

Introduction: A World of Unfreedom

In the spring of 1709, authorities in Boston accused Jack, a black indentured servant, of stealing a “considerable Sum in Money and Gold” from David Gwin, a wealthy merchant. When brought before the court, Jack stated that before arriving in Boston, he was a “Bondslave” belonging to Benjamin Hale, a merchant residing in Barbados. A few years prior to the alleged crime, Hale hired Jack out to serve onboard the *Dragon*, a London ship that traded around the Caribbean. For this trip, Jack was to serve on a crew carrying timber from Tobago to Barbados, but French privateers seized the vessel. They carried Jack to Martinique, where he labored on a sugar plantation for the next four years. One night, Jack and four other slaves stole a canoe and rowed to Montserrat and from there to Antigua. In the latter colony, Jack joined an English privateering venture and, after capturing a French ship, ended up on St. Christopher. There, Jack encountered Thomas Diamond, a captain of a “New England Sloop,” and being familiar with the region, Jack joined Diamond’s crew. He arrived in Boston sometime in the fall of 1708 and immediately indented himself to the farmer Edward Clap of Dorchester for four years in exchange for a new set of clothes every year and a cash payout. In the spring of 1709, Jack’s master allowed him to travel to Boston to find employment.

Jack’s story raises an important question for understanding slavery and freedom in the eighteenth-century American colonies. Why, after escaping from Martinique and effectively winning his freedom, did Jack sacrifice that freedom in order to enter into a dependent

relationship soon after his arrival in Boston? Jack's actions suggest he understood the society he inhabited. A free black stranger would have made people suspicious and had no place in the local community. The indentured servant of a local farmer, however, would have immediately found a place in the social order. Clap also seems to have given Jack considerable autonomy, allowing him to go to Boston to find work. Throughout his life, Jack had many different statuses—slave, free black, and indentured servant—but ultimately opted to remain in a state of dependence, although one certainly not as degrading as slavery, and live in Boston rather than have a tenuous freedom in the Caribbean.¹ *Unfreedom* peers into the lives of slaves and other bound laborers like Jack to better understand the lived experience of enslaved Africans in eighteenth-century Boston, British North America, and the early modern Atlantic world.

Unfreedom uses an early modern, transnational lens to examine slavery in eighteenth-century Boston. Rather than the traditional dichotomous conception of slavery and freedom, colonial-era slavery should be understood as part of a continuum of unfreedom. In Boston, African slavery existed alongside many other forms of oppression, including indentured servitude, apprenticeship, pauper apprenticeship, and Indian slavery. In this hierarchical, inherently unfree society, slavery must be put in the context of a larger Atlantic world characterized by a culture of dependence. Unfreedom for enslaved Bostonians, emanating from both their African heritage and New World slavery, shaped their behavior, making them more concerned with their everyday treatment and honor than they were with emancipation. By understanding slavery within this context, this study demonstrates not only how African slaves were able to decode their new homeland and shape the terms of their enslavement but also how marginalized people ingrained themselves in the very fabric of colonial American society.

This book is a cultural history of slavery that uses a new conceptual framework for understanding slave life in colonial America and the Atlantic world—the continuum of unfreedom.² Examining slavery in Boston using this concept allows us to develop a deeper understanding of early modern slavery and the world slaves inhabited. In this sense, racial and class boundaries collapsed due to the labor needs of Boston's economy, leaving a large bound laboring class that interacted and intermarried on society's margins.³ While other scholars have certainly looked at the intersection of race and class in early America, slavery often stands outside the class system.⁴ In a world of unfreedom,

however, slavery was an integral part of a divinely ordained hierarchy that structured society and everyday relations. Although early modern Britons began deploying a language of individual freedom during the tumultuous seventeenth century, it had a specific meaning. Essentially, independent individuals had full possession of a set of customary rights, controlled their own property and labor, and commanded the labor of their dependents. Such a narrow definition placed the unfree at the service of the free, enabling the latter to gain from the work of the former, thus accumulating more property, rights, and freedom. This scenario played out across any society where slavery and other forms of bound labor existed in the Americas.⁵

Individual rights in a world built on dependence meant that notions of those rights still penetrated colonial society, only in a specific way. Instead of believing in universal human rights, both the free and unfree in eighteenth-century Boston believed that everyone had a set of customary and defensible rights dependent on his or her class and status. Men had more rights than women, while artisans had different rights than laborers. In such a rights-based system, enslaved Africans came to appropriate their own set of liberties, were able to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and were able to make the best of an admittedly poor situation.⁶ Slavery in this context was not a totalizing system of oppression but a structure that slaves learned to navigate and manipulate to their advantage.

