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Slave Revolts, Royal Justice, and a Ubiquitous Rumor in the Age of Revolutions

Wim Klooster

DURING the Easter week of 1816, enslaved blacks in Barbados rose in revolt, catching the island's planters and authorities by surprise. The main incentive for slaves to take part in the rebellion was the rumor that a document had arrived or was about to arrive carrying an emancipation proclamation. More than fifteen years later, on Christmas Day 1831, slaves in Jamaica revolted after a gifted enslaved speaker named Sam Sharpe had aroused them, stressing the natural freedom of man and divulging the news that both the king and the English people were in favor of black emancipation. He told them he believed that a "free paper" had been issued but that the planters were obstinate. A massive revolt, sometimes called the Baptist War, ensued.¹ These two examples are not isolated cases in the history of New World slavery. During the age of revolutions, this rumor surfaced in slave circles throughout the Americas, frequently fueling uprisings.²

The rumor, usually featuring a liberating monarch, can shed light on the motives leading enslaved Africans in the Americas to take up arms for their own emancipation, which has been the subject of historiographical debate in the last decades. Thirty-five years ago Eugene D. Genovese

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¹ Henry Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery: Being a Narrative of Facts and Incidents, Which Occurred in a British Colony, during the Two Years Immediately Preceding Negro Emancipation* (London, 1853), 111 (quotation); Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 260–62, 295–96; Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736–1831* (Urbana, Ill., 1992), 262.

² David Patrick Geggus has drawn more attention than other historians to this rumor: Geggus, "Slavery, War, and Revolution in the Greater Caribbean, 1789–1815," in *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Geggus (Bloomington, Ind., 1997), 1–50, esp. 7–8.

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sketched a transition in the aims of slave resistance from the restoration of a traditional African way of life to the promotion of a forward-thinking radical revolution, as first shown in the Saint Domingue revolt that began in 1791.³ Like Genovese, Michael Mullin distinguished different stages in slave uprisings, starting with an African phase, followed by those organized in the early plantation regime, and culminating in revolts during the age of revolutions led by “assimilated” slaves. In the latter stage, Creoles led rural blacks into rebellion, aided by “literacy, biblical imagery, and the class organization provided by Christian missionaries.”⁴ More recently, several historians have followed Laurent Dubois in assigning much weight to the universalist rhetoric of the age of revolutions. They portray slaves in Saint Domingue as having claimed the rights of man for themselves and thereby having expanded the meaning of those rights. More generally, the decades after 1789 are depicted as an era that saw the politicization of the enslaved populations of the Americas, which made them more likely to rebel.⁵ What these works have in common is their contention that the mentality of blacks who took part in slave revolts changed during the age of revolutions.

Arguing against the grain, I contend that insurgent slaves in many parts of the Americas were consistently encouraged by the same rumor. Its ubiquity suggests commonalities between groups of slaves at work in both Catholic and Protestant environments, in mines and on plantations, and in rural and urban settings. My argument is necessarily synthetic, pulling together disparate research across languages and geographies to determine how, under which conditions, and by whom the rumor was generated in the revolutionary era. The numerous instances of revolts sparked by this rumor both before and after the start of the age of revolutions suggest that there was no change in the mentalities of most participants. They adhered time and again to the immutable principle that they were already free. Enslaved blacks, drawing on African and Creole notions of kingship, employed rumors of royal emancipation to rally their numbers to revolt against local authorities who had putatively suppressed monarchical edicts of manumission. Although the rumor was systemic to the institution of New World slavery for perhaps as much as two centuries, it was nevertheless forged locally by slaves. Surveying the appearance of this rumor in different times and places offers us a chance for broader insight into ideas of freedom among the enslaved in the revolutionary Americas.

³ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, La., 1979).

⁴ Mullin, *Africa in America*, 268–77 (quotation, 269).

⁵ Laurent Dubois, “An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic,” *Social History* 31, no. 1 (February 2006): 1–14, esp. 12; Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London, 2011).

HISTORIANS OF SLAVERY have carefully documented how slaves in the Americas sought to improve their condition. Many of them undoubtedly shared the feeling of Josiah Henson, author of a U.S. slave narrative, that “from my earliest recollection, freedom had been the object of my ambition.”⁶ But whether they aspired to worldly deliverance or not, the majority tried to carve out an existence as best they could under the brutal conditions of slavery. In numerous ways they negotiated with their masters for a larger degree of autonomy or tried to strike deals with whites or blacks that enabled their material improvement. For most, material well-being or autonomy was the goal, freedom an ideal beyond reach.

Like free people, slaves inhabited a world held together by a web of rights. As desperately downtrodden as some were, they still could use whatever bargaining chips they had to obtain more rights. They acted in unison in plantation and mine settings and on their own in courtrooms throughout the realm of the Spanish monarchy. Emilia Viotti da Costa has argued that the slaves of Demerara (Guyana) subscribed to a social contract, according to which they should perform according to their abilities and should be provided for according to their needs. If this contract was broken, they felt entitled to protest.⁷ Cuba’s royal slaves in the mines of El Cobre “actively contended entitlements and prerogatives,” appealing to the right to subsistence that masters owed them. “Through some precedent, this principle then turned into a sense of entitlement to self-provision, in fact, one extended to the provisioning of their families. The right of subsistence, of self-and-family subsistence, was also stretched and linked to another form of entitlement, namely, entitlement to the *means* of producing those forms of subsistence; and from there on to other aspects of what may be regarded as a moral economy.”⁸ In general, as Robin Blackburn has remarked, “emancipation in the Americas was not achieved through the slow accumulation of concessions and customary rights but it was marked by revolutionary ruptures, involving both intervention from ‘outside’ the slave system and the action or reaction of the slaves themselves.”⁹

⁶ Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson: Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* (1849; repr., Dresden, Ontario, 1965), 22. For this sentiment as expressed in U.S. slave narratives, see Maria Diedrich, *Ausbruch aus der Knechtschaft: Das amerikanische Slave Narrative zwischen Unabhängigkeitserklärung und Bürgerkrieg* (Stuttgart, 1986), 168–69. See also Silvia C. Mallo, “La libertad en el discurso del Estado, de amos y esclavos, 1780–1830,” *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 112 (July–December 1991): 121–46, esp. 136–37.

⁷ Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994), 73.

⁸ María Elena Díaz, *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre: Negotiating Freedom in Colonial Cuba, 1670–1780* (Stanford, Calif., 2000), 316 (“actively”), 317 (“Through some precedent”).

⁹ Blackburn, *American Crucible*, 362.

The slaves who participated in the many revolts that marked the age of revolutions generally did not intend to secure more customary rights. But neither did they seek to overthrow slavery as a system. Free people of color at times adopted the language and substance of the rights of man to further their cause, but slaves rarely did.¹⁰ Even if some slaves in Saint Domingue spoke of the “rights of man,” the mass of the insurgents, I argue, had another perspective. Rather than planning to abolish slavery as a system, they were eager to become free themselves. To understand why slaves rebelled when they did, we have to look at a core belief that was an important element in many, if not most, slave revolts during the age of revolutions: the notion of a thwarted royal emancipation decree.

In the days when most news was spoken, it was hard to distinguish it from rumors. In some past societies, the difference was merely a matter of degree. Rumors were considered not untrustworthy but simply less likely to be true.¹¹ Rumors are not necessarily whimsical notions believed by marginal people; as two psychologists have argued, they “sometimes provide a broader interpretation of various puzzling features of the environment, and so play a prominent part in the intellectual drive to render the surrounding world intelligible.”¹² People tend to selectively reduce uncertainty by transmitting rumors; research indicates that they only do so when the topic is relevant to them.¹³ A historian of colonial India has even suggested that the presence of rumors can be detected in any premodern or early modern revolt: “Rumour is both a *universal* and *necessary* carrier of insurgency in any pre-industrial, pre-literate society.”¹⁴

In the Americas the rumor of a royally sanctioned emancipation did not appear first in Barbados in 1816, nor was it laid to rest after revolt in Jamaica had been brutally suppressed in 1832. What stirred the slaves into action was the complement to the rumored emancipation decree—the idea that local authorities or slave owners withheld the freedom, that they knew

¹⁰ John Thornton has argued that rebelling slaves did not intend to topple slavery as a system: Thornton, “Africa and Abolitionism,” in *Who Abolished Slavery: Slave Revolts and Abolitionism: A Debate with João Pedro Marques*, ed. Seymour Drescher and Pieter C. Emmer (New York, 2010), 93–102, esp. 99. For the argument that slaves did not use the rights of man to further their cause, see Wim Klooster, “The Rising Expectations of Free and Enslaved Blacks in the Greater Caribbean,” in *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions, 1795–1800*, ed. Klooster and Gert Oostindie (Leiden, 2011), 57–74, esp. 59–60.

