



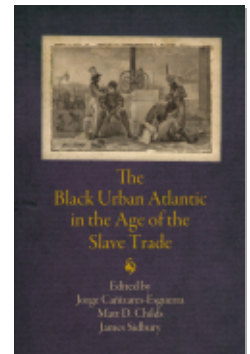
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The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The Cultural Geography of Enslaved Ship Pilots

Kevin Dawson

Westerners were world voyagers navigating the blue deep-water seas that Africans, Asians, Amerindians, and Polynesians knew as their own waters. Yet they usually relied on local pilots to guide them through green coastal waterways and into and out of port, enabling pilots to control the waters between land and the open ocean. Newspapers, ship logs, plantation records, and travel accounts indicate that the majority of ship pilots in New World slave societies were enslaved. These slaves possessed specialized knowledge of the hydrospace, or the area beneath the surface of the water, and how rivers, tides, currents, wind patterns, waves, and surf affected navigation. As ships entered pilots' domain, they assumed temporary command.¹

Enslaved pilots connected the slave castles and barracoons of Atlantic Africa to the slave fields of the New World. They linked plantations to overseas markets, and colonies to the metropolis, protecting the prosperity of plantation slavery. Black pilots bookended slave-trading voyages. African pilots were the last link most saltwater slaves had with Africa and the first they had with the Americas. They guided slavers down African rivers, through lagoons, across coastal waters, and into the open ocean. In the Americas, enslaved pilots rode rising tides up tidal waterways, depositing Africans at slave markets. Into the slaver's empty hold was poured the wealth of plantation slavery, which was carried into the Atlantic with the falling tide.

Slave pilots were intimately familiar with the ocean's rhythms and used their knowledge to navigate merchant and naval ships. They monopolized

the profession in Bermuda. When Yale University professor Josiah Meigs sojourned in Bermuda during the 1790s, he reported “without skilful pilots who are black fellows educated to the business from childhood it would be impossible to enter our harbours.”² Enslaved pilots bound Jamaica, Great Britain’s most prosperous eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century colony, to broader Atlantic economies. Scores of pilot boats carrying a dozen or more slave pilots each jogged off Jamaica’s east end to meet approaching ships and usher them into the island’s numerous ports. Slaves also dominated the profession in the American South.³

This essay analyzes how enslaved pilots used the green waters of the Anglophone Americas during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a cultural space to gain unparalleled privileges. In studies of black mariners, W. Jeffrey Bolster, Michael Jarvis, and David Cecelski briefly considered enslaved pilots.⁴ This essay considerably extends their analysis by focusing on slave pilots and placing them in the broader rubric of Atlantic history to consider how they used specialized wisdom and skills to invert racial/social hierarchies. Pilots’ lives were marked by privileged exploitation, exchanging knowledge and abilities for the benefit of cultivating semi-independent lives within the boundaries of bondage. Many were owned by planter-merchants, who were planters directly involved in the overseas shipping of goods and usually maintained shipping facilities, like wharves and warehouses. They resided in ports, often far from their owners’ observation, and enjoyed considerable mobility and anonymity in crowded streets. Pilots hired out their services, were paid, and sometimes employed enslaved assistants. Some purchased or were granted their freedom. Aboard ship their privileges exceeded those received by slaves working in other capacities. They remained aboard ship for several hours, a couple days, and sometimes a week or more. During these periods away from their owners, pilots became temporary ship captains, permitting them to curse and command white sailors and officers in an age when blackness supposedly entailed subservience.

Scientists have long used the color of waterways to distinguish marine environments. Maritime geography is often described in terms of the following imprecisely defined regions: brown water refers to navigable rivers and littoral areas; black water frequently refers to swamps; green water refers to ports, harbors, and shallow coastal waters; and blue water is the deep ocean.⁵ The field of maritime slavery is rapidly expanding our understanding of bondage. Most historians of maritime slavery treat the earth’s waters as one uninterrupted, uniform environment. This disregards crucial ecological variables.

We would be remiss to ignore how geographical features, like fields, mountains, mines, and urban settings, informed slave experiences, yet we disregard marine environmental variants. By adopting other disciplines' models of geographical organization, we can provide greater depth and nuance to our understanding of maritime bondage.

We can refine our understanding of maritime slavery by examining the influences that hydrography, or marine environments, exerted on the historical process. Scholars of maritime slaves have correctly asserted that the independent character of bondmen's labor permitted them to escape slaveholder dominance. Julius Scott explained, "The juxtaposition of plantation society and maritime culture was always a particularly uneasy one. Whereas slavery and its regime demanded a fixed status and clear boundaries, ships and the sea came to symbolize, for many people, possibilities for mobility, escape, and freedom." But, it was hydrography that defined life, labor, and maritime culture. Maritime experiences upon the brown waters of the Mississippi, Berbice, Suriname, and Amazon Rivers differed from those upon black water swamps, green coastal waters, and the blue waters of the Atlantic.⁶

Borrowing from Africanists' organization of geography into cultural spaces can enhance our conceptualization and understanding of maritime slavery. In the 1980s Africanists began redefining Atlantic Africa to clarify their analysis. They divided Africa into regions based on shared traditions, language groups, commercial interests, worldviews, and histories. Expanding on Walter Rodney's scholarship, Boubacar Barry introduced the term "Greater Senegambia" to correct what he felt was the historiographical and geopolitical fragmentation of the region that encompasses Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, and parts of Mauritania, Mali, and Guinea Conakra. This integrative standpoint was developed because previous scholarship of individual polities resembled "a historical jigsaw puzzle. Viewed separately the pieces make little sense. Brought together, the bits of shredded data, from vignettes of personalities to social sketches and political snapshots, reveal new meanings." John Thornton persuasively extended Barry's theoretic framework to the rest of Atlantic Africa, dividing it into seven cultural regions. It was not just geography that shaped these cultural regions. Robert Harms documented how hydrography imposed cultural diversification and cohesion in the Congo River Basin. Members of fishing societies that worked the Congo's brown waters hunted fish by stalking them and setting traps and led seminomadic lives as they followed their quarries' daily and seasonal movements. Fishing the black water swamps that radiated off the river was like farming.