For the majority of slaves in Boston, the alternatives to slavery were often nonstarters. Open defiance was ultimately futile. Because they were heavily outnumbered, rebellion would end in slaughter. Running away to the frontier was uncertain and fraught with danger. Even if a slave won his or her legal freedom, liberty was always amorphous in an unfree world that steadfastly refused to recognize black freedom. Free blacks in Boston, such as the Humphreys family, actually saw their material circumstances decline after manumission and became dependent on public and private aid. Week after week, Betty Humphreys had to beg for alms from Christ Church. Even then, she and her husband could not support their two sons, James and Thomas, whom the Boston Overseers of the Poor removed from their household and apprenticed to a wealthy sail maker. The Humphreys did not have “freedom” in any meaningful sense—even their family was not protected—and still lived in a state of dependency.

Rather than face such uncertainty, slave action took on a subtler form. When compared to unfree whites, this trend becomes clear.

Benjamin Franklin serves as a good example. Franklin's experience as an apprentice during his teenage years in Boston was both similar and dissimilar to that of slaves. His life story—running away to Philadelphia while still an apprentice to find remarkable success as first a printer and later a scientist and politician—speaks to the exceptional nature of Franklin's experience. It likewise tells us that race did sometimes matter in this world. Franklin's white skin allowed him to escape without raising the same suspicions that a runaway African slave would. The same can be said of Franklin's many accomplishments, which it is doubtful any runaway slave could have achieved in eighteenth-century America. That said, the printer's experience of unfreedom bore much resemblance to that of many enslaved Bostonians. Franklin faced "harsh & tyrannical Treatment" from his master—his own brother—including the many "Blows his Passion too often urg'd him to bestow upon [Benjamin]." It was this treatment that Franklin believed instilled in him an "Aversion to arbitrary Power that . . . stuck to [him] thro' [his] whole Life."⁷ Abuse and tyranny not only taught Franklin to resent his master's authority but also encouraged him to take flight and find opportunity elsewhere. Enslaved Bostonians also inhabited a space where the former was true but the latter exceptionally difficult. Instead, they created new and clever ways to resist the arbitrary authority of their masters and find autonomy in their personal lives, such as being able to use the legal system to their advantage or developing a skill set that allowed them to work independently.

The story of the Humphreys and Franklin suggests that there was an inherent tension between class and race in eighteenth-century Boston. Simply put, race mattered in eighteenth-century Boston, but class and status mattered *more*.⁸ We can clearly see this in the numerous references regarding slaves, free blacks, Native Americans, and poor whites as people of "mean and vile condition."⁹ Other laws grouped blacks, free and slave, and Indians in one monolithic underclass. What this strongly suggests is a world where there was a clear hierarchy, and race determined place in that social order. On the one hand, it meant slaves were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, but on the other, the bottom was still a place, meaning slaves were ingrained in the societies in which they lived and had communal ties. This factor explains why free blacks like the Humphreys proved so vexing to colonial authorities as they stood outside the social order. There were certainly pejorative notions of cultural difference and fears of

miscegenation, but these only bubbled to the surface periodically until coming to full fruition during the revolutionary era. What we see in eighteenth-century Boston, then, is a society in flux, shaped by early modern notions of social order but also actively creating race and defining racial difference. Enslaved Bostonians took advantage of this ambiguity, using it to their advantage, fighting to reshape the boundaries of their enslavement, seeking greater autonomy from the master class, and forcing their way into Euro-American society to demand a place within it.

Because of this tension, Boston is an important site in which to study slavery and unfreedom. It had many distinctive features yet was a typical port town in a seaborne network that fostered the circulation of goods, ideas, and people. By the middle of the eighteenth century, over sixteen hundred slaves lived in Boston, comprising between 10 and 15 percent of the total population, filling vital positions in the labor force—so vital, in fact, that if they suddenly disappeared from the historical landscape, Boston's economy would have collapsed. The study of slavery in New England has been a thriving area of scholarship in recent years, and this study contributes to this dynamism but also offers a new interpretation by arguing that Boston was different from the rest of New England.¹⁰ The town had a larger slave population than almost every part of New England, and unlike rural New England towns and smaller seaports where slaves provided only supplemental labor, slavery was central to Boston's economy.