¹¹ Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News from the Drum to the Satellite* (New York, 1988), 36–37.

¹² Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York, 1947), 38.

¹³ Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, *Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches* (Washington, D.C., 2007), 73.

¹⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), 251.

about the decree but went out of their way to suppress or hide it. The son of a freed black man in New Granada (present-day Colombia) reportedly even claimed that he had seen the royal decree that was concealed in the capital city. The slaveholders stole the document, or so the story ran, so that the slaves would never know the truth.¹⁵

This belief was not as far-fetched as it may seem. The reactions in France to the revolutionary turmoil that began in 1789 show how right the enslaved were in assuming that what was good news for them would not be publicized in the colonies. Even the news about the storming of the Bastille and the following chain of events had at first been kept from France's New World territories. Slaves arriving in France from Saint Domingue were sent back immediately, before they heard about the revolution. Captains of ships leaving France for the colony were not allowed to carry any mail. The text of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in particular was regarded as dangerous.¹⁶ The decree of May 15, 1791, that allowed all taxpaying adult males born of free parents on both sides to vote, however watered down, was deemed so dangerous that merchants in all major French ports were paralyzed with fear. Authorities in one department temporarily suspended the departure of ships to the colonies to prevent them from carrying "incendiary letters." But of course the news could not be stopped.¹⁷

Once hope was aroused, it was hard to defeat. Slaves often ignored the authorities' or planters' denial of the existence of a liberty decree. During the Baptist War in Jamaica (1831–32), one missionary vehemently dismissed the rumor, telling slaves that although some wicked people had told them

¹⁵ Renée Soulodre-La France, "Socially Not So Dead! Slave Identities in Bourbon Nueva Granada," *Colonial Latin American Review* 10, no. 1 (2001): 87–103, esp. 94. The dynamic is similar to that of some twentieth-century prison riots in the United States, which occurred after reform from above had met with obstruction on the part of correctional officers. In these cases, however, the reforms were not imagined but had indeed been mandated by higher authorities: Jack A. Goldstone and Bert Useem, "Prison Riots as Microrevolutions: An Extension of State-Centered Theories of Revolution," *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 4 (January 1999): 985–1029, esp. 1006–7.

¹⁶ [P. J.] Laborie, *Réflexions sommaires adressées à la France et à la colonie de S. Domingue* ([Paris, 1789?]), 4–5n; *Observations De M. de Cocherel, Député de Saint-Domingue, à l'Assemblée Nationale, sur la demande des Mulâtres* (Paris, [1789]), 11–12; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 77. Another reason for authorities in France to refuse entry to slaves was the Freedom Principle, according to which each enslaved person who set foot in France became automatically free. Slaves themselves were also prohibited at times to travel from or to the colonies. See Sue Peabody, "There Are No Slaves in France": *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford, 1996), 5.

¹⁷ *Journal général politique, de littérature, et de commerce*, June 16, 1791; *Délibération Des quatre Comités réunis de Constitution, de Marine, d'Agriculture & Commerce & des colonies: Du 12 septembre 1791* ([Paris], 1791), 3, 11; Pierre-Victor, baron Malouet, *Opinion de M. Malouet, sur la Législation des Colonies, relativement à l'état des personnes et au régime intérieur* (Paris, n.d.), 14. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

that the king had set them free, that news was “false as Hell.”¹⁸ And yet he found that “the idea of freedom had so intoxicated their minds as to nullify all I said.”¹⁹ Apparently, some slaves overcame their natural inhibitions regarding taking up arms in the belief that the king had ordered his soldiers not to fire on enslaved people fighting for their freedom.²⁰

Parliament, seconded by the king, did abolish slavery in the British colonies in 1833. The law stipulated that by the following year, the enslaved would become apprentices, indentured to their former owners. Not until 1840 would all ex-slaves be free. That freedom did not immediately follow emancipation seemed incongruous to the apprentices, especially those who believed that the king was mainly responsible. In Saint Kitts, Dominica, and Trinidad, former slaves claimed the king had liberated them. In their view, introducing the apprenticeship system was their masters’ strategy of obstructing the royal will. After all, apprentices in Trinidad said, the king was wealthy enough to buy the freedom of all slaves and would not make them only half free.²¹ The tendency of enslaved blacks in the Americas to attribute the liberty decree to the king at times led monarchs to respond. On June 3, 1831, British king William IV issued a proclamation that began, “Whereas it has been represented to us that the slaves in some of our West-India colonies and of our possessions on the continent of South America, have been erroneously led to believe that orders have been sent out by us for their emancipation,” and went on to warn the slaves that by engaging in acts of insubordination they would lose his protection.²²

Historically, rumors involving tacit or explicit royal approval of popular action have not been confined to slave populations. In early modern Europe, crowds frequently swung into action after receiving encouragement from authorities—or what they believed to be encouragement, even if mis-

¹⁸ Baptist Missionaries, *A Narrative of Recent Events Connected with the Baptist Mission in this Island*. . . (Kingston, Jamaica, 1833), 29, quoted in Mary Reckord, “The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831,” *Past and Present*, no. 40 (July 1968): 108–25, esp. 116, quoted in Richard Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, vol. 2, *Blacks in Rebellion* (Mona, Jamaica, 1985), 271. (The capitalization of “Hell” was introduced by Reckord.)

¹⁹ John Howard Hinton, *Memoir of William Knibb* (London, 1847), 118, quoted in Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, 2: 271. (Hart accidentally introduced a typo to “intoxicated” that has not been reproduced here.)

²⁰ Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, 2: 268–69.

²¹ Gad Heuman, “Riots and Resistance in the Caribbean at the Moment of Freedom,” *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 21, no. 2 (August 2000): 135–49, esp. 137, 139.

²² Quoted in Hart, *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery*, 2: 246. Fifty years before, Charles III of Spain had felt obliged to write to his *alcaldes ordinarios* (bailiffs) in Socorro, New Granada, ordering them to tell the slaves that their belief in an emancipatory decree was illusory. Royal provision from King Charles III, Sept. 12, 1781, Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, available at http://www.bibliotecanacional.gov.co/recursos_user/digitalizados/rm_372_132-133v.pdf.

takenly. Invoking the king's authority, "they might feel they were carrying out the law, not violating it—such a feeling of legitimacy could help overcome many inhibitions."²³ In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, peasants in Europe frequently rebelled in the belief that the king was on their side or even wanted to free them from certain obligations. Their lords and the local authorities, however, did not go along. In imperial Russia rumors about the emancipation of serfs circulated with great regularity, with the tsar as the source of freedom and the nobility as the camp of evil. This myth, whose chronological span was comparable to that of the slaves' imagined royal emancipation, prompted many peasants to take action. Even as serfdom was finally outlawed, a new myth sprang up to the effect that the former serfs would receive free land without any strings attached. Strikingly similar was the so-called Christmas insurrection scare of 1865, when rumors spread throughout the U.S. South that the federal government would distribute the planters' land among the ex-slaves. Yves-Marie Bercé, who has studied European revolts in depth, has pointed out that such rumors were both "reassuring" and "violently subversive." They simultaneously suggested "the permanence of a supreme justice," guaranteed by a Solomon-like king, and the need to remove the bad advisers and everyone else blocking the introduction of just laws.²⁴

²³ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 76 (quotation), 75. During the massive Peruvian revolt led by Túpac Amaru in 1780–81, many of Túpac's followers apparently thought that the king of Spain himself had come down on their side. Many professed that they had joined the movement after learning that Túpac had obtained a royal *cédula* (decree) authorizing him to do away with *corregidores* (provincial magistrates appointed over Indian towns) and end abuses. Scarlett O'Phelan Godoy, "El mito de la 'independencia concedida': Los programas políticos del siglo XVIII y del temprano XIX en el Perú y Alto Perú (1730–1814)," in *Independencia y revolución (1780–1840)*, ed. Alberto Flores Galindo (Lima, [1987]), 145–99, esp. 165–66. The argument that rebellious crowds derived imagined support from authorities is discussed in Georges Lefebvre, *La grande peur de 1789* (Paris, 1932); George Rudé, "La taxation populaire de mai 1775 à Paris et dans la région parisienne," *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 28, no. 143 (April–June 1956): 139–79; Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York, 1991), 99; Cynthia A. Bouton, *The Flour War: Gender, Class, and Community in Late Ancien Régime French Society* (University Park, Pa., 1993), 169–71.

