

Coolies and Cane

Race, Labor, and Sugar in
the Age of Emancipation

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entry. The 1862 law paved the way for the Page Law that targeted coolies and prostitutes by reinforcing the earlier law's dual framework of illegal importation and consular inspection in 1875.⁵³ Seven years later, Congress would outlaw the entry of "Chinese laborers." The last slave-trade law, from this angle, was simultaneously the first immigration law. Coolies bridged the legal and cultural gap between the national exclusion of slaves and immigrants, liminal subjects that were neither yet both in the age of emancipation.

Envisioning Freedoms

William J. Minor, the owner of three large sugar plantations in Louisiana, expressed his vision of freedom to a federal commission immediately after the Civil War. "The only certain remedy that we know of is, to take us back under the Constitution & establish things as they were," he explained in April 1865, "but perhaps under some other name." Asked if he meant the retention of slavery, Minor assented eagerly. "Yes Sir, I think this state & all the states would come back under the Constitution Sir," he replied. "I am the more inclined to think so because I was one of those who were altogether opposed to going out in the beginning." Nearly three years of wage labor under Union military occupation, according to Minor, had proven that sugar production would cease without slavery. Louisiana, he insisted, was too cold for sugarcane cultivation without enslaved labor—winter frosts were a perennial threat to ripened cane stalks after October—and too hot for white labor. He felt that "the white man can not bear the climate or sun & he can get as much as we can afford to give,

elsewhere." Increased foreign imports would eventually drive down agricultural prices and wages, making white labor impossible to control "to any extent" or to attract "to live among mosquitos & mud" of southern Louisiana. "When emancipation is perfected," Minor stated resignedly, "we will have to get 'Cooly labour' or some other,—labourers that can stand this Climate."¹ Envisioning freedom, like defending slavery, implicated exploiting coolies.

Forswearing coolie labor in the name of slavery, alongside slavery itself, was a casualty of the Civil War. As in the Caribbean decades earlier, slavery's death generated a planter demand for Asian coolies in the South. This racial logic, however, never materialized uniformly across postemancipation societies. In addition to depictions of Asian labor before the war, local wartime developments, themselves shaping and shaped by events near and far, drove former American ex-slaveholders to seek coolie labor after the war. Louisiana sugar planters, in particular, exhibited a swift and high demand for coolies, although they were by no means the only former slaveholders and proslavery ideologues to look to the Caribbean for historical guidance. Southern Louisiana was not an exception, but its distinctive history of colonial subjugation and sugar production made it as much a part of the Caribbean as the Old South. Political, economic, and social networks that stretched across the Gulf of Mexico in tandem with the revolutionary potential of the Civil War propelled New Orleans and its surrounding sugar-producing parishes to the forefront of postbellum movements for and against coolies. Although Asian workers remained on the margins of antebellum and wartime struggles over sugar production, their arrival in Louisiana so soon after the war was ultimately and intimately tied to the violently competing visions of freedom among planters, workers, and federal officials. Federal policies to sustain and then abolish slavery, driven by the words and actions of planters and workers, ironically would recast coolies as potentially free immigrants in American culture during the Civil War.

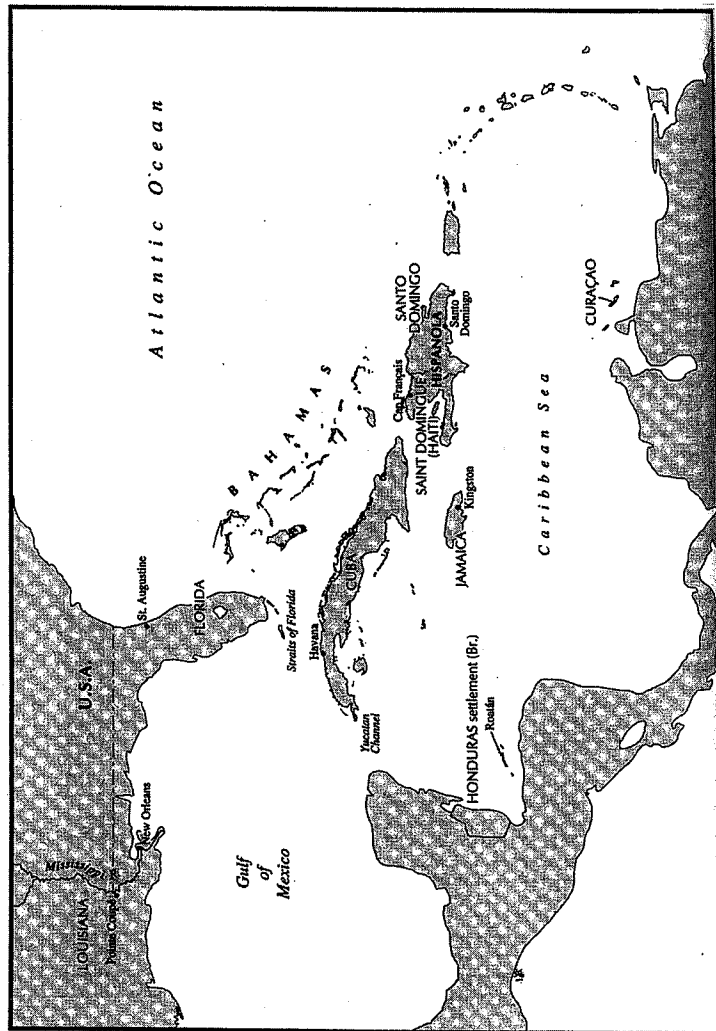
The Ties That Bound

Sugar and slavery—the twin forces that enriched western Europe, enslaved western Africa, and colonized the Americas for centuries—emerged and died in Louisiana during revolutionary times. Before the late eighteenth century, French and Spanish attempts to establish a plantation slave regime comparable to Saint Domingue had failed miserably, finding neither a viable staple crop nor a controllable labor force. The encroachment of American Indian lands, the impor-

tation and enslavement of Africans, and the production of plantation staples proceeded haphazardly in the lower Mississippi Valley, marred and jarred by African and American Indian insurgencies (real and feared), maroon communities, and competitive and fickle markets. Throughout the eighteenth century, slave importations from Africa and the Caribbean, intensely pursued at times, were forbidden repeatedly to guard against slave uprisings. Aspiring planters often found producing foodstuffs for sale within Louisiana and export to Saint Domingue, Martinique, Mexico, and Cuba more profitable than plantation staples like tobacco or indigo. For about a century after the French began colonizing Louisiana in 1699, mercantilist ties oriented Louisiana to the south, making it a northern colony within what some historians have aptly labeled the "Greater Caribbean." It, however, seemed incapable of producing the kind of wealth generated by Caribbean sugar colonies, even as its military and commercial significance grew over time.²

