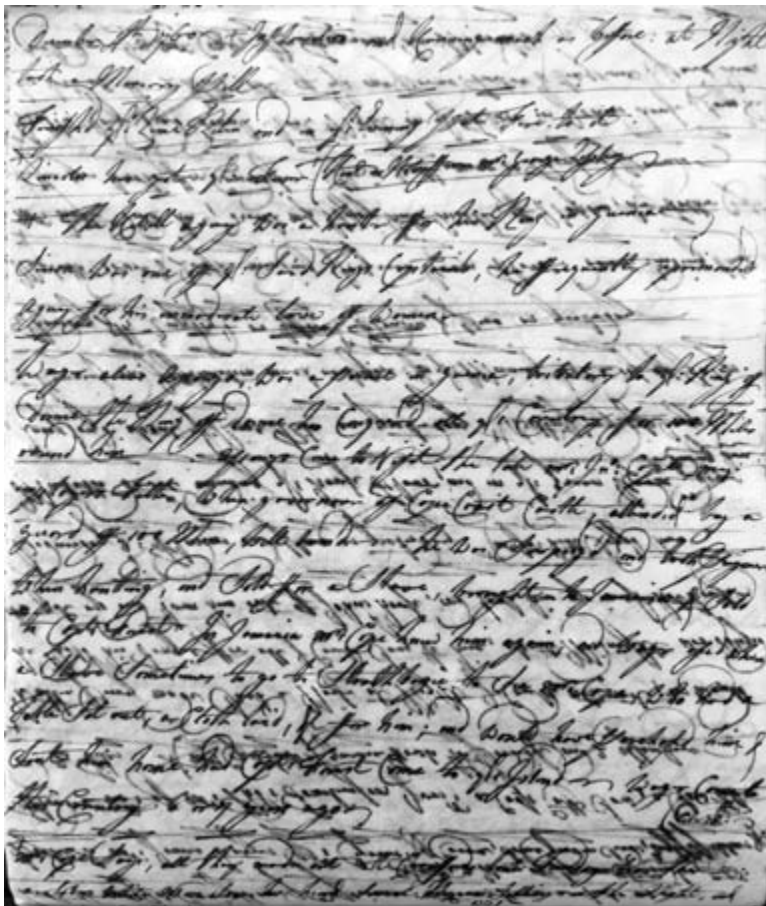


FIGURE 0.3. Diary of Thomas Thistlewood, 4 December 1760.

Courtesy of the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

the great uprising that created the nation-state of Haiti, they seem to have mattered mostly to local people on their estates or in their individual colonies, and to have been of little long-term consequence.⁴¹

This misimpression is partly due to the paucity of written sources produced by black people at the time. The government officials, slave-trading merchants, planter diarists, property-owning correspondents, colonial printers, and Christian missionaries whose inscriptions fill the archives were not primarily concerned with the politics of the enslaved. These writers discussed their own plans and maneuvers, competed with each other, and fretted over the great many things that could cause their endeavors to fail. Even where we find colonists writing directly about slave revolts, their comments

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betray an eagerness to move on to other topics. Black lives mattered mostly to the extent that they satisfied a desire for productivity, sexual gratification, or the magnification of personal status. Uprisings caused unfortunate interruptions in planting, trade, and travel, for which correspondents duly apologized to their creditors or supervisors—always promising a quick resumption of normal business—but few people paused to elaborate on the slaves' grievances and goals, or the connections among the various individuals and forces behind the insurrections.