²⁴ Yves-Marie Bercé makes his argument in Bercé, *Revolt and Revolution in Early Modern Europe: An Essay on the History of Political Violence*, trans. Joseph Bergin (New York, 1987), 29 (quotations). For revolts by peasants featuring the belief in a king who supported their causes, see Daniel Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston, 1976), 6, 24; Jerome Blum, *The End of the Old Order in Rural Europe* (Princeton, N.J., 1978), 335; Leonid Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars* (Cambridge, 2008), 127, 130–44. The 1865 rumors in the U.S. South are dealt with in Steven Hahn, "'Extravagant Expectations' of Freedom: Rumour, Political Struggle, and the Christmas Insurrection Scare of 1865 in the American South," *Past and Present*, no. 157 (November 1997): 122–58. For the general appeal of similar rumors, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn., 1990), 148.

The notion of a just, collaborative king was not necessarily subversive. In European history kings regularly circulated incognito to guarantee that justice was served, or so people thought. A seventeenth-century English chapbook asserts that “it was the custom of King Henry VIII to walk late in the night into the City disguised, to observe how the constables and watch performed their duty.”²⁵ In the Russian version, the tsar wandered around as a pilgrim and became aware of the serfs’ sufferings. Once he was back in the capital and in full possession of his powers, he delivered the entire people from bondage and oppression. Usually, however, royal support extended to more moderate acts of subversion. In New Spain numerous people saw Spanish king Ferdinand VII, whom Napoléon Bonaparte had imprisoned, move about at the time of the revolt led by Father Miguel Hidalgo; some reported the king’s presence “in a veiled coach,” spurring on the rebel leader.²⁶ During the French Revolution, King Louis XVI showed up in person to carry out justice in Aquitaine. In the first months of 1790, the monarch was said to have been spotted in the town of Quercy. In peasant dress and wooden shoes, he sat in church on the bench of a seigneur who had disgracefully driven him away, which induced the king to order all his subjects of the Third Estate to burn the benches.²⁷ And the theme was not confined to Aquitaine. In various parts of southwestern France, the king, sometimes in conjunction with the National Assembly, was said to have desired “that everything be equal,” decreeing the destruction of symbols of hierarchy such as church benches, weathervanes, and titles that established seigneurial rights.²⁸

It was quite common in European history for people to believe that hidden kings would suddenly reappear, thus pitting legitimacy against legality. Most kings were in some type of suspended state. A prominent belief during the People’s Crusades was that Charlemagne had never died but was asleep, either in his palace in Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) or inside a mountain, waiting for the right moment to return and defeat the forces of Islam.²⁹ In England

²⁵ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 152.

²⁶ Archivo General de la Nación, Criminal, vol. 454, no exp. no., no pagination, 1811, quoted in Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810–1821* (Stanford, Calif., 2001), 464 (quotation); Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, 6.

²⁷ Jean Boutier, “Jacqueries en pays croquant: Les révoltes paysannes en Aquitaine (décembre 1789–mars 1790),” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 34, no. 4 (July–August 1979): 760–86, esp. 768.

²⁸ Archives nationales, D/XXIX bis/40, quoted in Hubert Delpont, *La victoire des Croquants: Les révoltes paysannes du Grand Sud-Ouest pendant la Révolution (1789–1799)* (Nérac, France, 2002), 126–27 (quotation, 127).

²⁹ This European legend may correspond to the Asian myth of a hidden emir. See Alain Milhou, “La chauve-souris, le nouveau David et le roi caché (trois images de l’empereur des derniers temps dans le monde ibérique: XIIIe–XVIIe s.),” *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* 18, no. 1 (1982): 61–78, esp. 75. See, for Charlemagne, Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (New York, 1970), 71–73.

King Arthur, “the past and future king,” would emerge from a “hollow hill” and build a realm of justice.³⁰ Holy Roman Emperor Frederick (1122–90) was said to be asleep in a cave in Thuringia. His awakening would mark the start of Germany’s restoration to greatness. In Portuguese history the deeply mourned King Sebastian (1554–78), who had perished young battling a Moroccan army in northern Africa, became the source of hope in the country’s darkest hours. Now asleep, Sebastian would one day arise and unite the world culturally and spiritually under Portuguese leadership.³¹

Although the theme of a sleeping monarch who would soon wake up is not present in slave revolts in the Americas, slaves did at times expect a king or queen to arrive from Africa as their armed liberator or, alternatively, to order their emancipation. Blacks in Martinique in 1768 believed the rumor that the king of Angola was about to arrive with a strong army and take them back to Africa. Slaves in a small town near Popayán, New Granada, revolted in 1810, when a black queen had supposedly arrived from Africa, bringing freedom. Finally, during the Aponte rebellion in Cuba, two years later, slaves of the Kongo nation referred to the king of Kongo, who had supposedly sent letters ordering the slaves’ freedom to the island. What makes the latter case fascinating is that other slaves during the same revolt attributed the decree to the king of England and still others to the king of Spain. The conviction that an African monarch was the source of freedom suggests that a distinction could be made between creolized blacks loyal to a liberating king from Europe and recently enslaved blacks from Africa who paid allegiance to one from their native continent. The rumor about the role of the king of Kongo during the Aponte revolt, for example, circulated among Kongo slaves. On the other hand, it was a Kongo-born slave who, repeating what others had told him, credited England with providing freedom for all the slaves.³²

Kingship was evidently important in Africans’ understanding of the world. Historian Elizabeth W. Kiddy has argued that “African leaders, whether chiefs of small polities or kings of large states, held important ritual positions that mediated several levels of social, religious, and political relationships. Central African leaders were on the top of a very well understood hierarchy that defined a person’s position in the society of the

³⁰ Burke, *Popular Culture*, 153.

³¹ Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 143; Burke, *Popular Culture*, 153.

³² Julius Sherrard Scott III, “The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986), 117–18; Matt D. Childs, *The 1812 Aponte Rebellion in Cuba and the Struggle against Atlantic Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006), 160–61; Marcela Echeverri, “Popular Royalists and Revolution in Colombia: Nationalism and Empire, 1780–1820” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2008), 190.

living and also included an unseen world that extended to the ancestors and/or spirits and to the unborn as well as animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Leaders mediated, by means of ritual action, between society and the natural environment and between the living and the dead.”³³ The African “kings” elected in the Americas on occasion assumed this mediating function. Throughout the Americas, black communities—and sometimes individual nations—annually chose their own kings and queens, followed by parades and festivities.

Rebel slaves frequently described their own leaders as kings, in whom they often had a blind faith. Such kings led their followers into battle from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. The only reason why many slaves, such as those in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Cuba, joined rebellions in the first place was their commitment to their captains or kings from Africa. These leaders acted in line with one type of African monarchical rule that John K. Thornton has identified, that of the conqueror king who exercised absolute power.³⁴ It was this conqueror king who could lead his followers into battle.

Although it is clear that many of the Africans arriving in the Americas were monarchists, it is difficult to establish whether these same men and women were the ones who believed in the liberating king from Europe or if that conviction was confined to Creole slaves. As A. J. R. Russell-Wood argued for Brazil, “It is intriguing to speculate if their attitudes toward the Portuguese monarchy reflected African attitudes toward divine kinship, or

³³ Elizabeth W. Kiddy, “Who Is the King of Congo? A New Look at African and Afro-Brazilian Kings in Brazil,” in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda M. Heywood (Cambridge, 2002), 153–82 (quotation, 156).