Families led sedentary lives, fishing the same dam or pond for generations. The Congo River also melded cultural distinctions in the region by forcing societies to intimately interact and bend their traditions around the seasonal rise and fall of its waters.⁷ By conjoining the terminology of marine geography to Africanists' conceptualization of geography, we can examine how green water permitted enslaved pilots to construct semi-independent lives within a discrete marine environment.

Scholarship on maritime slavery has recently undergone a similar change. Scholars have remained reluctant to consider the ocean's effects on human experiences. The absence of landmarks and borders makes the sea an imprecise expanse, and historians generally treat the ocean as a void in the Atlantic World—an in-between, a *Middle Passage*—that separated the Old World from the New and bisected European empires, while facilitating the exportation of power and importation of wealth. Historians are increasingly examining how the ocean created experiences for members of marginalized groups that did not exist ashore. For example, Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh argued that the ocean was a liberating space that permitted sailors, slaves, and pirates to redefine terrestrial notions of race and status as they challenged colonial commercial capitalism. Bolster stressed that the Atlantic was a place where ideas and concepts were reimaged and people benefited from opportunities denied ashore. He showed how free black sailors used the ocean to improve their lives, gaining some economic advantages and racial parity.⁸ Likewise, Africanists are increasingly examining how waterways shaped commerce, urbanization, warfare, and state formation.⁹ This chapter enhances our understanding of water's influence on cultural processes. Rather than treating green water as a transitory segment in transatlantic voyages, this essay considers how enslaved pilots created a counterculture in this maritime zone.

Green water also constituted a border between the terrestrial and aquatic authority of two of the most oppressive regimes in the Atlantic World—slaveholders and shipmasters. Here landmen and mariners were unsure of their authority, permitting slaves to manipulate white uncertainty. Many blue water sailors believed coastal mariners were less hardy than themselves and used the term green water as a disparaging colloquialism. Sailors regarded pilots as extensions of land-based authority distinct from themselves, making pilots a marginalized amphibious group, belonging to neither the world ashore or the world afloat. But this was a world turned upside down in which the disenfranchised used closely guarded knowledge to link sea and land, gaining sway over their immediate circumstances and broader economic activities.¹⁰

Green water is also where most ships sank, compelling mariners to respect those protecting them from shipwreck.

Through much of the eighteenth century, pilots were technically advisors without legal shipboard authority. Yet everyone knew their *advice* was more reliable than white cartographers' charts and shipmasters' navigational instruments. Hence, pilots' advice took on the air of orders, permitting pilots to assume command. By the mid-eighteenth century most New World waterways were charted and numerous navigational guidebooks had been published, but nature quickly altered hydrospace and ripped buoys from their markers. Consequently, surveys, even for well-traveled routes, were typically inaccurate. Pilots shunned navigational instruments and maps. They mentally charted the ever-changing hydrospace by reading the movement of surface waters, observing color variations in reefs, and plumbing the depths with lead-weighted sounding lines, and they navigated ships by lining them up with landmarks.¹¹

Enslaved pilots used these skills to ensure vessels' safety. On August 23, 1778, an enslaved pilot navigated the fifty-gun British warship *Experiment* through Hell Gate, located near Harlem, New York, "to the great astonishment of Lord [Richard] Howe," Britain's commander-in-chief of North America. The ship was chased into Long Island Sound by three French ships and negotiated Hell Gate to avoid capture. "At the moment of greatest danger, Sir James Wallace, the Captain gave some orders" that contradicted the pilot's desires. Tapping Wallace on the shoulder the slave said, "'[Y]ou no speak here!' The Captain felt the full force of the brave fellow's remonstrance" and complied.¹²

Hell Gate is a reef-lined strait in the East River near the point where the Harlem River and Long Island Sound converge with the East River. Strong eddies are created by conflicting riverine and tidal forces. By the late eighteenth century, currents had driven numerous vessels onto these reefs, and the *Experiment* was the largest ship to make "that dangerous passage." This incident highlights how slaves appropriated authority to overturn the racial/social hierarchy. As a nobleman and shipmaster, Wallace wielded considerable authority. If a slave working in any other capacity had similarly corrected an elite white man, he would have been deemed insolent and summarily punished. But everyone understood that the pilot controlled the ship's destiny, so he could rebuff one of the most powerful men in the world aboard a vessel that both projected and symbolized British overseas power. Indeed, so "highly did his Lordship [Howe] appreciate the skill and adventurous spirit of

the Negro pilot, that he settled on him an annuity of £50 for life," legitimizing his inversion of the racial/social stratum.¹³

Other enslaved pilots behaved similarly. Bermudian James "Jemmy" Darrell helped push Bermuda from the backwaters of the British Empire to a colony of strategic military importance. The loss of the American colonies during the American Revolution created a void in the British North Atlantic, depriving Britain of a naval supply port between Nova Scotia and the Caribbean. This made it difficult to protect shipping during the French Revolution, when French privateers attacked British shipping off North America.¹⁴ On May 15, 1795, Vice-Admiral George Murray, commander-in-chief of the Royal Navy's North American Squadron, approached Bermuda with a five-ship flotilla to establish a naval base. On May 17, Darrell piloted Murray's flagship, HMS *Resolution*, through a coral-toothed channel called the Narrows and into what came to be called Murray's Anchorage. This was the first warship brought into Bermuda, an accomplishment that facilitated the establishment of the Bermuda Naval Base (1795–96). This permitted Bermuda to serve as the needed base between Canada and the Caribbean, speeding the non-plantation colony's development.¹⁵

For Darrell, this brought an end to bondage. Following Murray's request, Governor James Crauford purchased Darrell for £150 and freed him on March 1, 1796.¹⁶ Darrell became Bermuda's first king's pilot, a respectable, royally appointed position with a substantial salary, which enabled him to purchase an eighteen-foot pilot boat and "a little land" where he built a "small house." This set a precedent that other enslaved Bermudian pilots used to gain their freedom.¹⁷