Yet the content of a text is never limited to its author's agenda and purpose. Historical sources are never transparent reflections of what happened, how, and why; nor, in the case of the Jamaican uprisings, are they merely the literary phantasms of the colonists' imaginations. The story of Tacky's Revolt is forever entangled with their fears and fantasies, but these were stimulated by the stout militancy of rebellious blacks. As surely as wind and water change the contours of stone, slavery's archival sources have been shaped by the black people they rarely describe. Reading these records both against the grain, to investigate things the sources never meant to illustrate, and along the grain, to note how they constrain and shape our knowledge, we can tell plausible stories about the aspirations and strivings of the enslaved.⁴²

These were never the stories that someone like the eighteenth-century historian Edward Long wanted to tell. And yet Long's account of the slave insurrections of the 1760s remained the standard text for nearly two hundred and fifty years. Long was a well-cultivated and erudite Englishman with deep connections to Jamaica, the great-great-grandson of Samuel Long, who had been Speaker of the island's House of Assembly in the 1670s and 1680s. The younger Long went to the island in 1757 while in his early twenties, spending twelve years there as a planter, a judge in the vice-admiralty court, and a secretary to his brother-in-law, Lieutenant Governor Henry Moore, before returning to England in 1769 to write his three-volume *History of Jamaica*. Long was a serious historian, gathering his sources diligently and interpreting them carefully. He also hated black people, especially Africans, and was an ardent defender of slavery. His work cannot be ignored; neither can it be taken at face value. Interrogating Long aggressively, subjecting his stories and motivations to exacting scrutiny, produces useful intelligence. This applies equally to the subsequent history of the British West Indies written by Long's fellow planter Bryan Edwards, and to the eyewitness reports of Edwards' uncle Zachary Bayly, who helped to suppress slave uprisings in 1760 and 1765. In each case, as with the records of military and government officials, merchants, and missionaries, we must discover the history of the enslaved through the unreliable narrations of their captors.⁴³

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FIGURE 0.4. Rebel's Barricade. This detail from a 1763 Map of Jamaica shows the location of the Rebel's Barricade in Westmoreland Parish.

By Thomas Craskell, surveyor. *Courtesy of the UK National Archives.*

The bare outline of Wager's story, for example, was sketched by the overseer Thomas Thistlewood, whose personal diary is a catalog of brutal disciplinary tactics, casual cruelties, and sexual assaults over three decades. Thistlewood may not be a credible witness, but his brief mention of Apongo's time on the Gold Coast, enslavement in the Royal Navy, and execution on the public gibbet points toward the broader process of diasporic warfare.⁴⁴ By following the clues left by the diarist, we discover that Apongo was one of many persons of high status to fall prey to slavers, sail with other men from the Gold Coast, and labor alongside scores of other plantation slaves determined to fight the master class. Though he was an exceptional individual, his life was also full of experiences common to many. The slave trade forced all enslaved people to remake and renegotiate their sense of affiliation and belonging, while the massive dispersal of Africans across the Atlantic also scattered the seeds of military conflict throughout the Americas.

Like most slave insurrections, Tacky's and Wager's war ended badly for the rebels. The insurgents were killed or captured, publicly executed in grisly displays, or banished from the island—probably along with many bystanders who had taken no part in the fighting. Looking back with a historian's perspective, one can see that the outcome was never in doubt; the balance of forces doomed the rebellion from the start. The Coromantees would not win the colony from the British, as the North American colo-

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nists won their territory two and a half decades later, and as the Haitians in 1804 took Saint-Domingue from the French. But the rebels in Jamaica did not know they would fail. They acted with the hope of success, and their confidence demands a reassessment of the politics of slavery. Even amidst the business of war and enslavement in a colony garrisoned for battle with foreign and domestic enemies, they could find fissures in the landscape of planter power beyond the reach of the slaveholders' whips. They could even challenge the combined forces of the British Empire and find an enduring place in popular memory.

When they built a mountain stronghold for more than a thousand men, women, and children, the rebels forced their way onto the official map of Jamaica. In the midst of the Seven Years' War, surveyors were commissioned to produce the most detailed atlas of the island to date. Printed in 1763, it features large maps of the topography and estates in each of the colony's three counties. In Westmoreland Parish, in addition to the sites of the major towns built by former slaves called maroons, the map clearly marks the location of the "Rebel's Barricade." The concession of place name is a testament to the insurgents' ambition and a slave insurrection that could not go unnoticed, however much slaveholders might try to disavow and distort its history. Power is never total. Even the most subjugated peoples have dared to plan and fight for their own forbidden aims. The rebels' perspectives on empire and insurrection should inform our own. Their struggles illuminate cracks in the edifice of racial capitalism, reminding us that another world is not only possible, another world is inevitable.