Louisiana, a stop along what Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker call "the planetary currents around the Atlantic," profoundly felt the reverberations of revolutionary currents in the 1770s and beyond. Revolutionary ideas and peoples traveled across the seas, as did violent campaigns to expurgate them. The American Revolution extended into the lower Mississippi Valley, where U.S. and British forces met in battle. Spanish forces soon took over British territories, inciting enslaved peoples to flee to wherever freedom seemed most likely. News of the first modern republic in the Americas was then drowned out by stories of Jacobin uprisings in Paris and Saint Domingue, France's most prized colony, that fundamentally transformed Louisiana's physical and social landscape. The French Revolution, and its radical, Haitian incarnation ignited kindred hopes (and fires) in the streets of New Orleans and among a motley crew of Louisiana's working peoples. As French revolutionaries beheaded King Louis XVI and abolished slavery in all French colonies—an act spurred on by the mass slave revolt that would create Haiti, the second republic in the Americas—Spanish authorities in Louisiana did everything in their power to suppress, deport, and execute revolutionaries. But it proved impossible to contain the ferment encircling and engulfing the Atlantic world in the 1790s. Maritime workers and soldiers delivered the latest news; enslaved peoples and their allies organized and rebelled.³

Whispered reports of worldwide struggles for *liberté, égalité, fraternité* convinced many in Louisiana to claim their freedom. "We are free, but the settlers do not want to give us our freedom," a black Louisianian was overheard saying



Map of the Greater Caribbean, 1789.

From David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 76. Used by permission of Indiana University Press.

in 1795. "We must wipe them all out. We have enough axes and sticks to kill them." Centered in Pointe Coupée but extending miles to New Orleans and Opelousas, a plan for a mass uprising involving countless numbers of slaves (African-born and creole), free people of color, and some local whites was revealed in the spring of 1795. The Pointe Coupée conspiracy was not the first or the last to be uncovered, but it was perhaps the greatest. Spanish officials hanged and decapitated twenty-three slaves, nailing their heads on posts up and down the Mississippi River, and sentenced thirty-four others, including three whites, to imprisoned hard labor abroad. The convicts were first taken to New Orleans, a city teeming with supporters and arsonists, before being secretly shipped off to Havana. The alarmed captain general of Cuba received them begrudgingly and begged Louisiana officials to "send such individuals to some foreign country" in the future. The Pointe Coupée convicts, some of whom traced their roots to Saint Domingue, undoubtedly took their insurrectionary notions with them to Cuba.⁴ The revolutionary currents of the Greater Caribbean were contagious.

The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) and corollary conspiracies and rebellions in Louisiana had ramifications far and wide. The Spanish crown, constantly on guard for slave unrest, lost interest in maintaining the unruly colony and agreed to return Louisiana to France in 1800. Napoleon Bonaparte, in the meantime, was busy turning back the revolutionary tide in Europe. Planning to force Saint Domingue into colonial submission, he hoped the revival of its vast plantations would resuscitate the French Empire—Saint Domingue had accounted for 40 percent of prerevolutionary France's external trade—that again included the lower Mississippi Valley. The disastrous results of Napoleon's grand military expedition to the Caribbean killed his western imperial designs, reportedly leading him to exclaim in January 1803: "Damn sugar, damn coffee, damn colonies." The United States would benefit from the triumph of black Jacobins in Haiti later that year when diplomatic negotiations yielded more than 800,000 square miles of land claimed by France. But Americans inherited more than land. Fears of another Haiti or Pointe Coupée led federal legislators and territorial governors to prohibit slave importations, especially from the Caribbean. "I am particularly desirous to exclude those slaves who (from late habits) are accustomed to blood and devastations," the governor explained, "and whose Counsel and communication with our present black population may be pregnant with future mischief." The passage of time could not extinguish the nightmares and hopes that Haiti represented in Louisianians' minds, kept alive most vividly by local conspiracies and outright revolts.⁵

If the Pointe Coupée conspiracy exposed Louisiana's revolutionary potential to turn the colonial world upside down, an experiment downriver by a sugar maker from Saint Domingue spawned an altogether different kind of revolution with no aspirations for liberty or equality. In 1795, after decades of sporadic and disappointing attempts at sugarcane cultivation and granulation, Antoine Morin demonstrated decisively the adaptability of sugar production to Louisiana's alluvial soil. With the capital investment of a frustrated indigo planter and the labor of forty enslaved workers, Morin successfully oversaw the production of twelve thousand dollars worth of sugar. Thus began the sugar revolution in Louisiana at a critical historical juncture within the Greater Caribbean. Sugar and slavery—the generators of wealth in Saint Domingue that the Haitian Revolution dismantled—were regenerated elsewhere, especially in Cuba, Trinidad, the Guianas, and Louisiana in the nineteenth century, often by the experience and capital carried by Saint Domingue refugees and their enslaved laborers. The destruction of Saint Domingue's plantation society stimulated and facilitated the creation of a similar society in Louisiana, but it also created a major obstacle. At a time when would-be sugar planters stridently demanded more and cheaper labor, Spanish and then American authorities continually closed off Louisiana to the slave trade in the name of public safety. Greed ultimately prevailed. Beginning in 1805, U.S. authorities allowed Louisianians to import slaves from any state in the union. And they did.⁶