Even though pilots proved invaluable to overseas shipping, or perhaps because of it, many whites resented them. Contempt for slave pilots was rooted in concepts of social and racial hierarchy. White pilots upset concepts of status long before Europeans came into contact with Africans. Shipmasters and mates were generally members of society's upper stratum and were often described as tyrants. For example, in 1744, one former sailor proclaimed, "[A] Captain is like a King at Sea, and his Authority is over all that are in his Possession."¹⁸ Pilots, like sailors, were usually members of the lower echelons. When pilots assumed command of a vessel, they stood the societal hierarchy on its head, as seafaring satirist "Ned" Ward delineated in 1699, penning, "A Vessel, whilst the *Pilot* is on Board, is an Emblem of Feeble *Monarch*, where the *King* has a States-man in his Dominion Greater than himself, That the Prince only bears the Title, but the other the Command."¹⁹ If this was true

on ships in the Thames piloted by whites, it was doubly true in the Americas aboard vessels piloted by slaves.

Enslaved pilots existed on the cusp of the spectrum of negotiated authority that scholars currently use to describe master-slave relations.²⁰ In theory, slaves' race and status reinforced each other, making them the most degraded members of society. Centuries of maritime tradition and law predetermined pilot-captain relationships, and early modern white people were unwilling to alter this precedent, regardless of a pilot's race or status, leaving shipmasters with little room for negotiation. Simultaneously, slaveholders and port authorities placed slave pilots outside captains' sphere of control. Pilots also had much more leverage than field slaves—they held the safety of ships and all those aboard in their hands. They were caught in the machinery of bondage, but unlike field slaves they could not be easily replaced. Captains commanded considerable power, but pilots could conceivably avenge abuses by *accidentally* sinking their ships. Officers knew it was unwise to verbally or physically assault someone responsible for the safety of the ship and their own well-being. Pilots' persuasive powers were enhanced by white people's inability to swim, making the specter of shipwreck more ominous. These factors permitted slave pilots to evolve as they clambered from the pilot boat, up a Jacob's ladder, and swung themselves over the ship's rail. They immediately ascended to the quarterdeck—symbol of maritime authority and rank—where they assumed command.²¹

White mariners also recognized that they were symbiotically locked in antagonistic relationships with enslaved pilots. They regarded them as racial inferiors, but as pilots navigated dangerous waters, mariners conceded that it was in their best interest to treat them like officers. They understood that one could not simultaneously behave like a pilot and a slave. If pilots acted like humble slaves, they placed vessels in danger. Hence, mariners generally accepted their authority.

Even so, enslaved pilots had to remind shipmasters that they ensured their ship's safety and had to be treated with respect. Work stoppages were an effective way of demanding deference. When pilots boarded a vessel, captains routinely gave them grog as a sign of approbation. In 1808, a British shipmaster refused to extend this decorum to Jamaican pilots. A slave pilot and his assistants boarded the ship as it approached Port Royal, proclaiming, "Give me some beef, massa, me can no take ship safe widout grog and beef." Deeming the slave insolent, the captain determined to maintain command, retorting, "D—n you, mind the ship, you black rascal, . . . and when she is safe

you shall have what you want.’” An assistant pilot used the familiar slave ploy of feigned ignorance to enforce their control over the vessel. Inquiring on the water depth, the captain asked, “What water have you got? ‘What water, massa? why *what water* do you tink we got?’ ‘D—n you,’ says the captain, ‘I say what water have you?’ ‘Why *salt water*, massa, to be sure.’ ‘You black scoundrel,’ says the captain in a rage, ‘tell me, again, I say, how *much water*, have you got?’ ‘Lord, massa, how can me tell, me have no pot to measure it wid!’” The captain recognized the slaves’ ability to continue this routine until his ship ran aground, compelling him to surrender his authority, grog, and beef.²² These Jamaicans demonstrate how pilots used the weapons of the weak to extract concessions from the powerful. Pretending to be too dumb to comprehend simple questions, they used a common ploy of slave tricksters to engage in a form of work stoppage perfected by white mariners.²³

They feigned ignorance as part of a labor demonstration similar to those of white sailors. Scholars of maritime labor history have posited that the term “strike” derived from the collective work stoppage of London seamen in May 1768, who struck work in the same manner they would strike, or lower, sails to halt a ship’s progress.²⁴ Simon Finger shows that in November 1766 white pilots on the Delaware River refused to conduct chips to Philadelphia, threatening the prosperity produced by Pennsylvania’s Atlantic commerce. They forced elite land- and ship-based authorities to concede to their demands by preventing East India Company tea from being shipped into port. This coincidentally averted a Philadelphia Tea Party by denying radical Philadelphia artisans the chance to challenge king and Parliament by destroying imported tea.²⁵ Unlike white men, slaves could not openly strike without facing harsh punishment. Yet they could feign ignorance, using racist stereotypes to their advantage in winning the respect and provisions they believed to be their dues.

If whites could not openly confront enslaved pilots when at the mercy of their knowledge of hazardous waters, they were less restrained once in port. Some ridiculed black pilots in print, mocking their clothing and dialects. For example, even as the Hell Gate pilot was rewarded, he was derided in print. In several accounts he was called “mungo,” a British term for slave that mocked Africans’ hair by inferring that it resembled an old, worn-out woolen rug. Mid-nineteenth-century accounts replaced “mungo” with “Sambo,” suggesting the pilot was a timid, lazy buffoon.²⁶