³⁴ Nineteenth-century examples of rebelling slaves led by “kings” include a conspiracy in 1822 and a revolt in 1838, both in Bahia, Brazil: Jose Alipio Goulart, *Da fuga ao suicídio: Aspectos de rebeldia dos escravos no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1972), 161, 231. For Cuba, see Manuel Barcia, *Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations, 1808–1848* (Baton Rouge, La., 2008), 43. These kings tended to be members of the black militia: Matt D. Childs, “‘The Defects of Being a Black Creole’: The Degrees of African Identity in the Cuban *Cabildos de Nación*, 1790–1820,” in *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Jane G. Landers and Barry M. Robinson (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 2006), 209–45, esp. 222. Besides the conqueror king, the alternative African model was that of the blacksmith king, whose governance was based on consensus and consent. John K. Thornton, “‘I Am the Subject of the King of Congo’: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 181–214, esp. 189–91. Maroon communities were also often led by “kings,” some of whom even claimed to have been kings or royalty in Africa. See Richard Price, “Introduction: Maroons and Their Communities,” in *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, ed. Price, 2d ed. (Baltimore, 1979), 1–30, esp. 20; Marina de Mello e Souza, *Reis negros no Brasil escravista: História da festa de coroação de rei congo* (Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 2002), 239–40; Jane Landers, “Leadership and Authority in Maroon Settlements in Spanish America and Brazil,” in *Africa and the Americas: Interconnections during the Slave Trade*, ed. José C. Curto and Renée Souldre-La France (Trenton, N.J., 2005), 173–84.

whether such persons of African descent had become acculturated to accept European notions of the moral responsibilities of monarchs toward their subjects and had learnt how to make use of a system in which the monarch remained the supreme source of justice with a direct relationship to his or her subjects.”³⁵

The latter argument has been propounded by historian Brendan McConville, who contends that slaves in British America could see the king as a distant but powerful ally. They learned of the king’s benevolence through royal celebrations and the administration of the king’s justice in courts of law, especially in cases where the king decided against their masters. In view of their imagined alliance, royal decrees received added force, as can be seen in the case of the workers in Cuba’s El Cobre mine, who had become royal slaves after the king assumed direct responsibility over the mine. Their belief in the power of royal edicts knew no bounds.³⁶

Perhaps those allying themselves with the European king had shed their African monarchism or that of their ancestors. João José Reis has remarked that in none of the Brazilian episodes in which the European ruler was credited with abolition were insurgent slaves led by their own “kings.”³⁷ Still, in other parts of the Americas, slave revolts that featured both the monarchist rumor and the election of African kings did occur (including those in Saint Domingue in 1791 and Demerara in 1823), although it is impossible to establish if the same slaves both believed the rumor and followed their African leaders.

MONARCHS WERE NOT ALWAYS the ones expected to lead the enslaved into a realm of liberty. The same was true at times for other powerful white leaders. The slaves who started the Haitian Revolution provide one example. In one version of the events, a slave addressed delegates from many plantations on August 14, 1791, reading aloud public documents that announced that the king and the National Assembly had granted them three free days per week—a variation on the theme of full freedom.³⁸ Since the white settlers

³⁵ A. J. R. Russell-Wood, “‘Acts of Grace’: Portuguese Monarchs and Their Subjects of African Descent in Eighteenth-Century Brazil,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 32, no. 2 (May 2000): 307–32 (quotation, 330).

³⁶ Díaz, *The Virgin, the King*, 303–4; Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006), 175–76.

³⁷ João José Reis, “Quilombos e revoltas escravas no Brasil,” *Revista USP* (São Paulo) 28 (December 1995–February 1996): 14–39, esp. 33.

³⁸ J. Ph. Garran [de Coulon], *Rapport sur les troubles de Saint-Domingue. . .* (Paris, [1798]) 2: 193, 211–12. This rumor first surfaced in the south of the colony in January 1791, motivated some slaves to take up arms in August, and lingered on in the following months. Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1990), 268; John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York, 2006), 230. The three-day variant surfaced in Martinique in 1789 and 1831, Dominica in 1791, Tobago in 1807, and both Demerara

opposed this new decree, most of the enslaved preferred to wait for troops to come from France to enforce the measure, but some wanted to start the war against the whites before the troops disembarked. They rose up in arms.

Likewise, insurgent slaves in Puerto Rico in 1812 thought that the extraordinary Cortes that was in session in Spain had ended slavery.³⁹ One of the insurgent leaders in Jamaica in 1831–32 declared after the revolt was suppressed that he had been convinced that the slaves had been freed by an order of king and Parliament: he had read in newspapers and heard from others that the English people were on the slaves' side, even saying that the blacks should fight for their freedom. "This gave us great encouragement, especially when we saw that neither the King nor any one in the Parliament said no it was not to be given to us."⁴⁰ Finally, during the U.S. presidential election campaign of 1836, some slaves in North Carolina seemed to believe that Martin Van Buren would decree the slaves' freedom once he was elected. Four years later, Georgia slaves expected William Henry Harrison to do the same.⁴¹ One could argue that the absence of a monarch in the United States precluded the possibility of a royalist rumor within its boundaries. Yet even there, the enslaved at times imagined monarchical justice. Harriet Jacobs relates how one slave woman begged her to read the newspaper to her. "She said her husband told her that the black people had sent word to the queen of 'Merica [America] that they were all slaves; that she didn't believe it, and went to Washington city to see the president about it. They quarrelled; she drew her sword upon him, and swore that he should help her to make them all free."⁴²

and Trinidad in 1823. Deposition of Lieutenant-Colonel John Thomas Leahy, Nov. 5, 1823, in *An Authentic Copy of the Minutes of Evidence on the Trial of John Smith, a Missionary in Demerara*. . . . (London, 1824), 90; Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 225, 252–53; David Geggus, "The Slaves and Free Coloreds of Martinique during the Age of the French and Haitian Revolutions: Three Moments of Resistance," in *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, ed. Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman (Gainesville, Fla., 1996), 280–301, esp. 289; Caroline Oudin-Bastide, *Des nègres et des juges: La scandaleuse affaire Spoutourne (1831–1834)* (n.p., 2008), 62; James Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule: Power and Subversion in the British Atlantic during the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2012), 263.

³⁹ Guillermo A. Baralt, *Esclavos rebeldes: Conspiraciones y sublevaciones de esclavos en Puerto Rico (1795–1873)* (Río Piedras, P.R., 1982), 21–22. Another insurrection that broke out a few months later in Santo Domingo was also based on false rumors that Spain had abolished slavery and the local authorities had withheld the news: *ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the House of Assembly, 1832, Jamaica Archives, quoted in Verene A. Shepherd, "'We All Thought the King Was on Our Side': Voices of the Enslaved in the Post-Slave Trade Abolition Era in Jamaica," *Arts Journal* 3, nos. 1–2 (March 2007): 26–46 (quotation, 29).

⁴¹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 59.

⁴² [Harriet Jacobs], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child (Boston, 1861), 69–70 (quotation, 70).