Sugar and slavery expanded rapidly in southern Louisiana in the first half of the nineteenth century, fueled by dreams of immense wealth and realities of coerced labor—bound, shipped, and sanctioned by the whip, the slave market, and the state. By the time the United States purchased Louisiana in 1803, there were already eighty-one sugar plantations on the richest lands bordering the Mississippi River that consumed enslaved labor far faster than the local market could supply. Inundated with complaints over prohibitions on the slave trade, the territorial governor wrote to President Thomas Jefferson in 1804 that “the most respectable characters, cou[ld] not, *even in my presence*, suppress the Agitation of their Tempers, when a check to that Trade is suggested.” Louisiana's prominence in the flourishing domestic slave trade—New Orleans was home to the largest slave market throughout the antebellum period—would ease some of those tempers and enable hundreds of individuals to establish sugar plantations of their own, initially led by French creoles (and some free people of color) and steadily joined and surpassed by Anglo American migrants. By 1853, scarcely a half century after its founding, Louisiana's cane industry was producing nearly a quarter of all

exportable sugar in the world.⁷ The enormous profits falling into slave traders' and slaveholders' pockets flowed from the backbreaking labor of Louisiana's enslaved women and men, whose numbers increased exponentially in the decades before the Civil War. This was true for the lower South in general, but southern Louisiana stood out.

Sugar marked the difference. Combining field and factory work, modern sugar plantations were, in the words of anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz, an “industrial enterprise,” subject to the agricultural rhythms of the cane fields and the industrial discipline of the sugar mill. Planters eager to optimize production levels not only embraced advances in cultivation and manufacture but also demanded particular types of workers—enslaved, young, male. “I will give the highest price for likely young negroes, say from 10–25 years of age,” an antebellum advertisement announced. “Fellows will be preferred with proper certificate for the New Orleans market.” The rigors of sugar production demanded laborers in their prime; if female, they had to be “stout young women,” as a slave trader put it. Around two-thirds of the slaves imported into Louisiana's sugar region were male, in contrast to a more balanced sex ratio in the cotton districts. Reminiscent of and parallel to the disastrous demographic characteristics of the Caribbean, the enslaved peoples on Louisiana's sugar plantations had inordinately low birth and fertility rates, their increase mostly due to large-scale importations.⁸ It was a legal, brutal system of migrant labor. About twelve years old when she and her family were sold from South Carolina to St. Bernard Parish, Ceceil George recalled it was like arriving in “a heathern part of de country.” “Everybody worked, young and old,” she explained. “If you could only carry two or three sugar cane [stalks], you worked . . . And if you say, ‘Lawd a-mercy,’ de overseer whip you. De old people, dey just set down and cry.”⁹

As American slaveholders, Louisiana sugar planters held a common political agenda with cotton planters to the north, especially as the conflict over slavery intensified. At the same time, they shared wishes and struggles with sugar planters in the Caribbean. As late entrants in the sugar rush, by which time empires and nations had begun repudiating the transatlantic slave trade, planters in Trinidad, British Guiana, and Cuba, too, complained bitterly about labor shortages, importing enslaved and indentured laborers from wherever possible, legally and extralegally, and demanding young male workers in particular.¹⁰ Although incomparable to the scale of legalized migrations within the United States, labor migrations sometimes crossed national and imperial boundaries in

the Greater Caribbean, the boundaries themselves constantly shifting and being redrawn. British West Indian planters recruited free blacks from the United States between 1839 and 1847; slave smuggling, including shipments from Cuba to Louisiana, lasted into the 1860s in the United States. If not for U.S. annexation, slave vessels docking in antebellum New Orleans with thousands of human beings might have sailed from Africa and Asia, as in Havana, rather than from Richmond. Their domestic origins did not diminish the human suffering and terror.¹¹

Ideas, peoples, and capital moved around the Greater Caribbean in myriad ways, across geopolitical boundaries. It is not surprising, then, to discover that coolies—or, at least, ideas about them—made their way to Louisiana by the mid-nineteenth century. As planters and lawmakers pointed to Caribbean importations of African “immigrants” and Asian coolies to drum up support for the reopening of the African slave trade in the late 1850s, other Louisianians simultaneously pursued Chinese workers directly from Cuba. As early as February 1859, several merchants had taken steps toward the transport of coolies from Havana to New Orleans, going so far as to inquire if the local customs collector would consider the project a violation of federal slave-trade laws. Treasury department officials, as confused as other federal agents, declined a definitive answer and instructed the customs collector to use his discretion in dealing with such shipments. “The mere description of persons as Coolies, does not appear to indicate whether they come within the laws prohibiting the Slave trade, or not,” wrote Secretary Howell Cobb. “Without any special knowledge of the meaning of this term, it is supposed to refer to *laborers*, in oriental countries, whatever may be their condition.” By way of coolie vessels or some other means, there is evidence to suggest that some Chinese entered Louisiana from Cuba before the Civil War.¹²

Geopolitical boundaries, at the same time, mattered a great deal to sugar planters, particularly in light of the industrializing economy, which deeply affected sugar-producing regions of the world. Sugar production and consumption patterns, in many ways, acted as an index of world capitalist development, centered around the north Atlantic. The incorporation of sugar as “a virtual necessity” into the British industrial working-class diet by 1850, for instance, placed a premium on a greater supply of sugar at lower prices. These coterminous developments operated hand in hand, according to Mintz, as “sugar and other drug foods, by provisioning, sating—and, indeed, drugging—farm and factory workers, sharply reduced the overall cost of creating and reproducing