An anonymous female traveler to Antigua in the early nineteenth century engaged in similar derision of slave pilots. A pilot boarded her ship as it

approached St. John's Harbor. She reported that the pilot was a "very pompous personage . . . who no doubt stood vastly high in his own estimation." The man "lent upon the rail of the vessel, with his large straw hat, and gigantic snuff-box," while "giving orders to the sailors, and discussing the news of the island." She rendered his conversation in dialect: "'Hab fine rain last night; you bring good *wedder*—(war for you 'tad staring dere for, you black nigger?)—yes, feber berry last month, many buckra [white people] die—(war you godo, run de ship on de shore?)—Crop bery good dis year; ship load fast 'nough—(why you no haul dat rope good?)." The man safely guided the ship into the harbor, past the wreck of the mail boat *Maria*, which had sunk when its captain tried to enter the harbor without a pilot. Several "missionaries, and their wives and children" returning homes to Antigua drowned "almost within sight of their homes—within hearing of the church bell." The lone female survivor watched her husband and children drown. As the traveler reported this story, her prejudice prevented her from respecting a bondman even as he averted such disaster.²⁷

While many white people resented pilots' inversion of the racial/social hierarchy, most accepted it because pilots provided valuable services. Brothers Thomas and John Gray Blount were prominent North Carolina merchant-planters. In early winter of 1794, their sloop, *Sally*, ran aground, and they offered a £60 reward for refloating the vessel. For three weeks a succession of white pilots tried unsuccessfully before a black pilot succeed. Thomas was so impressed by the "clever fellow" that he gave "him 20 dollars in addition to the £60 which he is entitled." Prudent merchants, planters, and captains heeded such lessons. They did not conclude that pilots' race or enslavement diminished their abilities. They could regard black pilots as racial inferiors while exploiting and rewarding their abilities.²⁸

Pilots acquired a profound familiarity with local waterways, often while working as canoe men, fishermen, wreckers, sea-turtlers, and coastal and interisland sailors. The skills required for these jobs complemented pilotage. For example, in 1800 William Tatham reported that Virginia's tobacco canoe men "made excellent skippers and good river pilots." Likewise, Josiah Meigs recognized enslaved Bermudians' complementary array of skills: "The blacks are excellent sailors, pilots and fishermen." In 1815, an Antigua slaveholder advertised "a stout negro man, a good sailor and fisherman, capable of taking charge of a vessel, and a good pilot for this all the neighboring islands."²⁹

Thomas Jeremiah of Charleston, South Carolina, provides a quintessential example of the benefits pilots reaped by marrying maritime occupations. He

was apparently born into slavery and purchased his freedom with his pilot's income. Jeremiah was undoubtedly an enslaved fisherman in the 1740s and used his knowledge to secure a more lucrative pilotage position in the mid-1750s. He knew Charleston Harbor well yet initially possessed an imperfect understanding of the water depth necessary for ship navigation. On February 11, 1755, the *South-Carolina Gazette* charged that the "Jamaica Man of War" was run hard aground "by the Carelessness of a Negro Pilot (*Jerry*)." One year later, Jeremiah sank the merchantman *Brothers Adventure*. Through fishing and continued pilotage (as well as firefighting), Jeremiah improved his skills, fame, and fortune. By 1771 he was free, and his piloting skills, which were crucial to South Carolina's naval defense and maritime trade, made him an important man in the colony. Governor Sir William Campbell proclaimed him "one of the best pilots in the harbor" who had "by his industry acquired property upwards of £1,000 sterling" and owned "several slaves." Historian William Ryan declared, "[H]e may well have been the wealthiest man of color in the entire thirteen colonies."³⁰

Pilotage was often a semiseasonal occupation, with shipping demands being greatest from spring through fall. Consequently, pilots pursued other maritime occupations during lulls. When working as watermen they did not enjoy the respect accorded pilots; however, they received considerable autonomy and wages, refreshed their knowledge of waterways, and placed themselves in a position to intercept approaching ships and solicit pilot jobs.

Serving as mariners in small boats also afforded pilots more intimate understandings of the hydrospace than if they toiled high upon a ship's decks, which helps explain why enslaved watermen came to dominate the more lucrative pilotage profession. Watermen and sailors had divergent experiences with the water. Sailors looked down upon the seascape from several feet above, while watermen interacted more intimately with the sea. Watermen skimmed across shallows a few inches above the surface, obtaining detailed views of the hydrospace. They mentally mapped the ocean's bottom by peering beneath clear waters and watching and feeling how surface waters heaved and plunged as they moved over reefs and sandbars. Fishermen cultivated detailed understandings of water floors as they charted the movements and retreats of fish. Wreckers probably had the best understanding of the shallows. They navigated shallows looking for wrecks to salvage and were in a position to recover goods from vessels that refused their pilotage services. When diving, they viewed the waterscape from below and felt currents and tides, providing themselves with acute understandings of the depths.³¹

As temporary shipmasters, pilots demanded white respect and did not hesitate to reprimand white offenders. William Nevens's experience aboard the *Ceres* in 1805 exemplifies white acceptance of enslaved pilot's authority. When Nevens was a novice New England sailor, a pilot on the British occupied island of Martinique taught him to respect slave pilots. He boarded the ship as it approached Trinity Harbor. Nevens "had before seen what I called black fellows, but they were not a consideration to this pilot." Shocked by his wardrobe, Nevens thought he resembled "the ghost of Socrates, in a British uniform. He had on a cocked hat, red coat, white neckerchief, but no shirt, or hose a pair of yellow breeches, a yellow slipper on one foot, and a red one on the other." Nevens "involuntarily" laughed. The pilot responded, "Who you laugh at, you bloody bitch? I let you know, I king pilot, Gor bras ye to 'ell." With this exclamation, the slave capsized the racial/social hierarchy. He ordered Nevens to measure the water depth, which he submissively did. Turning "to the man at the wheel," he "roared out" that he better keep a strait course. When the helmsman asked "what course he shall steer," the pilot scoffed, steer "for dat rock tone point, where he hab a cane patch and a sugar mill on him; me no trouble with dat dam ting in de box [meaning a compass]." ³² Tellingly, the captain did not challenge the pilot, legitimizing his authority upon his ship. In an age when black insolence was usually met with white violence, this Martinican berated whites without fear of retribution. ³³