To better understand the exceptionality, I mostly disaggregate slavery in Boston from the historiography of slavery in New England. While the scholarship on slavery in New England provides important context for this study, it is important to remember that during the eighteenth century, Boston had transformed itself from a Puritan city on a hill to an Atlantic port reliant on unfree labor to keep its economic engine running. The town was an urban center with deep ties to the Atlantic economy and reliant on slave labor like other cities in the Americas, such as New Orleans, Havana, and Charleston, South Carolina. In this sense, Boston was one of many Atlantic entrepôts where slavery intermixed with other forms of bound labor, and slaves worked within the unfree, hierarchical society to carve out a space for themselves.¹¹

As such, my study contributes to an ongoing conversation concerning slavery and freedom in early America and the Atlantic world. By reading the lives of enslaved Bostonians through legal

and ecclesiastical records, I reveal them as being full of complexity and contradiction. Enslaved Bostonians were part of a particular eighteenth-century world, which was quite different, especially in regard to liberty and rights, than the modern one. In this context, we have to redefine and rethink central themes in the history of slavery, most importantly resistance and agency. These are problematic terms to begin with, but historians subscribe—consciously or not—to a “liberal-republican ideology” that emerged during the American Revolution, where slave resistance, especially violence, ultimately undermined slavery as an institution and made slaves worthy of freedom.¹² More importantly, this line of reasoning inextricably links resistance and agency to a desire for individual freedom and an end of slavery as an institution. Although resistance was sometimes a path to freedom, this ideological lens precludes and obfuscates other aims and desires of resistance. Moreover, to use this context when examining slavery in Boston between 1700 and 1775 would be imposing a revolutionary ideology on a prerevolutionary world.¹³ Indeed, a better way of understanding slave resistance in eighteenth-century Boston is as a form of early modern popular protest. Deeply conservative in nature, these struggles did not look to upend the social order but rather to defend long-standing customs and traditions. Usually provoked by changes in labor arrangements, food shortages, or increased taxation, these actions were locally focused, were untethered from larger ideologies, and sought to reestablish a mythical status quo in which violated rights would be restored and grievances addressed.¹⁴ Much like angry artisans writing letters of grievance to London newspapers or hungry peasants rioting over the price of flour, slaves in Boston utilized weapons of the weak. Work stoppages, running away, and even joining large crowd actions such as the Impressment Riot of 1747 allowed slaves to increase their autonomy, ameliorate their condition, or actively reshape the terms of their enslavement, all without necessarily advocating for their freedom.¹⁵ Engaging in these types of protest allowed enslaved Bostonians to find effective ways of bettering their lives and participating in colonial life, all without challenging the social order.¹⁶

Until the American Revolution, resistance to slavery in Boston focused on the fight for autonomy more than legal freedom. Autonomy in this sense meant the possession of a certain degree of independence from the master class. In finding that autonomy through workplace arrangements, the formation of communities and families,

the articulation and defense of rights and privileges, and religious affiliation, slaves were largely successful and had a degree of de facto freedom—within slavery, of course—that was largely unknown in other parts of the Americas where slavery existed. That is not to say that this work follows the old trope that slavery was more benign in New England than elsewhere.¹⁷ As this work attempts to demonstrate, slavery in Boston was one part of a larger system of African slavery, one that had many similarities and differences with other parts of that system but was still an exploitative institution designed to extract labor from legally unfree people. Benevolence and autonomy, this line of thinking goes, was only sometimes a gift of the master but was more often demanded and won by the slave.