SLAVE REVOLTS WERE DIVERSE in motives, settings, and organization. What many of them had in common was not the protagonists' generic desire to be free but their belief in a powerful king's thwarted decree. Nor was this belief specific to the age of revolutions. In New Jersey's Somerset County in 1734, an inebriated slave told a white resident that "he was as good a Man as himself, and that in a little time he should be convinced of it."⁴³ His interlocutor warned the authorities, who rounded up thirty conspirators, executed two men, and punished the others by whipping them or cutting their ears off. The tipsy slave, who paid for his indiscretion with his life, had prefaced his bold statement by accusing the English of keeping slaves against the positive order of King George to set them free. The king, he added, had sent the order to the governor of New York, whose attempt to introduce it was thwarted by the council and the aldermen.⁴⁴ Fifteen years later and two thousand miles to the south, alarming news reached the lieutenant general of the province of Caracas. Slaves in the capital city intended to come to his house to inquire about a royal decree that had granted them their freedom. The next day, Caracas's municipal council heard that rural slaves were planning to arm themselves and walk to the capital. The authorities moved quickly, prevented an insurrection, executed the ringleader, and jailed many insurgents. Like their urban counterparts, all rural slaves who had been involved were eventually condemned to one or two hundred lashes and the loss of their left ear. Their confessions revealed that they also believed—apparently without exception—in a hidden royal emancipation decree.⁴⁵

Although its presence in slave communities is hard to document for the period before 1789, I have found evidence for the mythical emancipation decree at work in slave revolts from at least 1669 onward. In other words, the rumor was a potent catalyst for two centuries, from the charter generation of the enslaved in the British and French colonies right up to the completion of slave emancipation in most of the West Indies. This widespread presence appears to confirm Hilary Beckles's argument that most blacks did not recognize the legitimacy of their enslavement as well as D. A. Dunkley's notion of slave freedom—"the knowledge and conviction of enslaved people that they were free."⁴⁶ In itself, the belief in the decree

⁴³ Quoted in Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), 89–90 (quotation, 90).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Lucas Guillermo Castillo Lara, *La aventura fundacional de los isleños: Panaquiere y Juan Francisco de León* (Caracas, 1983), 273–82.

⁴⁶ D. A. Dunkley, *Agency of the Enslaved: Jamaica and the Culture of Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Lanham, Md., 2013), 1 (quotation); Hilary Beckles, "Caribbean Anti-Slavery: The Self-Liberation Ethos of Enslaved Blacks," *Journal of Caribbean History* 22, nos. 1–2 (1988): 1–19.

was therefore no new element, but since it was awakened or triggered much more often by news from overseas after 1789, slave revolts occurred with greater frequency than before.

How was it possible for this particular rumor to become established within the horizons of so many slave cultures from Bahia to Bermuda, New Jersey to New Granada, and Veracruz to Venezuela?⁴⁷ One potential explanation for the ubiquitous appearance of the rumor—at least in the Greater Caribbean; it surfaced much less frequently in the thirteen colonies that became the United States and in Brazil—is that it traveled. The numerous Caribbean incarnations seem to suggest introduction from a nearby location, especially in certain decades such as the 1730s or the 1790s. The interconnectedness of the Caribbean Sea could have enabled the dissemination of the rumor by sailors throughout the region, from ships to pubs and from pubs to plantations. The problem with this theory is the lack of proof. In the numerous interrogations conducted in the wake of crushed rebellions, it was rare for people to come forward mentioning sailors or ships as vectors of the good news. Admittedly, in 1775 a rumor circulated in the French Antilles that general emancipation was coming, planned by the French government for all blacks and mulattoes. The French authorities were convinced that the rumor originated in the ports of France, home to many current and former slaves. But even in this case, no slave testimony confirmed that the rumor had been introduced from the outside. The only three unambiguous episodes for which evidence has survived took place in Virginia in 1730, in Venezuela in 1749, and in Puerto Rico in 1812. In Virginia a white sailor may have set off the rumor by telling slaves “that the King of England had ordered they should be all set free.”⁴⁸ During the Venezuelan uprising, a sergeant of the free blacks repeated a story he had heard from a black from Cádiz, Spain: that a bishop who was coming from Spain, escorted by four black crusaders on horseback, would arrive carrying the emancipation decree. Later an enslaved man claimed under interrogation that the spirit of a recently deceased member of the municipal council had ridden a white horse to Spain and returned with the liberty decree. And in Puerto Rico, a ship’s carpenter (probably a liberated slave) from a

⁴⁷ For Bermuda (1669 and 1682), see Virginia Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda, 1616–1782* (Columbia, Mo., 1999), 193–95; for Veracruz (1735), see Patrick J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development* (Austin, Tex., 1991), 97. Carroll estimates that close to two thousand slaves were involved in this uprising in the end, although another historian mentions that five hundred slaves joined the rebellion: Adriana Naveda Chávez-Hita, “La lucha de los negros esclavos en las haciendas azucareras de Córdoba en el siglo XVIII,” *Anuario de Centro de Estudios Históricos* (Jalapa) 2 (1980): 76–85, esp. 81–82.

⁴⁸ [Philadelphia] *American Weekly Mercury*, Nov. 12–19, 1730, quoted in McConville, *King’s Three Faces*, 177 (quotation); Gabriel Debien, “Les affranchissements aux Antilles françaises aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles,” *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 23 (1966): 1177–203, esp. 1197–98.

vessel arriving from Cádiz was held responsible for propagating the belief that the Cortes in Spain had given all blacks their liberty.⁴⁹

It is, however, much more likely that the rumor, as a rule, did not come from afar but originated locally. As the lack of variety from place to place indicates, the monarchical rumor's construction did not require many building blocks. The only ingredients needed were the decree, the liberating king, the deserving slaves, and the obstructive local powers. Like in tsarist Russia, therefore, the rumor was remarkably stable. Once planted in an area with an enslaved population, the imagined emancipation rumor was not bound to die or fade away after suppression of the revolts to which rumors often gave rise. The belief hibernated in a variety of colonial theaters. In Bermuda, the site of the first recorded case of the monarchist rumor (1669), the story resurfaced thirteen years later, probably after an off-hand remark by the master of a visiting ship. Martinique provides another tantalizing example. As we have seen, in 1768 slaves on Martinique told each other that the king of Angola would soon arrive with a formidable army to free them and lead them back to their lands. Twenty-one years later, on the same island, rumors circulated of an African king who had bought the freedom of all slaves and planned for their return to Africa.⁵⁰

The town of Chaparral in interior New Granada also experienced the same rumor twice. First, in 1804, slaveholders were alarmed because slaves planned to go to the capital city of Bogotá to claim the royal decree. Seven years later, as the independence movement gained steam, slaves cited the hidden decree again, not only crediting the king but also referring to the Supreme Junta in Bogotá as the author of the decree.⁵¹ It is not impossible that the rumor that helped fuel the Jamaica revolt in 1831–32 had also become rooted there in an earlier period. During a slave conspiracy in 1791, some elite slaves were overheard saying “that the King of England wished Slaves in Jamaica to be on the same footing but that their owners were

⁴⁹ Héctor García Chuecos, “Una insurrección de negros en los días de la colonia: Los esclavos de la provincia de Caracas en Venezuela, tratan de levantarse para obtener su libertad,” *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 29 (June 1950): 67–76, esp. 71; José Marcial Ramos Guédez, *Contribución a la historia de las culturas negras en Venezuela colonial* (Caracas, 2001), 459–60; Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery, Freedom, and Abolition in Latin America and the Atlantic World* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 2011), 91.

⁵⁰ Analogously, clothing workers in East Anglia and the west of England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries expressed the same notions about justice in riots separated by long intervals: E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1993), 226–27. For Bermuda, see Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 193–95. For Martinique, see Geggus, “Slaves and Free Coloreds of Martinique,” 282–87; Sue Peabody, “‘A Dangerous Zeal’: Catholic Missions to Slaves in the French Antilles, 1635–1800,” *French Historical Studies* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 53–90, esp. 89.

⁵¹ Mario Aguilera Peña and Renán Vega Cantor, *Ideal democrático y revuelta popular: Bosquejo histórico de la mentalidad política popular en Colombia, 1781–1948* (Bogotá, 1991), 74; Soulodre-La France, *Colonial Latin American Review* 10: 94–95.

against it.”⁵² Finally, the revolt of 1823 in Demerara may also have involved a rumor with local roots. Eleven years before, a white man who was labeled as insane had told the blacks “that they were free, and that ships were coming from England to carry them away.”⁵³ Most evidence seems to suggest that the emancipation rumor occurred in tandem with slave revolts or conspiracies, since it was instrumental in bringing these about. Here, however, are a few examples in which the rumor hung around long after the uprising had been prevented or suppressed. We may assume that these cases are no more than the tip of the iceberg. In various locales, then, the rumor must have been transformed into a tale, a narrative that became part of the folklore of those places, known to untold members of each community.