Enslaved pilots' determination to be treated like free white ship officers shocked white people into quiet submission. Frederick Bayley illustrated how pilots disarmed whites, compelling them to accept their authority and affronts to the racial hierarchy. When an African-born pilot boarded Bayley's ship as it approached Bridgetown, Barbados, he had an immediately unfavorable impression. "He was an African of ferocious aspect, and certainly not formed to create a very favorable opinion of his race in the minds of those who saw him." However, the pilot regarded himself as whites' equal and was treated accordingly. "He took possession of the vessel, with as much importance as if he had been a fine, rough, old English seaman bearing up Channel." After a few cordial remarks he issued orders and cursed sailors. "Vell, captain,' said he, 'so you have had a fine passage: I hope de ladies below are vell; if you hab no jection I vill drink deir health.' Accordingly he had a glass of grog given him, and then turned to work:—"What de debil are you at dere in de fore top?—Come down dere; I vant to put about; don't you see de wind blow?" and then turning to the man at the helm; 'Vy you no [s]teer [s]teady? Got dam you, Sir,—vy you no teer teady, I say?" Shocked that an African

would toast white women and curse white men, Bayley asked a bondman who boarded the ship to sell fruit: “‘Is that fellow free?’ ‘No massa,’ was the reply.” Bayley, who was unfamiliar with shipboard relations, marveled that an African’s nautical acumen enabled him to toast white women and curse white men. Mariners appreciated his ability to ensure their ship’s safety, allowing the slave to behave like an “English seaman bearing up Channel.”³⁴

Slave pilots used Western material cultural to visually communicate shipboard authority. They apparently felt their rank was comparable to that of shipmasters. Thus, it made sense to dress the part. The Martinican, like other pilots, demonstrated how clothing conveyed this ascendancy. The uniforms of naval officers and formal attire of merchantmen officers distinguished them from sailors while demanding respect. Pilots appropriated this tradition to the best of their abilities. Since slaves lacked access to full Western regalia, and perhaps believed complete uniforms were unnecessary, they pieced together discarded military and civilian formal wear, creating their own symbols of office.

Westerners felt that slaves’ appropriated European formal wear in order to partake in vainglorious displays that did not conform to bond people’s debased status. When field slaves wore dress clothing, they failed to comply with white perceptions of how they should look. Slavery was a labor institution, and whites felt bond people should wear clothing that indexed their debased status. Coarse clothing, like blackness, symbolized savagery and oppression, punctuating white perceptions of Africans. When slaves wore dress clothing, many whites concluded that they challenged their debased status and assumed privileges whites reserved for themselves.³⁵ Accounts portrayed enslaved pilots as seminaked buffoons who pieced together brightly colored articles of formal European military and civilian attire, creating an ungainly, savage appearance. A travel guide for Jamaica cautioned Britons not be shocked by their first encounter with islanders, invariably enslaved pilots. “Here the astonishment of those who never before beheld a sable visage is at its height. His uncouth appearance and apparel, combined with outlandish lingo and quant remarks, create much amusement.”³⁶

It is important to consider why slaves wore European formal wear. Sources indicate that slaves did not fully embrace Western fashion, did not have the wherewithal to purchase complete outfits, or both. Instead, they created their sense of fashion to project personal and group beliefs. Shane White and Graham White expressed how slaves culturally imagined clothing with a “carefully constructed appearance” that was “an act of cultural *bricolage*,

the imaginative mediation of an African-born slave in a new, European-dominated environment.” Wearing the attire of nonlaboring whites permitted slaves to express pride in their appearance while providing the illusion that their lives were not defined by labor. Unlike other slaves, pilots did not labor, and like gentlemen’s attire, their idiosyncratic uniforms articulated this reality.³⁷

Slave pilots also used extravagant clothing to lampoon white authority. New York bondman King Charles caricatured elite whites by wearing a British brigadier’s broadcloth, a scarlet jacket plastered with gold lace that stretched almost to his heels, yellow buckskins, blue stockings, and polished black shoes adorned with silver buckles while officiating at slave festivities in Albany during the 1790s and early 1800s. These sorts of fantastic ensembles enabled bond people to openly mock white authority, while unknowing whites laughed at representations of themselves.³⁸

The ship’s quarterdeck provided pilots with a stage for their *minstrel acts*. Their *white face* was an oversized hat and bright, variegated clothing, and they acted white when they cursed and commanded. While inverting the racial/social hierarchy, they used the common comedic routine of inversion to openly mock unsuspecting elite white men. French philosopher Henri Bergson explained how “inversion of rôles” was a primary method for provoking laughter, penning, “[W]e laugh at the prisoner at the bar lecturing the magistrate; at the child presuming to teach its parents’ in a word, at everything that comes under the heading of ‘topsyturvydom.’” Whites were unaware that they were the butt of slave jokes, and many became infuriated by what they perceived as tasteless savagery that incorrectly copied white fashion. But pilot’s minstrel acts were performed for slaves’ benefit and not for white amusement. Bond people witnessing these routines were surely forced to contain their laughter, for they could not laugh at slaves lampooning shipmasters even as white indignation enhanced the melodrama. Hence, enslaved pilots’ renditions remained beyond white comprehension. Accounts suggest that as the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries progressed pilots wore increasingly outlandish ensembles, perhaps in attempts to outdo each other’s caricatures.³⁹

As slave pilots mocked white people, they also formed symbiotic relationships with terrestrial and maritime authorities that provided overlapping sources of protection. Ship officers were primarily concerned with the safety of their vessel and with crew discipline, causing them to ignore the bonds of whiteness they shared with sailors. Slaves were not supposed to mock whites, but could publicly deride elements of white society scorned by elites. It was

not uncommon for slaves, at their owners' encouragement, to lampoon poor white southerners and the Irish in jokes. Perhaps shipmasters similarly encouraged pilots to berate crewmembers. When officers refused to stop bondmen from ridiculing sailors, they provided themselves with amusement while effortlessly reinforcing seamen's subjugation.⁴⁰