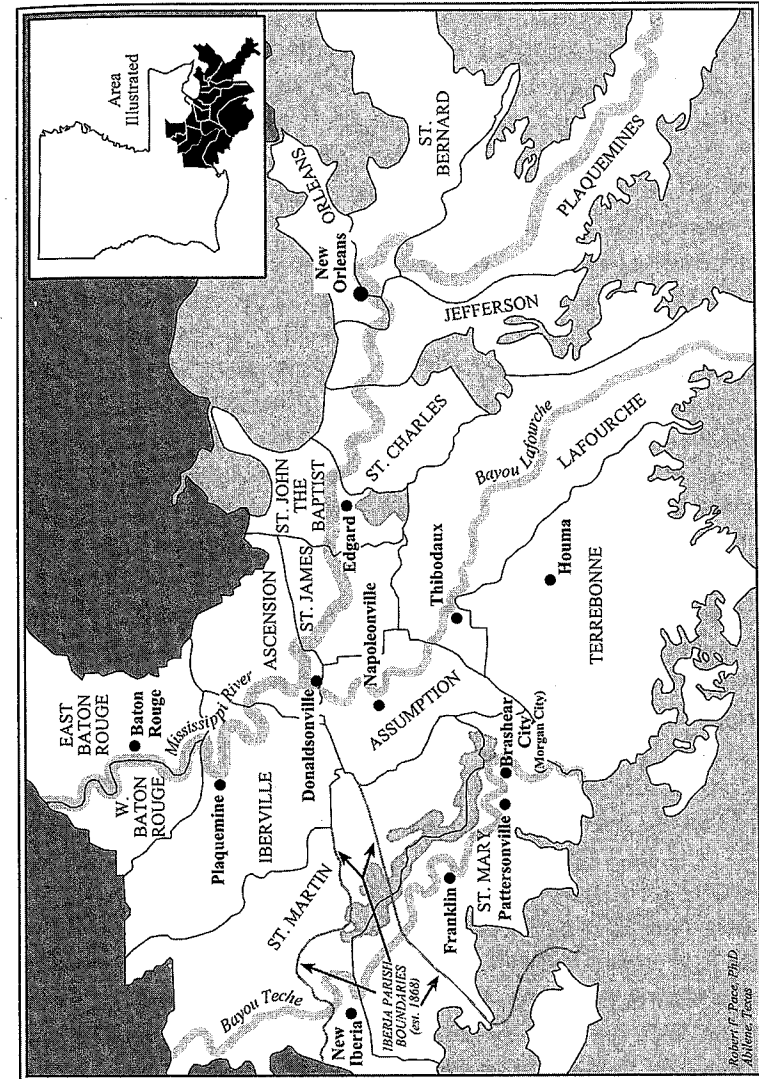
the metropolitan proletariat.” The institution of “free trade” policies over the rancorous protests of British West Indian planters in the second half of the nineteenth century attested to the political triumph of industrial capitalists within the British imperial economy. To a great degree but later in time, this was a struggle that sugar planters encountered everywhere. In an industry renowned for its high capital requirements—in land, machinery, and labor—as well as high profits during the height of mercantilism, sugar planters’ fates depended on industrial markets far away, markets determined previously by tariff protections and more and more by global competition. No matter how wealthy sugar planters became in southern Louisiana—and they were among the wealthiest slaveholders in all of the United States—they were entering a vulnerable industry, susceptible to increasing foreign competition in addition to spring floods, winter freezes, and disgruntled workers.¹³

The Civil War would lay bare these vulnerabilities, but, encouraged by new cane varieties, federal tariffs, and high prices, Louisiana’s sugar industry experienced phenomenal growth in the antebellum decades. Louisiana produced about five thousand hogsheads of sugar in 1803 and nearly doubled that figure within seven years. The intensity and scale of sugar production increased sharply in subsequent decades, reaching the antebellum record of 495,156 hogsheads by 1853. Throughout the 1850s, Louisiana averaged more than 300,000 hogsheads per season, which coincided with an explosive jump in U.S. sugar consumption.¹⁴ An expanding market and federal protection not only made sugar planters wealthy men but also attracted wealthy men to become sugar planters. With easier access to manufacturing equipment, improved lands, and enslaved labor, an elite corps of planters came to dominate southern Louisiana by the eve of the Civil War, enlarging and consolidating sugar plantations over time. In 1860, 525 large planters (owners of fifty or more slaves), though only 12.6 percent of the sugar region’s slaveholders, owned about two-thirds of all improved lands and enslaved laborers and accounted for more than three-quarters of the state’s sugar production. Capital flowed upward in southern Louisiana, the top twelve individual sugar planters alone representing nearly a tenth of the 1859 crop. None of this growth would have been possible without the labor of bound women and men, whose numbers increased from about 10,000 in 1812 to 88,439 in 1860. Outnumbering whites (60,356) by a significant margin, the enslaved population reflected sugar planters’ labor preferences, men exceeding women 1.4 to 1.¹⁵ They bore the deep human costs of sugar and slavery.

Saint Domingue Redux

Enslaved laborers of Louisiana made the war between the Union and Confederacy a revolutionary moment, fomenting a crisis that would lead to the abolition of slavery and the near annihilation of sugar production. On the eve of the Civil War, Louisiana's sugar industry was valued at \$200 million, more than half of that figure being the value of the enslaved labor force. By the end of the war—after the physical destruction of sugar machinery, depreciation of land prices, and, most of all, emancipation—the industry would lose approximately \$193 million of its antebellum assessment.¹⁶ In claiming their freedom and their bodies, slaves effected a radical redistribution of wealth that their forebears had imagined possible for generations. A tradition of slave rebellions, that of running away, stretched back to the earliest days of slavery—sustained through French, Spanish, and American rule—and shone bright as thousands personally bid farewell to slavery before formal abolition. No one recognized this better than their owners. "As far as the memory of man can go," a distressed planter stated in 1862, "there has existed among the negro population a tradition which has caused us many a sleepless night."¹⁷ The Civil War caused planters more sleepless nights than ever before. To slaveholders and slaves alike, the war was nothing short of revolutionary Saint Domingue resurrected on U.S. soil.