Healers may have been especially instrumental in spreading the monarchical rumor or keeping it alive. Believed to have access to supernatural forces, healers did much more than cure illnesses in slave communities. Their abilities extended to divination, finding lost property, righting wrongs, and protecting against the forces of evil. Since they were more mobile than their enslaved colleagues, free healers likely picked up the monarchical rumor and carried it to plantations where it was unknown, using the rumor to their own advantage. In his biography of African-born healer Domingos Álvares, James H. Sweet discusses the legend of the treasures that Moors had hidden in the Portuguese countryside upon their expulsion from the country. As he traveled through southern Portugal, Álvares learned the details of the legend and integrated them into his divinatory practice. The monarchical rumor could have served a similar function for New World diviners such as free black healer Cocofio, who seems to have disseminated the royalist emancipation rumor in the vicinity of Coro in western Venezuela prior to his death in the early 1790s. He was described as a man without any formal occupation who had roamed around the area for many years. The same profile was ascribed to Josef Luciano Guambo, a free black in interior New Granada who allegedly lacked an occupation and wandered as a vagabond. Slaveholders accused him of inciting slaves to flee to the viceregal capital of Santa Fe de Bogotá and to ask the royal ministers to see the royal decree that had supposedly freed them.⁵⁴

⁵² Quoted in Mullin, *Africa in America*, 222.

⁵³ Thomas Rain, *The Life and Labours of John Wray, Pioneer Missionary in British Guiana* (London, 1892), 76–77 (quotation, 76).

⁵⁴ Healers in slave communities are discussed in Jerome S. Handler, “Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, circa 1650 to 1834,” *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 74, nos. 1–2 (2000): 57–90. Álvares’s life story is the topic of James H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2011), 203. For Cocofio, see testimony of Manuel de Carrera, Valle de Curimagua, June 2, 1795, in *Documentos de la insurrección de José Leonardo Chirinos* (Caracas, 1994), 44–45. For Guambo, see Soulodre-La France, *Colonial Latin American Review* 10: 94.

Like healers, priests and other preachers may have been progenitors of the royal emancipation rumor. In South Carolina at the start of the American Revolution, authorities discovered a slave conspiracy that was triggered by a white man. The testimonies of the main rebel leaders pointed to a Scot called John Burnet who had allegedly been a longtime preacher to the blacks in the woods and other places. One of the accused slaves testified that another suspect had informed him that Burnet told his black listeners the new king possessed a book, which the old king had received from God, according to which he was to set the blacks free. In Saint Pierre, Martinique, rebelling slaves in the summer of 1789 identified a white Capuchin friar named Jean-Baptiste as the source of the rumor. This *curé des nègres*, responsible for the black worshippers in his parish, had a large following among independent (or semi-independent) urban slaves and was described by one of the town's magistrates as an antislavery activist. It was to him that the slaves attributed the story that the king of Angola, accompanied by a large army, would soon liberate them and guide them back to Africa.⁵⁵

TO ASSERT, AS I HAVE, that the emancipation rumor was usually forged locally rather than being introduced from abroad is not to deny the importance of a locale's connections to the outside world. The imagined royal emancipation decree was likely to surface in response to both simple regulatory policies and sweeping changes in the European mother countries. In line with James C. Scott's argument that "a powerful and suppressed desire for relief from the burdens of subordination seems . . . to strongly color" the way the oppressed interpret events, slaves often assigned meaning to messages from Europe in self-serving ways.⁵⁶ Even the arrival of a new official could spark the monarchist rumor-cum-revolt, as it did in Virginia in 1730, when former governor Alexander Spotswood's return to the colony led slaves to speculate that he brought an order from the king to set all slaves who were Christians free. Spotswood must have earned a reputation among the slaves for his endeavor to stop white violence against blacks and his role in prosecuting the white murderer of an enslaved woman.⁵⁷

Slaves elsewhere also read signs into published or publicized news, often jumping to hoped-for conclusions, as examples from before the age of revolutions show. In Antioquia, near the town of Medellín, New Granada,

⁵⁵ In South Carolina John Burnet denied having any knowledge of the book and was released. Jim Piecuch, *Three Peoples, One King: Loyalists, Indians, and Slaves in the Revolutionary South, 1775–1782* (Columbia, S.C., 2008), 78–79. The Martinique revolt of 1789 is discussed by Geggus, "Slaves and Free Coloreds of Martinique," 282–83; Peabody, *French Historical Studies* 25: 89.

⁵⁶ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 147.

⁵⁷ Anthony S. Parent Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003), 159–60.

a slave named Lorenzo explained to his interrogators in 1768 how the rumor that had induced a few slaves to run away had come about. Inside the mine where he worked, his owner spoke with a man who asserted that “they are taking our slaves away, that His Majesty issued a royal decree regarding them.”⁵⁸ His owner responded that it was a lie and that he had not heard such news. Lorenzo also related that two fellow blacks had heard from a mulatto slave named Antonio that the governor had already released all his own slaves from bondage, keeping only one man and one woman for his service. Antonio also knew that his owner had visited the governor twice to keep possession of his slaves. The slaves who ran away must have combined unrelated events to conclude that freedom was forthcoming. Antonio, for example, may have mistaken the gold his owner brought to the governor for ransom money, whereas it might actually have been a bribe of some kind. The decree in the conversation that Lorenzo overheard may have discussed not emancipation but rather the king’s decision to claim for himself the slaves that had belonged to the Jesuit order, whose members had been expelled from New Granada a few months before. In 1773 the slaves revolting in Anacaro, Panama, and those who threatened to do so in nearby Toro, demanding the implementation of the royal liberty decree, undoubtedly confused the emancipation decree for another recently issued one that recognized and regulated the slaves’ free Sunday.⁵⁹

The tumultuous era in Atlantic history that started in 1789 offered much more room than before for slaves’ wishful thinking. The hidden emancipation decree featured in at least twenty actual or attempted slave revolts in the period 1789–1832, as David Patrick Geggus has revealed. It was not only the revolutionary climate that stirred slaves into action during these years. Reformism, amelioration, and antislavery also had this effect. The rebellious consequences of reformist policies were obviously unintentional. Those in power, after all, often perceive great endeavors differently than their subjects. The effect of reformist measures was often to awaken or give new strength to slaves’ belief in imminent freedom.⁶⁰ In Saint Domingue planters heard reports in December 1789 about the conviction of numerous black field hands that Louis XVI had set them free but that

⁵⁸ Report of José Barón de Cháves, governor of Antioquia, Jan. 16, 1768, 3v–4r, Colombia, Archivo General de la Nación, accessed at <http://negrosyesclavos.archivogeneral.gov.co/portal/apps/php/presentacion.kwe>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; Francisco Uriel Zuluaga Ramírez, *Cartago: La ciudad de los confines del Valle*, 2d ed. (Cali, Colombia, 2007), 83.

⁶⁰ Geggus discusses the revolts featuring the emancipation rumor in the context of all slave revolts and conspiracies in the period 1789–1815. Geggus, “Slavery, War, and Revolution,” 7–8. In such times of rapid changes, Yves-Marie Bercé has argued, “things happened as if ideas formulated for a very long time, but which had remained confined to the empyreum of untried verbiage, suddenly acquired a new urgency, and began to crystallise and proliferate.” Bercé, *Revolt and Revolution*, 11.

slaveholders had suppressed the news. The king, it was reported, had supposedly already marked the “day of jubilee.”⁶¹ A few months earlier, when the authorities of Martinique interrogated the slaves who had taken part in a conspiracy on that island, they received more specific information about the royal will. The rebels had received word from healers in the urban slave population that their distinguished friends in Paris had recently persuaded the king to free them. The opposition of their owners made it necessary to kill and burn to force concessions. In French Guiana slaves combined news emanating from France with small signs to conclude in late 1789 that they had been granted liberty. One slave was quoted as saying that the priest had received a large package of paper from France and that a recent local meeting, presumably of the planters and authorities, had been aimed at preventing the slaves from being freed.⁶²