Port authorities and planter-merchants also kept pilots from being sucked under the mercy of maritime discipline. Port authorities forced captains of ships over a certain tonnage (or size) to employ a pilot and entrusted pilots with a harbor's safety by keeping watercourses free of shipwrecks, which could obstruct maritime commerce and damage wharves and vessels. They were also trusted not to usher enemy vessels into port and were the first line of defense against seaborne epidemics, forcing ships suspected of carrying contagions to "ride quarantine" for several days with passengers and crew confined aboard ship. Late eighteenth-century changes to the pilotage profession fundamentally tilted the pilot-shipmaster relationship in the pilots' favor. Recognizing the importance of skilled pilots to maritime commerce, port authorities increasingly shielded them from abuses that would undermine their ability to retain expert pilots. For most of the eighteenth century pilots were, in essence, independent contractors licensed, regulated, and protected, but not employed, by port authorities. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries port authorities increased pilots' responsibility and power by making them conferred government employees and giving them command of vessels—formalizing the social construct that slave pilots had been forcing shipmasters to accept. For example, in Bermuda they were king's or queen's pilots (depending on the monarch's gender). Early nineteenth-century U.S. law stated, "After a pilot is taken on board, the master has no longer any command of the ship till she is safe in harbour." Hence, port authorities inverted the social/racial hierarchy by authorizing bondmen to become shipmasters. Impressing or physically abusing pilots or refusing to pay their fees resulted in criminal charges.⁴¹

Planter-merchants owned most enslaved pilots and permitted them to act like free wage laborers because of the benefits they received. Hired-out slaves gave their owners a percentage of their incomes and guided merchantmen to their owners' wharves and warehouses, making the arrangement profitable for slaveholders.⁴² Enslaved pilots also projected planters' power onto the water, strengthening their social, political, and economic power. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries white North Carolina pilots repeatedly attempted to break slaves' near monopoly of the profession by introducing

legislation specifically designed to bar them from pilotage and, more broadly, to prevent bond people from being hired out. Angered by efforts to restrict the use of their property, planters soundly defeated these bills. In the process, they undermined white pilots' political influence, consolidated their power ashore and afloat, and, since merchants paid slave pilots less than their white counterparts, suppressed pilotage fees.⁴³

As the property of powerful planters, enslaved pilots received protection denied to their white counterparts. Laws compelled shipmasters to respect slaveholders' property, and if they harmed their possessions they could expect to face civil and criminal charges. In addition, captains who injured a slave pilot could face the unsanctioned wrath of his owner when they went ashore.⁴⁴

Some bondmen used pilotage to move from anonymous obscurity to positions of privileged exploitation in which elite, white terrestrial and maritime authority rewarded and protected them, as illustrated by the case of the pilots of Hell Gate and Bermuda. On April 26, 1798, pilot James Darrell informed George Beckwith, who was Bermuda's governor and "Commander in Chief, Vice-Admiral, etc.," of the Royal Navy's North American squadron, that three soldiers stationed in Georgetown stole his "Pilot Boat," and Darrell requested its return. Beckwith expedited the request. Nor did his support of black pilots end there. In 1806, Darrell and Jacob Pitcarn, another recently freed pilot, successfully petitioned Beckwith for pay increases and the "Commissioners of His Majesty's Navy, London" for the right to will property to their descendants.⁴⁵ On June 29, 1800, Thomas Cooper, an enslaved pilot probably related to Darrell, used his relationship with Beckwith to secure his freedom. Beckwith and other elite white men and women supported Cooper's manumission petition on the grounds that his deceased grandmother "was a white woman" and that a child's condition of freedom followed that of the mother.⁴⁶ Throughout the Americas, white people probably provided similar support to other pilots.

Bermuda is a reef-ringed archipelago, and Beckwith and others recognized that black pilots facilitated Bermuda's growing importance and prosperity. By granting freedom and other favors to enslaved pilots, these men protected shipping. Cooper's "Yellowish Complexion" testified to his biracial status, and many knew his grandmother was white, yet he remained enslaved into adulthood. Cooper's skills, importance to shipping, connection to Darrell, and relationships with powerful individuals permitted him to secure freedom. Had Bermudians denied Cooper his freedom, they might have

alienated Darrell, the islands' most valued pilot. Freeing him cost money, but the revenues pilots generated dwarfed these costs. Officials understood that their family members, their profitable occupations, and the privileges and respect bestowed upon them by white benefactors bound freed black pilots to the colony. Concurrently, pilots and Bermudian officials surely realized the risks of illegal enslavement and other forms of mistreatment if they left Bermuda.

Pilots also used terrestrial connections to protect themselves from shipboard reprisals, as illustrated by Thomas Jeremiah, the Charleston, South Carolina, pilot. In 1771, probably a few short years after acquiring his freedom, Jeremiah assaulted Thomas Langen, a white ship captain, when he piloted Langen's ship up the Cooper River. Jeremiah was convicted of assault and "Sentenced to lie in the stocks One hour & receive ten Lashes between the hours of Eight & Ten." Jeremiah escaped punishment, however, by asking for and receiving a pardon from "Lieutenant Governor & Commander in Chief" Sir William Bull. This incident emphasizes black pilots' importance to colonies and how they used their positions to benefit their lives. Born a slave, Jeremiah utilized specialized wisdom to obtain freedom, economic success, and protection from legal punishment. Some fifteen years earlier, Jeremiah grounded one ship and sank another. Now he was indispensable. Bull wanted to retain one of the colony's best pilots and spare him from public humiliation, permitting Jeremiah to go unpunished for striking a shipmaster on his own vessels.⁴⁷

Enslaved pilots forged relationships with terrestrial officials that permitted them to treat shipmasters as their equals. Pilots ensured ports' economic success while guarding against disease and attack. Bull's pardon legitimized Jeremiah's inversion of the racial/social stratum while indicating that he valued the convicted black pilot more than the abused white captain. There were always far more captains than pilots in a given port. More important, captains were transient figures; pilots were routinely relied-upon fixtures. Langen was a cog in the wheel of maritime commerce that could be replaced; Jeremiah was a fixture of more value than a single shipmaster. Hence, land-based officials seemingly valued black pilots more than elite, white shipmasters.⁴⁸