Even before Louisiana's native son, Confederate general Pierre G. T. Beauregard, ordered the first shots of the Civil War on April 12, 1861, tension and excitement filled the humid air. Rumors of an impending war and possibly emancipation gripped the countryside, from the plantation mansions to the slave quarters. "Shucks we knew everything de master talked about," recalled Elizabeth Ross Hite, a former slave. "De house girl would tell us and we would pass it around. Dats how we knew dat master was afraid of de Yankees. My mother says dat one day she heard master say dat de Yankees would kill dem and take all de slaves and free dem." Planters and local police juries (governing bodies at the parish level) took precautionary steps whenever they learned that, as a planter put it, "the Negroes have got it into their heads they are going to be free." They raised slave patrols, reinforced the pass system, and banned slaves from possessing a boat or a skiff. Planters' confidence in the slavery regime nonetheless suffered severe blows everyday, with military preparations and maneuvers providing an ominous backdrop. Within days of Beauregard's shots on Fort Sumter, N. P. S. Hamilton, in charge of a sugar plantation in Lafourche Parish, summoned Allen Collins from the slave quarters, to no avail. When Collins



Map of Louisiana's Sugar-Producing Region.
By Robert F. Pace, Ph.D., Abilene, Texas.

finally showed up, Hamilton "slap[p]ed him in the face" to teach him a lesson. Collins promptly ran away.¹⁸ This was but the beginning of a deluge.

As Union forces captured New Orleans in April 1862 and then marched through the heart of the cane region, Louisiana's slaves formed a considerable portion of what W. E. B. Du Bois labeled the "general strike" of half a million African Americans, which determined the fate of the Civil War. They ran to Union lines, to freedom. In 1861, Octave Johnson was sold by his New Orleans owner to a planter in St. James Parish. Working by the task as a cooper, he figured he could get away with not responding to an early morning bell. "For this the overseer was going to have me whipped," Johnson recounted, "and I ran away to the woods, where I remained for a year and a half; I had to steal my food . . . before I left our number had increased to thirty, of whom ten were women; we were four miles in the rear of the plantation house." After narrowly evading the bloodhounds on their trail, Johnson and his cohorts "jumped into" a bayou before finally finding refuge in a Union military camp. When federal forces made their way up the Mississippi River to Baton Rouge in June 1862, a West Baton Rouge planter noted in his diary the names of those slaves who had "Gone to Federals," including "Antony & Achille . . . in Tony's skiff—a most daring achievement."¹⁹ The imperative to run away spread like a wild contagion wherever Union soldiers went.

Desperate to contain and maintain their human property, Louisiana's sugar planters resorted to costly preventive measures. "I tell you, a man that owns ten, twenty, or thirty thousand dollars in *Slaves*," observed a New York soldier, "*will not* give them up without a struggle to maintain their (so-called) rights." Planters who "used to count their money by thousands" displayed a "brutal ferocity" worse than that of "the Savage." In September 1862, the Roman family of St. James Parish sent some of their slaves farther behind Confederate lines, but the new surroundings failed to stem the tide of runaways. "Now, let me tell you that I have no news of your servants . . . I am looking for them and if they are found they will be caged up right fast," wrote Céline Roman to her son. "I have three of them in prison now. This costs \$36 a month[.] when we find a way to send them to the country I shall send them back and I beg you to put them to work in the fields and lock them up in the evenings and on Sundays." She slapped Rosalie, a bondwoman who threatened to leave, and thought such actions were necessary to demonstrate her authority. A week later, Roman was begging her son to punish Rosalie harshly, if found, for she had run off with some others. "I do not want any more Negroes around me," Roman exclaimed,

"with what pleasure I would sell them all." Instead, she took great pains to keep her "negroes" around.²⁰

When Union troops organized an offensive down the Bayou Lafourche in October 1862, John Williams, a sugar planter who would play a leading role in recruiting coolies after the war, knew what would happen next. Just six days into the campaign, a Union general was complaining that he had "already twice as many negroes in and around my camp as . . . soldiers within."²¹ Along with many of his neighbors, Williams decided to seek refuge in Texas. He directed his daughter Mary W. Pugh to pack and prepare her husband's slaves for an imminent departure. "I rode up to Dixie, sent for all of the negroes & told them there was a strong probability of the Yankees coming," Pugh reported to her husband Richard, a Confederate soldier, "in which case it was your desire that I should move & take care of them, that you had plenty of money to support them until they could return home (*a big story* isn't it?) & that you would certainly take care of them as long as possible, &c. . . . they have behaved as well as possible since we started notwithstanding they have had every example to do otherwise." The trip had been a disaster. "The morning we started about 29 of Pa's had disappeared, amongst them Jim Bynum (will you ever have faith in one again?) . . . the first night we camped Sylvester left. the [*sic*] next night at Bayou Boeuf about 25 of Pa[']s best hands left & the next day at Berwicks Bay nearly all of the women & children started," she explained, "but this Pa found out in time to catch them all except one man & one woman. altogether [*sic*] he has lost about sixty—many of them his best men—he bears his losses very cheerfully *all things considered* & says he thinks he was fortunate in saving what he has done." A fellow planter decided to turn back after most of his "best hands" deserted him on the road. Pugh was "grateful" and "proud" of her own slaves, but, to protect against future losses, she "brought their winter clothes along in bundles," so "if any of them ran off they should go without any."²²

The precipitating event varied from plantation to plantation, but the world that slaveholding families had made came crashing down. Like so many Confederate women whose husbands joined the military or escaped westward, Josephine N. Pugh witnessed the revolutionary change among her labor force alone. "They saw their masters leaving their homes . . . their faith could not stand the test, and numbers flocked to the Yankee Standard, forming a motley, grotesque, and increasing multitude," Pugh wrote. She resolved to stand her ground, hoping that "demoralization would be less complete at home." She was wrong. The Union Army entered and left her Lafourche plantation in a single day—albeit

with all the plantation livestock and "negro men, they could lay hands on"—but her troubles remained. Early the next day, her "confidential man" in the slave quarters reported that "the servants yet remaining, dissatisfied and sullen, refused to work." Pugh was confident she could mend matters by speaking to them directly. "I was among a strange people, and was unprepared for a change so great," she wrote. "I looked vainly in familiar faces for the old expression." When her "voice faltered" and her eyes filled with tears "unbidden," Pugh saw the "pleasure" and "triumph" in her workers' expressions. She composed herself into "a countenance as hard as their own" and instructed them to work as long as they remained on the plantation, wondering all the while if their "relationship" was "so soon severed" and "an antagonism already arisen" between them. All but "one invalid family" left within twenty-four hours.²³