C H A P T E R O N E

War's Empire

THE JAMAICAN SLAVE uprising of 1760–1761 did not begin in Africa, but that is where its story starts. Although the revolt was a response to the African rebels' predicament in Jamaica, they drew upon lessons learned long before they crossed the Atlantic Ocean. It is unclear exactly what they knew about white colonists, about the power of European empires, or about the best strategies and tactics for fighting them. Yet this uncertain aspect of the story suggests its most important point of departure: many Africans came to the Americas with firsthand experience of Europe's imperial expansion. African history was already joined to the history of the Americas.¹

Beginning the story of American slave revolt with West Africa's entanglement with European empire allows a shift in perspective, taking in the wider geography that shaped the course of the insurgency and the political imagination of its participants. Starting with the image of slaves in Jamaica, or elsewhere in the Americas, encourages us to fixate on their suffering black bodies and see only their reactions to bondage. By contrast, recalling their roots in West Africa reminds us to consider their goals, initiatives, and maneuvers. This provides a different perspective on slaveholders, as well: their interactions with militant Africans highlight the failures of European command as much as mastery, the brittleness and insecurity that colonists could overcome only with massive displays of force. Slaveholders cited black militancy as a justification for their brutality. In response, late-eighteenth-century abolitionists would rally around the image of a kneeling supplicant

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begging to be recognized as a man and a brother, as if the condemnation of evil required the meek innocence of its victims. That icon of abjection has shaped the prevailing understanding of bondage and race to this day. But the caricature bore no resemblance to the black fighters who stood toe-to-toe with whites in encounters all across the war-torn world of Atlantic slavery, from West Africa to the Americas.

We can glimpse the outlines of this transatlantic struggle through the entangled lives of Wager (or Apongo, as he was originally named), John Cope, and Arthur Forrest, which embodied the nature of African insurrection in Jamaica as a war within a network of wars. Wager's enigmatic life story encompasses an unlikely journey from the administrative councils of Gold Coast statecraft and trade to the British Royal Navy at war, and from the sugar plantation fields of Jamaica to leadership of a massive slave uprising, and finally to his execution on the public gibbet. Cope spent a tumultuous few years in West Africa, taking the opportunity of internecine African strife to enhance his fortunes in the British slave trade. Then, after some years of financing the trade from London, he retired to an affluent life as a planter in Jamaica, Britain's most profitable colony. Arthur Forrest, a naval warrior and great planter, fought commendably in some of Britain's most celebrated military triumphs of the eighteenth century, even while his slaves staged the empire's greatest servile rebellion. Though we know Cope's and Forrest's stories with more certainty than Wager's, they are all in their way emblematic of various experiences, forces, and patterns. The story of the two white men's relations with Apongo, or Wager, uncertain as it is, illuminates the connective circuits of Atlantic slavery.

These men were all traveling the main arteries of Atlantic empire, but their divergent paths suggest other ways of seeing the Atlantic world beyond those of official plans and diagrams.² Their interconnected stories draw attention to the "intimacies" of intercontinental history, showing how the people who made empires work linked oceanic, imperial, and topographical scales of analysis that are often held apart.³ From the intimacy of this shared social geography, characters such as Cope, Wager, and Forrest learned lessons that would guide their strategic decisions and tactical responses in the face of violence. Their experiential knowledge braided Europe, Africa, and America into a single region where almost everyone knew the traffic in human beings as integral to the business of war.

ON a large map and an extended timeline, we can view the major transformations from the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century that set the stage for the three men's journeys. European empires expanded through military competition and trade, West Africa grew more violent to

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