Jeremiah's knowledge of Charleston Harbor permitted him to retain his position even after grounding one ship, sinking another, and assaulting a white man. His rise from enslaved obscurity to a place of commercial and naval importance caused him to conclude that he was irreplaceable and above reproach, a conclusion Bull agreed with. This conviction, however, contributed

to Jeremiah's execution early in the American Revolution. Jeremiah was valuable, but he undercut his worth to patriots by brashly stating that he "often piloted in [British] men-of-war" and had "no objection to have been employed again in the same service." Jeremiah was important to British shipping, but war redefined his relationship with terrestrial authority. His skills made him a threat to patriots in a British colony, and even the British governor's pardon could not save him. Since South Carolinian patriots could not charge Jeremiah with treason for promising to pilot *enemy* British ships into port, they convicted him on exaggerated charges of planning a slave rebellion, which also intimidated other black pilots and advanced the colony's military readiness. On August 18, 1775, Jeremiah was hanged and his body burned.⁴⁹ His execution is part of a larger pattern in which Charlestonians fabricated claims of slave conspiracies to intimidate black residents.⁵⁰

Several scholars have studied Thomas Jeremiah, focusing their analysis on events surrounding his execution. Yet his formative years as an enslaved and free pilot contributed to his execution. Philip Morgan noted that Jeremiah's demise was due "to his unusually elevated and precarious position within Charleston society." More important, his successes as a pilot contributed to his demise by causing him to incorrectly conclude that the highest levels of white authority always protected him. Jeremiah was uniquely situated in Charleston, but when compared to other pilots he was not anomalous. Unlike other black pilots, Jeremiah did not know his limits. He could strike a white man but could not threaten to guide enemy ships into port. One of pilots' primary responsibilities was to protect ports against enemy vessels. Patriots regarded his promise to guide British warships into Charleston Harbor as a treasonous violation of the tenets governing the pilotage profession. It was this, and not his wealth or status, that precipitated his hanging.⁵¹

Ports formed an "urban perimeter" around colonies that afforded enslaved pilots with numerous shoreside privileges. Green water and ports conspired to undermine slaveholders' authority by providing pilots with two parallel cultural and geographical borderlands along the cusp of slavery, colony, and empire. Here water undercut prevailing land-based institutions, providing ports with their own social arrangements that blurred the boundaries between slavery and freedom and permitted pilots to pretend to be free.⁵²

Bond people constituted a significant portion, sometimes the majority, of a given port's population.⁵³ Ports did not afford pilots with the same benefits enjoyed aboard ship, but they offered a chance to become anonymous faces in multiracial urban crowds while enjoying independence away from their

owners. Like other urban slaves, many were entrepreneurs living independent of direct white interference that dictated where they lived, what they ate or wore, who they married, and the work they performed, permitting them to become members of a virtually free labor force. Industrious slaves generated considerable incomes for themselves, enhancing the material comfort enjoyed by themselves and their family members.⁵⁴

Ports were also marketplaces for news, and pilots were great purveyors, funneling information between sea and land while serving as the Atlantic eyes and ears of urban and rural slave communities. News passed by word of mouth along established maritime commercial routes, and as Julius Scott documented, free black sailors linked black communities from New England to the West Indies into what he called the “greater Caribbean.” These sailors permitted free and enslaved lands people to monitor international events. As the first shoreside contact with vessels, pilots were key figures in these networks. Pilots, mariners, and passengers exchanged colonial and overseas news. While vessels lay at anchor for hours or even days waiting to clear customs and quarantine, pilots returned ashore with the news of the world. Urban, maritime, and country slaves converged in ports. As pilots entered these pulsating communities, they disseminated Atlantic news, and slaves rapidly and accurately conveyed information inland along the arteries of their internal economies.⁵⁵

Atlantic ports contained vibrant waterfront institutions that catered to the needs and desires of maritime workers regardless of race. “Socially marginal” fixtures in pilots’ lives, like taverns and brothels, provided “comparative privacy” for white and black men and women to mingle. Brothels and taverns were probably the most integrated places on earth. Alcohol and the commodified bodies of white and black women were sold to transient men regardless of race, and saloonkeepers and prostitutes served as conduits of information, gleaning news from one patron and disseminating to others.⁵⁶

While mariners, passengers, and pilots sometimes had difficult ship-board relationships, ashore they often got along quite well. Enslaved pilots frequently helped disembarking whites navigate ports, conducting them to lodging places or the homes of friends and associates. Likewise, they guided whites to brothels and taverns, where they socialized together. In short, ports were multiracial communities with ties to rural, urban, and maritime workers and offered enslaved pilots numerous opportunities and considerable autonomy.⁵⁷

Pilots gained autonomy not by removing themselves from white contact,

but by serving white economic interests. Most bond people acquired autonomy by working in occupations that permitted them to escape close white observation. Shipmasters, officers, sailors, and passengers watched pilots' every move, yet, pilots' actions went unregulated. Barry Higman's analysis of urban slavery reveals that autonomy was not necessarily based on white absence. He explained that urban slavery "was characterized by contradiction and ambiguity. Most urban slaves lived in more intimate contact with their owners than did rural slaves, frequently sharing their houses, eating their leftovers, and wearing their castoffs." Yet many enjoyed considerably more freedom than rural bond people, exercising "substantial ability to organize their own time and resources and worked beyond the immediate fear of their owner's tongue and lash." The ratio of whites to slaves was higher in towns than in rural areas. It was greater still aboard ship. White observers judged slave pilots by their race, status, and skills. However, maritime law and planters' sway precluded pilots from shipboard authority, while affording considerable autonomy.⁵⁸

The public nature of pilotage enabled bondmen to broadcast their abilities, heightening their community standing. They displayed their abilities to those ashore and afloat. The anonymous Antigua-bound traveler documented how a pilot successfully brought ships past a shipwreck. As he navigated past the wreck, shipboard and shoreside observers were reminded of his skills. When a black pilot dislodged Thomas and John Blount's sloop, observers knew white pilots had failed before him. Waterfront spectators could not hear slave pilots curse white mariners, but they saw these brightly clad bondmen, knowing that they dictated ship movements.