The revolution afoot in Louisiana's sugar region was a primary reason behind the postbellum initiative to recruit coolies. Before the war, it would have been nearly inconceivable to imagine scores of Chinese migrant laborers at work on Laurent Millaudon's vast sugar estate, valued at upwards of \$1.25 million. But everything changed in the fall of 1862. Relations between overseer William P. D. McKay and the enslaved labor force had grown extremely tense when Millaudon's son paid a visit in October. Henry Clement Millaudon reproached George Windberry, the alleged "ringleader," and threatened to hit him if his "rough manners" did not cease. Windberry refused to back down and, upon being struck with a whip, knocked Millaudon down. The scuffle ended when the planter pulled out his pistol and shot "sideways" at Windberry's retreating figure. Windberry reemerged shortly thereafter and charged at Millaudon with an axe, at which point another bondman intervened. Windberry fled into the cane fields. Millaudon then left the place in McKay's charge, evidently with instructions to shoot in case of further trouble. The overseer did precisely that later the same day, injuring two men and endangering many others, including Freeman Washington, a slave not involved in the earlier altercation. "When McKay shot at me I made up my mind that if he shot again, I would shoot him," Washington testified later. The overseer was shot dead; the remaining 150 or so slaves left the plantation en masse. Within eight years, Boston investors would purchase the estate for merely \$175,000 and recruit more than 140 Chinese migrant laborers.²⁴

Louisiana planters could not have foreseen all of the changes looming ahead, but they certainly felt the immediate shock of the labor insubordination and military occupation that would overthrow slavery, although Lincoln's Emanci-

pation Proclamation conspicuously exempted southern Louisiana. By the summer of 1863, Union forces had captured almost the entire sugar-producing region, westward to Bayou Teche and northward to Alexandria. The level of disruption and defiance stunned and overwhelmed planters and Union troops alike. "All or nearly all of the plantation hands come within our lines and planters in consequence are unable to use their plantations," reported a Union general looking to "remedy" the situation. Andrew McCollam had no remedies. Most of the planter's slaves had "cleared out" of his Terrebonne Parish plantation by March 1863 so that in 1864 he could only hope to cultivate enough cane to use as seed with his remaining force, some of whom were "not more faithful than" those who had fled. A regiment dispatched to Duncan F. Kenner's estates found willing and able assistants, his daughter noted, "the negroes" disclosing the whereabouts of the hidden wine and silver. The prominent planter narrowly escaped arrest, but everything valuable was found and confiscated.²⁵

Despair among planter families manifested in a range of emotive responses. Mary C. Moore, whose husband had relocated to the Confederate interior, fell into a deep depression. "Your letters are written more in a style of business than . . . that of protector [*sic*] . . .," she wrote him, "no one can im[ag]ine the suffering I have undergone mental and bodily . . . I am this moment the worst off of any woman in the place . . . I am failing so much in flesh that I fear I may never see you again. I feel so desolate and cast down . . . my very heart sickens with despondency, every thing seems so changed, my thoughts are all of gloom." The arrival of Union troops and the likelihood of emancipation at times triggered violent outbursts. Carlyle Stewart's owner was usually "good to us," the former slave recalled, "but when we was freed, one of the bosses kicked my ma in the face." The same turn of events outraged Henrietta Butler's plantation mistress, who was already "mean as hell." "Never will forget how she said," Butler remembered decades later, "'Come here, you little black bitch, you!' and grabbed my finger [and] almost bit it off."²⁶

The spirit of Pointe Coupée and Saint Domingue was very much alive in southern Louisiana. From plantation to plantation, parish to parish, slaves waged war against slavery, the Confederate cause. The results were profound, as realized on the sugar plantations of Louisiana's Confederate governor Thomas O. Moore in the spring of 1863. The arrival of Union forces, his neighbor John H. Ransdell reported, drove the slaves "crazy" and "utterly demoralized at once and every thing like Subordination & restraint was at an end." Three bondmen "forcibly put a confederate soldier in the stocks at your place on Saturday night

a week ago," Ransdell continued. "They abused him too, very much." The soldier finally managed to escape near dawn the next morning. A high proportion of Moore's labor force left with the Union troops, taking with them plantation stock and supplies. "Demoralization" persisted after the soldiers' departure. One of the overseers was "determined to chastise" a slave named Nathan who had been "acting badly" the following month, but Nathan "showed fight" and vowed he "was ready for him." The overseer subsequently beat him "pretty severely & put him in the stocks." Ransdell nonetheless recognized that the workers' outlook had changed fundamentally, and he pledged a new course in plantation management. "*My feelings*, too, have entirely changed towards the Negro," he informed Moore. "I now care nothing for them save for 'their work.'" ²⁷

The British West Indies Redux

The kind of labor sugar plantations would employ was the driving concern of not only Louisiana's planters and slaves but also, with the de facto dissolution of slavery, federal officials in charge of the state. Indeed, wartime reconstruction in Louisiana, which was to be the blueprint for postwar national Reconstruction, highlighted the central role the federal government would assume in U.S. society. Louisiana sugar planters had long appreciated the power of the nation-state, with their profits heavily dependent on sugar tariffs. Although as obsessed with the protection of slavery as any group of slaveholders in the Old South, many had resisted secession from the Union until it became a foregone conclusion. ²⁸ Louisiana slaveholders' resistance to federal authority over labor relations would prove much more durable. For most of the war, however, Union military officials attempted foremost to assuage planters' anxieties and to revive their unionist sentiments. Quite apart from the revolution that they, by and large unintentionally, sparked, these northerners were no revolutionaries. Denying, misconstruing, and repressing the cataclysmic changes in their midst, they prolonged the institution of slavery by implementing what was, in effect, an American equivalent to British "apprenticeship," the netherworld between enslavement and emancipation that pleased no one but its creators. Union officials turned repeatedly to the British West Indies rather than Haiti for historical inspiration and justification, reflective of the wide gulf between themselves and the thousands of slaves around them.