To better understand how slavery in Boston was part of this larger system of slavery, this study engages with the ever-burgeoning literature on the Atlantic world. In doing so, it joins a chorus of voices proclaiming, “We are all Atlanticists now.”¹⁸ Using transnational methodology allows us to understand how American (especially Caribbean), African, and European notions of slavery, freedom, and dependence combined in Boston to create its unique cultural landscape.¹⁹ While examining how unfree and marginal people interacted is relatively rare in early American historiography, an Atlantic approach allows us to examine the Latin American tradition, in which these studies are much more common.²⁰

In order to reconstruct slavery and the lives of enslaved Bostonians, this study draws heavily from legal records, including trial papers, wills, probate inventories, decision books, and justice of the peace record books. While these sources have allowed me to reveal the “otherwise invisible or opaque realms” of the lives of enslaved people and have a better understanding of their “social and cultural worlds,” the records are problematic. Most of the trial records come from criminal proceedings in which slaves were accused of and often perpetrated heinous crimes. Because of this fact, these sources are inherently biased. First and foremost, not all slaves were criminals, making it difficult to extrapolate the experiences of all slaves on the basis of the transgressions of a few. Likewise, depositions and testimonies often offer conflicting narratives, and those who were being interrogated lied. All of these voices must be respected, especially since it is nearly impossible to discern guilt and innocence nearly three centuries after many of these trials took place. Also, any reader must recognize the power dynamics at play. Judges and magistrates gathering evidence

and conducting these trials were powerful men in Boston and the colony of Massachusetts, while slaves were at the bottom of the hierarchy. Certainly slaves would have been deferential—even if only pretending—and their answers tailored to better assuage the men questioning them.

A final, and perhaps the most important, concern when using legal records is that it is often too easy to read thought into action. To truly understand the subjects of this book, however, is to accept that, in this case, actions speak much louder than thoughts. It is completely possible that slaves dreamed of being free, but they were also keen enough to understand that they lived in a world that found black freedom troublesome and oxymoronic. They had to look no further than free black men being forced to labor or the children of free black families being removed from their households to understand that liberty for blacks was often fraught and rendered meaningless by the state. Rather than vocalize their thoughts about freedom, slaves operated within the institution of slavery to carve out a considerable degree of autonomy and find ways to better their condition materially. This approach was much more practical—thus the use (perhaps overuse) of the word *abstract* throughout this study to contrast pragmatic action with ultimately unknowable thought.

Nevertheless, despite the limitations of legal records, they demonstrate that alternative interpretations of the social order existed and uncover a hidden world, one where enslaved Bostonians attempted to exercise control over their own lives and function in an oppressive society.²¹

To uncover the diverse origins of black Boston, the study begins in chapter 1 by reconstructing the Atlantic origins of Boston's black population. While there was a small native-born population descended from those who arrived in the seventeenth century, most slaves came from the Caribbean or Africa in the eighteenth century, usually through Boston's connection to the transatlantic slave trade. Most important, these people were slaves from slave societies. Slaves from Africa, for example, would have understood slavery as a customary institution in which enslaved people were accorded more customary rights. Unlike New World slavery, then, the objective of African slaves was not to overthrow the entire slave system in the name of universal emancipation but to become part of their master's society and obtain the rights that came with such affiliation.

Chapter 2 examines slaves once they arrived in Boston, where many would have encountered a society both familiar and alien. The town,

like the rest of British North America, was in the midst of an ongoing cultural transformation. Residents of white Boston were moving away from their Puritan roots, becoming closer with their cousins across the sea by appropriating their attitudes, norms, and monarchical notions of societal organization. This hierarchy emphasized deference to social superiors and living within networks of dependence. Most Bostonians, whether European, Native American, or African, were legal dependents: women, children, servants, and slaves. Such a society was a perfect match for the newly evolving social order. Despite the inherent unfreedom, life in colonial Boston ensured that everyone from the lowliest pauper to the wealthiest merchant had a set of customary and defensible rights and privileges. Slaves, fighting for a place in this order, adapted and laid claim to a set of rights of their own.

Buttressing their position, Afro-Bostonians built strong and resilient social worlds (chapter 3). They made friends and acquaintances with similarly unfree people of all races and fought vociferously to protect their marriages and families. They built cross-class, cross-racial, and cross-gender networks both within their masters' households and in Boston at large. Although marriage between whites and blacks was expressly forbidden, slaves intermarried with each other, free blacks, and Native Americans. Avoiding classifying black communities as racially exclusive, chapter 3 argues that the social reality was much more fluid and dynamic.