The year 1789 also saw the introduction of a Spanish royal decree with far-reaching implications. King Charles IV’s decree of May 31 regulated master-slave relations, stipulating that slaves could not be forced to work before sunrise, after sunset, or on Catholic holidays and must be permitted two hours per day to tend their own provision grounds. Owners were required to encourage marriages among their slaves and to support those who were old and ill. The news about the slave code had a powerful effect: in various places it spawned the conviction that a royal emancipation decree had freed the slaves. At the same time, slaveholders in Caracas, Havana, New Granada, New Orleans, Quito, and Santo Domingo protested against the decree’s publication, which may have contributed to rebelliousness, since such behavior confirmed the idea that slaveholders suppressed the slaves’ legitimate freedom. In the end, metropolitan authorities sided with colonial slaveholders by repealing the code (although it was never formally revoked), no doubt dreading an uprising such as that in Saint Domingue. But by the early nineteenth century, the emancipation decree rumors had emerged again, thanks to the debates in the Spanish Cortes and the new constitution of Cádiz. The enslaved credited King Ferdinand VII with their liberation, although he was still in French custody. The growing tensions between Portugal and Brazil in light of the latter’s approaching independence found their expression in the notion among slaves in Itu, São Paulo, in 1821 that either Portugal’s Cortes or the king had proclaimed the end of slavery.⁶³

⁶¹ Archives Nationales de France, Fond des Colonies antérieures à 1815, C9A-162-23, Dec. 1, 1789, quoted in Clarence J. Munford and Michael Zeuske, “Black Slavery, Class Struggle, Fear and Revolution in St. Domingue and Cuba, 1785–1795,” *Journal of Negro History* 73, nos. 1–4 (Winter–Autumn 1988): 12–32 (quotation, 21).

⁶² Geggus, “Slaves and Free Coloreds of Martinique,” 282; Yves Benot, *Les Lumières, l’esclavage, la colonization*, ed. Roland Desné and Marcel Dorigny (Paris, 2005), 225.

⁶³ For the royal decree of 1789 and its impact, see Ildefonso Leal, “La aristocracia criolla venezolana y el código negrero de 1789,” *Revista de Historia* (Caracas) 2, no. 6

The activities of the Société des Amis des Noirs, the French abolitionist society, also influenced slave rebellions. Many rebellions were motivated—at least in part—by the belief that an emancipatory document had been introduced but was hidden. The slaves witnessed firsthand the fear that the abolitionists instilled in slaveholders. In particular, a letter the Société sent to all French *bailliages* (bailiwicks) responsible for the election of deputies in 1789, asking the Estates General to occupy themselves with the freedom of slaves, may have been instrumental in convincing the slaves of Martinique that slavery had been abolished in France. It is difficult, however, to disentangle the impact of the abolitionists from the events that shaped the French Revolution. As news about the events occurring in Paris coincided with tales about the Société's growing power, slaves in Martinique came to believe that the king and his advisers had proclaimed their freedom. They expected that emancipation would be proclaimed on Sunday, August 30, and, when the decree failed to materialize, slaves began to gather by the hundreds. Three hundred fled to the mountains, only to return within a few days.⁶⁴

The emancipation of all slaves in French-held colonies, as decreed by the Convention on 16 pluviôse, year 2 (February 4, 1794), was evidently welcomed in slave circles throughout the Greater Caribbean. Freedom suddenly appeared to be a realistic prospect. It is no coincidence that the following year, 1795, perhaps saw more slave revolts than any other. In the Spanish colony of Louisiana, for example, the Spanish king was credited with issuing the imaginary emancipation decree, but the colony's governor

([1961]: 61–81; Scott, "Common Wind," 147–57, esp. 153; Gloria García Rodríguez, *La esclavitud desde la esclavitud: La visión de los siervos* (Mexico City, 1996), 69–89; Manuel Lucena Salmoral, *Los códigos negros de la América española* (Alcalá, Spain, 1996), 108–19; Jean-Pierre Tardieu, *Noirs et Nouveaux Maîtres dans les "vallées sanglantes" de l'Équateur, 1778–1820* (Paris, 1997), 42–43; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004), 106–7; Consuelo Naranjo Orovio, "La amenaza haitiana, un miedo interesado: Poder y fomento de la población blanca en Cuba," in *El rumor de Haití en Cuba: Temor, raza y rebeldía, 1789–1844*, ed. María Dolores González-Ripoll et al. (Madrid, 2004), 83–178, esp. 89. For the complete text of the slave code, see Miguel Acosta Saignes, *Vida de los esclavos negros en Venezuela* (Havana, 1978), 254–58. The reappearance of the rumor in Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo in 1812 is mentioned in Baralt, *Esclavos rebeldes*, 21–22, 29. For the events that transpired in Itu, see Reis, *Revista USP* 28: 28.

⁶⁴ General studies of the Société include Marcel Dorigny and Bernard Gainot, *La Société des Amis des Noirs, 1788–1799: Contribution à l'histoire de l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Paris, 1998); Yves Benot and Marcel Dorigny, eds., *Grégoire et la cause des Noirs: Combats et projets (1789–1831)* (Paris, 2005). The letter of 1789 is discussed in Gabriel Debien, *Études antillaises (XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris, 1956), 119; Léo Elisabeth, *La société martiniquaise aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles, 1664–1789* (Paris, 2003), 447, 450–53. For the Société's impact on Martinique, see Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London, 1988), 175; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 79–80. For a general discussion of this revolt, see Geggus, "Slaves and Free Coloreds of Martinique," 282–83.

did not implement it after having been intimidated by the planters—or so the slaves told each other. An abortive revolt was the outcome.⁶⁵

British antislavery also triggered the monarchist rumor, not once but repeatedly. The events that occurred in Demerara in 1823 provide one example. In July of that year, the colony's governor received a new resolution adopted by the House of Commons to the effect that the state of slavery was repugnant to the British constitution and the Christian religion and should be abolished gradually throughout the British colonies. After King George IV had signed off on the resolution, Parliament approved ameliorative regulations that included the stipulation that slaves should work no more than nine hours per day, that flogging of female slaves was outlawed, and that slave marriages were allowed. The Court of Policy took almost a month before publishing the resolution, and then it did so very reluctantly. Its sessions may have contributed to the spread of the rumor of a monarchist decree, which then bred a slave revolt, many of whose participants presumed, as the governor reported, that "God had made them of the same flesh and blood as the whites, that they were tired of being Slaves to them, that their good King had sent Orders that they should be free and they would not work any more."⁶⁶ News about British abolitionism reached African shores as well.⁶⁷ In 1811 a ship en route from Great Britain to Guyana encountered a ship of unknown nationality carrying a human cargo. When one of the British sailors boarded the slave vessel, two of the enslaved blacks reportedly exclaimed, expecting to be released from their shackles, "O King George! King George!"⁶⁸

After the foundation of Haiti, slaves in two Caribbean islands began to see this new state as the wellspring of freedom. According to one rumor in Puerto Rico in 1812, the black king of Haiti, Henri Christophe, had ordered all slaves to be freed. Following Christophe's coronation as King Henri I in 1812, rumors crediting him with the liberty decree circulated in Cuba. Once again, various slaves who took part in a local revolt believed that local powerful men were withholding their freedom.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Gilbert C. Din, *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763–1803* (College Station, Tex., 1999), 154.

⁶⁶ Michael Craton, "Slave Culture, Resistance and the Achievement of Emancipation in the British West Indies, 1783–1838," in *Slavery and British Society, 1776–1846*, ed. James Walvin (Baton Rouge, La., 1982), 100–122, esp. 120 (quotation from Governor Murray to Lord Bathurst, Aug. 24, 1823, CO 111/39, NA), 103, 105. For the potential impact of the Court of Policy's deliberations, see the testimony of H. van Cooten, Nov. 3, 1823, in *Authentic Copy*, 81.

⁶⁷ Compare, for the abolitionist context of late slave revolts in British America, Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge, La., 2006), 44–46.

⁶⁸ Rain, *Life and Labours*, 63.

⁶⁹ Baralt, *Esclavos rebeldes*, 27; Ada Ferrer, "Cuba en la sombra de Haití: Noticias, sociedad, y esclavitud," in González-Ripoll et al., *El rumor de Haití en Cuba, 179–231*, esp. 226–27.