Gen. John W. Phelps, an abolitionist from Vermont, articulated early on the vast promises and grave limitations that the Union forces brought with them.

In December 1861, from a Mississippi island before the Union invasion of New Orleans, he proclaimed the North's determination to destroy slavery, long before Lincoln and others were ready to do so. Slavery, Phelps argued, was a "monopoly which excludes free-labor and competition," and which kept slaves in "comparative ease and idleness" in the South and confined "free white laborers" to the North where they were "often distressed by want." He was fighting for free labor, "the granite basis on which free institutions must rest . . . [and] the right of five millions of our fellow countrymen in the Slave States as well as of the four millions of Africans there." He encouraged Louisiana's slaves to flee to Union lines, openly welcoming them to his base near New Orleans beginning in May 1862. Two months later, Phelps decided to organize the escalating number of fugitive slaves into military units, in his mind "the best way" to channel them away from "a general state of anarchy" and toward a Union victory. Ending slavery, however, was only the beginning. Phelps assumed emancipation would necessarily involve "a well regulated system of apprenticeship" to last between five and fifteen years. ²⁹

Although unmistakably ahead of his peers and superiors in lashing out against slavery, Phelps's beliefs rested fundamentally on the free labor ideology at the core of the Republican party in the 1850s and 1860s. Republicans saw the world in dichotomous, individual terms, insisting on the utter incompatibility of slavery and free labor, and shifting the abolitionist focus on the personal sin of slaveholding to slavery's degradation of free labor. Slavery, Republicans argued, denied individuals the right to realize their full potential, the right to advance from wage labor to self-employment, the ultimate objective of all free laborers. Slavery not only extinguished any hope of free labor—the drive to become an independent producer—in the slave South but threatened the aspirations of northern whites by its expansion to new territories, the underbelly of America's "manifest destiny." Slavery, not capital, was the enemy of free labor. Indeed, capital and labor were deemed partners on an endless path toward general prosperity and individual mobility, purportedly the hallmarks of northern society. The antislavery stress on social values (industry, frugality, enterprise) as the key ingredient to a free society ironically prevented nearly all Union military leaders from envisioning a policy that would enable slaves to become independent producers. ³⁰ A revolution in values was not a revolution in property; it was hardly a revolution. Even to a man like Phelps, ever impatient to wage war against slavery, freedom was a gradual matter, a matter of the mind. It would involve years of adjustment, of inculcation, of "apprenticeship" or the like.

Unlike Phelps, the commanding Union generals of the Gulf Department were all too eager to delay the abolition of slavery. First to take charge, Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, a Democrat from Massachusetts, initiated a cautious course to appease Louisiana slaveholders. In May 1862, while his subordinate Phelps embraced fugitive slaves, Butler "directed all not employed to be sent out of my lines, leaving them subject to the ordinary laws of the community in that behalf." That is, he threw them back into the hands of slaveholders, whom he generously characterized as "passive rather than active in the rebellion." A policy of virtually confiscating slave property, Butler reasoned, was "manifestly unjust" and equal to "an actual confiscation of all property, both real and personal, of the Planter, if we take away or allow to run away his negroes as his crop is just growing." He objected to the institution of slavery—"a curse to a nation"—but was willing to accept "its present existence" to avert a crisis. "What would be the state of things if I allowed all the slaves from the plantations to quit their employment and come within the lines," he concluded, "is not to be conceived by the imagination." Moreover, he objected to the "employment of negroes in arms" and deemed them unfit for military duty, alleging that the British failure to capture New Orleans half a century earlier was due to their reliance on a black regiment from the West Indies.³¹

Pressed by circumstances beyond his control, Butler slowly came to recognize the centrality of slavery in the war, albeit long after Louisiana's slaves, months after Phelps, and weeks after federal officials in Washington, D.C. In July 1862, Congress authorized the confiscation and emancipation of Confederate-owned slaves as "captives of war" and the employment of African Americans in military labor or service. Around the same time, Lincoln's treasury secretary instructed Butler to demonstrate clearly that he was "no proslavery man." In these changing times, the general could only intimate warnings against an imminent "negro insurrection," another "San Domingo," to defend his hard-line stance. By August, however, he felt enough pressure to reverse his policy on runaways, whose numbers showed no signs of diminishing, and to reconstitute the Native Guards, formerly a Confederate regiment made up of Louisiana's free people of color. Still wary of arming slaves, an issue over which Phelps tendered his resignation, but desperate for troops, Butler formally allowed free blacks to enlist in the revived unit. He proudly pointed out his policy's consistency with Confederate policy. In practice, as Union forces suffered their worst military setbacks, anyone who swore to his "free" status was allowed to enroll.³²

Months after his Louisiana tour, which ended in December 1862, Butler reflected on his experiences before a federal commission. His testimony—sprinkled with metaphors and allusions to the Caribbean, however misapplied or misinformed—revealed not only a staunch disciple of the free labor ideology but also the severe limitations of that ideology and his policies. A belated convert, Butler became a vocal proponent of black military service. Asked about the likelihood of a slave insurrection, he again invoked Haiti. "Not if you will arm the negroes, and give them officers of their own color," Butler replied. "Do you suppose if the French General at St. Domingo had given Toussaint a captaincy, there would have been any trouble? I have always thought not." His mission had been to thwart, to co-opt a revolution, not to promote it. Butler was against slavery, believing its abolition essential before northern ideas could take root in the South. But emancipation had to be implemented gradually, with "remuneration to the masters" of perhaps one hundred dollars per slave. "I think any change should be gradual," he said. "All natural changes are gradual." He envisioned "a military supervision" of the South "for a series of years" necessary to instill free labor values in blacks and whites.³³ His testimony was an apt reflection and justification of Union military policies on Louisiana plantation labor, during his tenure and afterward. They were a peculiar variation of British apprenticeship, concocted in wartime conditions more analogous to Saint Domingue. And they were bound to fail.