Although many slaves' personal interactions could be violent and unstable, most proved especially resilient in the town's labor market (chapter 4). They were a highly versatile workforce and could be found in almost every industry, working in artisanal trades and making important contributions to the town's economic growth. Any visitor to Boston would have encountered slaves like Cato, Nero, Quaco, and Scipio, skilled tanners who absconded from their master's tannery in Boston to work under much less onerous—and more sanitary conditions—for a Cambridge farmer. They would have been fed, clothed, and waited on by bondswomen who served as cooks, seamstresses, and washerwomen for many of Boston's families and were important to domestic production. If guests were observant, they might even catch a glimpse of Boston's many enslaved sailors, like Briton Hammon, who made a thirteen-year journey around the Atlantic as a slave, prisoner of the Spanish governor of Cuba, and mariner in the merchant fleets of two different nations before returning to Boston. All these contributions were not lost on Boston's elite, who recognized the

economic importance of slavery and gave their bondsmen and bondswomen considerable autonomy in their working lives, autonomy that empowered enslaved Bostonians to reshape and redefine the terms of their enslavement. It also freed enslaved laborers to form an occupational identity, one created by proactive workers to protect their workplace rights.

Likewise, enslaved Bostonians appropriated white institutions and discourse to better their everyday lives (chapter 5). They channeled much of their energy into learning and using local institutions, namely, the law and Boston's many Protestant churches, to obtain valuable skills like the ability to read and write and acquire a basic understanding of Anglo-American jurisprudence. White Bostonians never created specialized mechanisms of control, such as slave courts, to govern slavery, and slaves actively worked to ingrain themselves in local institutions. On any given Sunday, the pews of Boston's churches were full of black faces learning not only the gospel but how to read and write, while slaves knew to approach local justices if their masters were being cruel or abusive and would almost always receive a fair hearing. Comprehending their larger society and understanding its basic contours enabled enslaved Bostonians to navigate their enslavement and fight for concessions from the master class.

The afterword examines how enslaved Bostonians came to use natural rights language to fight for personal liberty and emancipation during the 1760s and 1770s. This struggle coincided with white Bostonians' parallel efforts to free themselves from British imperial rule. While the slaves appropriated natural rights discourse from their masters and used it against them, the stakes for the slaves were much higher. Throughout the imperial crisis and the early years of the Revolution, the world of dependence unraveled, hierarchy collapsed, and the house of unfreedom fell. Sons defied their fathers, women disobeyed their husbands, and slaves challenged their masters' authority. Prerevolutionary society with its strict, patriarchal social order began to come undone at the seams, presenting opportunities to defy that order and, for Afro-Bostonians, an opportunity to make a claim for freedom. For the first time, personal liberty was a real option, and this became the goal for black Bostonians, who saw it as the ultimate safeguard for property and families and an avenue to becoming full members of American society. To do this, slaves and free blacks in Boston employed a petition campaign to end slavery once and for all in Massachusetts, culminating in a 1783 legal victory that dealt a

serious blow to the institution of slavery. Even after the 1783 decision, however, freedom was not ensured. Their courtroom victory was by no means decisive, and its consequences were ambiguous. Moreover, the legacy of unfreedom did not disappear after the American Revolution. In this new world of freedom, old obligations and duties fell to the wayside, leaving newly freed slaves out in the cold, without a safety net, and unprepared to confront the racial structures formed around emancipation. The book ends with a reexamination of the petition of Belinda, an impoverished, recently freed slave, allowing us to see how the language of dependence survived revolutionary upheaval.

The records left behind by enslaved Bostonians reveal a different narrative than historians of slavery are used to telling, one that complicates freedom as a category of analysis. Although such an interpretation can be troubling for readers with modern conceptions of liberty, these slaves inhabited a world where those ideas and ideologies were neither transcendent nor a universal desire. Instead of producing despair, however, I contend that the ability to adapt to—and often succeed in—an inherently unfree world with such skill and tenacity demonstrates the flexibility and dynamism of Boston's slave population. Assumptions about the diametrical opposition of freedom and slavery in colonial America denies this adaptability and transforms the enslaved into mere caricatures of who they actually were. These were people who had families and friends, who loved and, most importantly, lived life to the fullest given their circumstances. Ultimately, then, *Unfreedom* not only reconsiders assumptions about slave life but also demonstrates how enslaved Bostonians were able to fully and richly inhabit their humanity.

Note on Terminology: Throughout the text, I use “slave,” “black,” and “African” interchangeably despite recognizing the existence of free and indentured blacks. I do this to avoid being too repetitious. When discussing nonslave Africans, I explicitly note it, but otherwise, I use the terms interchangeably.