IT COULD BE ARGUED that rebelling slaves and runaways were usually not so much drawn to freedom as determined to flee slavery. Only where havens of liberty existed, of course, could slaves run to freedom. They joined maroon communities, fled from non-Spanish to Spanish colonies, responded to the proclamation of John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, at the start of the American Revolution, or escaped from the U.S. South via the Underground Railroad. Although freedom also beckoned for the slaves inspired by the royal emancipation rumor, they did not flee to obtain it.

Distinct from runaways, slaves believing in the royal emancipation rumor bore a particular resemblance to another category of men and women who pursued freedom without flight. Frank T. Proctor III has recently analyzed the “liberty suits” brought against masters or their estates by slaves in New Spain. In the Spanish colonies, as in all other corners of the New World, manumission was both rare and ultimately controlled by the master. From the slaves’ perspective, obtaining freedom by means of manumission was therefore a remote possibility. But once a master had offered them manumission, an instant change set in. Suddenly, the slaves felt they were free. Their legal status had changed overnight, or so they believed, and they did everything in their power to achieve the freedom that was legitimately theirs. In the Iberian colonies as well as Brazil after independence, slaves had the legal means to pursue this goal, even if the cards were frequently stacked against them. Slaves thus took their masters to civil, ecclesiastical, or inquisitorial courts or filed suits against their masters’ heirs if the masters had died, which was often the case. These suits, usually fought over breach of promise, stand out because slaves explicitly sparred with their masters over liberty. On few other occasions, at least in New Spain, did slaves even use the word *libertad*.⁷⁰

The uprisings sparked by the royal emancipation rumor were the collective variant of the liberty suits pursued by men and women who felt that

⁷⁰ Frank T. Proctor III, “*Damned Notions of Liberty*”: *Slavery, Culture, and Power in Colonial Mexico, 1640–1769* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 2010), 157 (quotation; see also 188), 163, 184; María Eugenia Chaves, *La estrategia de libertad de una esclava del siglo XVIII: Las identidades de amo y esclavo en un puerto colonial* (Quito, 1999), esp. 137–38; Herman L. Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640* (Bloomington, Ind., 2003); Alejandro de la Fuente, “Slave Law and Claims-Making in Cuba: The Tannenbaum Debate Revisited,” *Law and History Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 339–69; Lyman L. Johnson, “A Lack of Legitimate Obedience and Respect: Slaves and Their Masters in the Courts of Late Colonial Buenos Aires,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (November 2007): 631–57; Keila Grinberg, “Manumission, Gender, and the Law in Nineteenth-Century Brazil: Liberta’s Legal Suit for Freedom,” in *Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World*, ed. Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks (Columbia, S.C., 2009), 219–34, esp. 221, 223. For freedom suits in the early United States, see Loren Schwenger, “Freedom Suits, African American Women, and the Genealogy of Slavery,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 71, no. 1 (January 2014): 35–62.

they were illegally enslaved. These revolts were rooted in the slaves' same realization that they were actually free. This sudden awareness was so real that they had to act on it in the face of denial or obstruction, which only served to increase their resentment and indignation.⁷¹ For these slaves, seeking recourse from the courts was not an option, nor was flight. But revolt was.

Nonetheless, the rumor did not automatically lead to revolt. The year 1773 saw the wide diffusion of a rumor, spread by blacks and "mulattoes," enslaved and free, in the Brazilian captaincy of Pernambuco that a law adopted in January of that year, prohibiting slavery in Portugal, also applied to Brazil.⁷² The authorities braced themselves for a revolt, but nothing happened. On a few other occasions, the rumor of the liberty decree could also have led to a revolt but did not. Consider the events that transpired in Suriname in 1842, less than two years after King William II was inaugurated in the Netherlands. The arrival of a Dutch man-of-war sparked a rumor that its hold was filled with shoes sent by the new king. Since the colony's population was largely made up of slaves, who were banned from wearing shoes, some slaves argued that the cargo's shipment could only mean the king was sending a sign that emancipation was near. Although the seeds were sown, no revolt ensued this time. Six years later, the introduction of the monarchical rumor was averted in another Dutch colony, that of Saint Martin, which shared its island territory with its French counterpart of the same name. After the provisional government of the French Second Republic decreed general slave emancipation in the French colonies, the rumor could have surfaced. That it did not may have been due to slaveholders' unprecedented decision to ameliorate the slaves' condition to the point of *de facto* freedom, even while leaving them in legal bondage.⁷³

⁷¹ Raymond Geuss and Martin Hollis, "Freedom as an Ideal," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 69 (1995): 87–112, esp. 93.

⁷² Guillermo Palacios, *Cultivadores libres, Estado y crisis de la esclavitud en Brasil en la época de la Revolución Industrial* (Mexico City, 1998), 312 (quotation). The reasoning of these slaves is reminiscent of the logic used by insurgent slaves on the island of Curaçao in 1795. They assumed that after the French army successfully invaded the Dutch Republic earlier that year, the emancipation issued for slaves in French colonies would extend to their island. Account of Pastor Jacobus Schinck, Sept. 7, 1795, in A. F. Paula, ed., *1795: De slavenopstand op Curaçao: Een bronnenuitgave van de originele overheidsdocumenten* (Curaçao, N.A., 1974), 268.

⁷³ The episode of the warship arriving in Suriname in 1842 is discussed in *Maandblad, uitgegeven van wege de Nederlandsche Maatschappij ter bevordering van de afschaffing der slavernij* (The Hague, 1855–56), 18. These slaves in Suriname may have been influenced by the prophecy of the messianic leader of a slave revolt six years before, who had told his audience that a time would come when all slaves would wear shoes. J. Voorhoeve and H. C. van Renselaar, "Messianism and Nationalism in Surinam," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 118, no. 2 (1962): 193–216, esp. 199. Instead of revolting, slaves from one plantation, seeking to ascertain the news, walked to the capital city of Paramaribo to meet with an official. This man referred them to the attorney general, sending him a note in which he asked for the slaves to be punished. With their backs

The difference between the periods before and after 1789 was therefore not that enslaved blacks became more forward-thinking or more comprehensive about their goals. That was true of a small elite among the insurgents. What changed was the scope of opportunities for the emancipation rumor to be born and reborn. In a time replete with antislavery, abolitionism, and revolutionary activity, when the slaveholders' old certainties disappeared overnight, masses of slaves came to believe that their world had been altered overseas. They set their hopes on a document that acknowledged something that many of them had always felt: freedom was legitimately theirs. Slaves had numerous reasons to join an insurrection once it had been planned or was unfolding. Where it was instrumental in the outbreak of revolts, the royal emancipation rumor would not have inspired all insurgents, even if some nonbelievers might have spread the rumor in order to fuel the insurgency. But those who were convinced of its veracity were crucial, and it is doubtful whether many slave revolts in the decades after 1789 would have taken off without the insurgents' notion that they had already obtained legal freedom.

bleeding and robbed of an illusion, the slaves returned to their plantation. The events in St. Martin are the subject of A. F. Paula, "*Vrije*" *slaven: Een sociaal-historische studie over de dualistische slavenemancipatie op Nederlands Sint-Maarten, 1816–1863* (Zutphen, Netherlands, 1993), 114–15. The situation in St. Martin did spawn the royal emancipation rumor in the nearby Dutch island of St. Eustatius, where authorities quashed the subsequent rebelliousness by killing two insurgents and injuring others. Cornelis Ch. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam, 1791/5–1942* (Assen, Netherlands, 1990), 286. The rumor of a liberating royal decree also appeared in 1848 in Danish St. Croix, another island in the Lesser Antilles, in the wake of the French decree. On July 3, eight thousand slaves refused to start their working day and gathered in front of a government fort in the town of Frederiksted demanding their freedom. They got what they wanted. Ignoring the advice of other officials, the Danish governor told the assembled slaves, "Now you are free, you are hereby emancipated." Neville A. T. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies: St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix*, ed. B. W. Higman (Baltimore, 1992), 208–9 (quotation, 208).