Like spectators at a major sporting event, throngs of white and black Bermudians crowded the waterfront to watch James Darrell pilot HMS *Resolution* into port. Initially believing Murray's fleet was an invading French force, men rushed to the waterfront to defend the colony. When the *Resolution* was recognized, women and children flocked to the scene. "Hundreds of boats filled with holiday folk from the country gathered" and the *Resolution* "was saluted from the artillery of the fort."⁵⁹ Darrell instantly became a Bermudian icon. Whites used his accomplishments to advance the colony's development and inspire white and black Bermudians to become pilots. Darrell's dexterities enabled him to pass from enslaved obscurity to celebrated freedom, and slaves learned of his success, manumission, and purchase of a boat and house.

Pilots' shipboard activities were no secret to slave communities. Black people were often aboard vessels and witnessed pilots subverting captains'

authority. They undoubtedly recounted, with much embellishment, how pilots cursed and commanded sailors and officers, which probably made pilots idolized figures of the slave community.⁶⁰

The ocean is not one undivided span of water. This essay differentiates between maritime zones to demonstrate how hydrography affected human experiences. Scholarship on maritime bondage is typically linked to terrestrial slavery within its respective society. However, marine environmental factors provided the structural contours of maritime slavery much more than shoreside realities. Studying slavery within specific maritime environments exposes striking similarities irrespective of terrestrial forms of bondage. Slavery differed radically throughout the Anglophone Americas. Antigua, Jamaica, Barbados, and Martinique possessed brutal plantation systems that dwarfed those of the American South in size and violence. Bermuda was a maritime society, rather than a plantation colony. Studies of urban slavery in the American South, Brazil, and the British and Danish Caribbean generally concur that the “urban milieu” provided bond people with autonomy, mobility, and freedom distinct from their rural surrounding.⁶¹ Green water off of port cities provided an extension of that milieu, though with important variations.

Scholars remain cognizant of how cultural ecology, or the relationship between a given society and its natural environment, shaped the human experience ashore, while demonstrating reluctance to consider these processes afloat. As we increasingly consider human interactions with the sea, we must consider how discrete marine ecosystems informed the historical process.⁶² Black peoples’ lives on green and blue water were profoundly different. Maritime regions, black people’s condition of slavery or freedom, the types of work they performed, and their connections to terrestrial institutions shaped their experiences. For example, Bolster documented how blue water provided free black sailors with social and economic opportunities denied ashore. Yet tradition barred most free black hands on blue seas from becoming officers. Green water, tradition, and law fostered an environment where enslaved pilots became *de facto* commanders, obtaining more shipboard authority than most sailors of any status or race ever received.⁶³

Studies considering terrestrial relationships between slaveholders and slaves underscore our need to examine how maritime regions defined human interactions. Historians like Ira Berlin, Peter Wood, and Eugene Genovese have provided praiseworthy analytic models delineating the give-and-take relationship between agricultural slaves and slaveholders. Yet their theories

are incongruent with the experiences of enslaved pilots. Relationships between enslaved pilots and captains were not predicated on the same give-and-take regimens field slaves were subjected to. Historians have long examined how slaveholder-slave relations were defined by “reciprocal obligations defined from above.” Slave owners granted privileges to make bond people more dependent, maximize production, and create the illusion of joyful subordination. Slaveholders dispensed privileges at their discretion, and as they did so they melded master-slave associations to suite their needs.⁶⁴

Pilots and shipmasters forewent the daily routines and gestures that demarcated land-based master-slave relationships. Accounts reveal that shipmasters could not significantly alter their relationships with pilots. Maritime tradition and law predetermined the conditions of pilot-captain relationships, irrespective of the pilot’s race and status, compelling shipmasters to treat pilots with respect. Terrestrial authority strengthened the position of enslaved pilots. In the eighteenth century most captains understood that time did not permit them to negotiate relationships with each pilot who boarded their vessel, allowing bondmen to immediately assume command. When shipmasters sought to redefine this relationship, pilots utilized familiar tools of the weak. They could, like our Jamaican pilots, withhold their services through feigned ignorance to demonstrate that they would not negotiate with captains, forcing them to acquiesce. Similarly, pilots could claim that conditions were too perilous—the tide was too low, currents or winds too strong, visibility too poor—to safely bring a ship into port. If a captain attempted to bring his vessel into port against the pilot’s advice, he risked inciting mutiny among sailors who did not want to place their lives in jeopardy. As late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century port authorities transformed pilots into government employees who assumed shipboard command, they officially inverted the social/racial hierarchy. Hence, enslaved pilots were able to step upon deck, proclaim themselves “king pilot,” and act like an “English seaman bearing up Channel.”⁶⁵

Enslaved pilots capsized ideas of race and slavery while at sea; whites righted them ashore. Pilots’ shipboard authority was ephemeral and dissipated as they climbed back over the ship’s rail, descended the Jacob’s ladder, and set foot in an awaiting pilot boat. When they reached shore they were urban slaves divested of their anomalous authority. Ashore they no longer controlled white people’s immediate destiny, and probably faced swift and severe retribution for cursing, mocking, or striking white men.

Enslaved pilots challenged the supremacy of the dominant culture,

exchanging their skills for lives of privileged exploitation. But their autonomy was measured in hours and days. They, like all slaves, were owned and exploited. Slavery was a labor institution, and the privileges granted to slaves were designed to extract knowledge and wealth from their minds and bodies. They generated wealth for their owners, shipping companies, and manufacturers while helping to sustain Atlantic economies that generated state, colonial, national, and imperial wealth. Some used pilotage to secure their freedom; most died as they had lived—enslaved.