As in the British West Indies—where the first four years of emancipation had compelled the freedpeople to remain with their former owners as "apprentices"³⁴—Butler attempted to reconcile the fundamentally irreconcilable contradiction between masters' claims to slave property and slaves' claims to freedom. In an agreement reached with "loyal" planters in St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes in October 1862, the U.S. government vowed to employ "all the persons heretofore held to labor . . . as they have heretofore been employed and as nearly as may be under the charge of the Loyal Planters and overseers" and to "authorize or provide suitable guards and patrols" to maintain law and order. Planters, for their part, were required to pay ten dollars per month, three dollars deductible for clothing, to "each able-bodied male"—the rate set by Congress for military laborers—and less to women and children, in addition to furnishing food and medicine to all laborers and their dependent relatives. Planters were barred from inflicting "cruel or corporal punishment"; instead, they were to report cases of "insubordination or refusal to perform suitable labor" and other offenses to local provost marshals, who would administer the

appropriate punishment, "preferably imprisonment in darkness on bread and water." Slaves belonging to "disloyal" planters (and "loyal" planters refusing to enter the agreement) could "hire themselves" out to "loyal" planters of their choice. Butler subsequently extended the arrangement to the Lafourche district, where "thousands of hogsheads of sugar of the value of at least a Million of Dollars" were at stake. Labor was in high demand for the grinding season, when workers harvested the cane and manufactured it into sugar.³⁵

Although Butler excitedly forwarded "the first sugar ever made by *free black labor* in Louisiana" to President Lincoln in November 1862, his policy hardly heralded a new era of free labor and prosperity. Individual slaves' consent to contract, the most basic tenet of nineteenth-century understandings of freedom, was completely absent in his arrangement. It was rather a contract between "loyal" planters and their government, with the laborers' interests presumably represented by the latter. Even on government-operated plantations, those confiscated from "disloyal" planters, laborers were cheated out of what had been promised them. Due to malfeasance, insolvency, or both, many employers, including lessees from the North, did not pay their laborers after the 1862 grinding season, causing another exodus from Louisiana's plantations.³⁶ The sugar industry was in a dire crisis. Planters, who had been unable to market much of the 1861 bumper crop (459,410 hogsheads), already owed their New Orleans factors about \$20 million. The disastrous results of the 1862 season (87,231 hogsheads) brought down the industry at all levels. Only six of the thirteen New Orleans banks in business before the war remained open after February 1863; only a handful of the five hundred antebellum factorage firms, dependent on bank loans, survived beyond 1863.³⁷ Those at the bottom, the workers, were the first to go unpaid.

Union occupation put southern Louisiana in limbo under a plantation labor system that was both compulsory and compensatory, neither slave nor free. In December 1862, planters and workers, frustrated and infuriated by the first mass experiment in black wage labor, anxiously cast their eyes on Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks as he took over the Gulf Department. The moderate Massachusetts Republican quickly made it clear that he would stray little from his predecessor's compromising ways. On Christmas Eve, in a tense atmosphere created by slaves' anticipation of emancipation and planters' fears of the same (as well as slave revolts), Banks stressed that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation would not apply to southern Louisiana. He advised slaves "to remain upon their plantations until their privileges shall have been definitely established," suspend-

ing "unusual public demonstrations" and restricting the Native Guards' role. Banks, like Butler, tried to entice slaveholders to the unionist cause by suggesting that slavery could be preserved if the rebellion ceased and "the former constitutional relations be again established." At the same time, he reiterated the federal statute against military officers' returning fugitive slaves and counseled planters to reserve "an equitable proportion of the proceeds of the crops . . . for the support and compensation of labor."³⁸ Slavery was not over, but compensatory labor ought to proceed.

Declaring war against "idleness," "vagrancy," and "crime," Banks initiated a new labor program in February 1863 that further confused the boundary between slavery and freedom. Provost marshals would induce "negroes . . . to return to their families and the plantations where they belong" and take their physical presence as "proof of their assent" to contract. They would then make sure laborers worked "diligently and faithfully" with "respectful deportment to their employers, and perfect subordination to their duties" on the plantations to which they were "bound" for the year. Employers, in turn, agreed to provide food, clothing, proper treatment, and due compensation in the form of wages (sharply reduced to between one and three dollars per month) or one-twentieth share of the crop at the end of the year. Louisiana's working peoples, the majority of whom formally remained slaves, were nowhere closer to economic independence under Banks's system. Many refused to be "induced" to return to their old plantations, a group of workers on a plantation near New Orleans collectively vowing they would "rather die" than labor under the new rules. Union officers, moreover, often ended up taking on roles previously held by slave patrols and overseers. Not only did they compel blacks to work on plantations or public works projects, they collaborated closely with planters to discipline workers, at times displaying a viciousness that rivaled the worst of the slavery regime. Planters nonetheless decried the new system as "an actual and immediate emancipation" of Louisiana slaves.³⁹

The British West Indies seemed to afford the only argument in favor of Banks's labor regulations, which satisfied neither slaveholders nor slaves. George H. Hepworth, a "warm Abolitionist" chaplain, arrived in Louisiana in January 1863 skeptical of Banks's plan, personally favoring a more radical plan of confiscating and distributing plantation lands to black families. He, however, changed his mind after touring southern Louisiana and later championed Banks's system in northern antislavery circles. It was the "first grand step" toward freedom, he wrote, "very like the apprentice system in the West Indies between

1834 and 1840, except that, in this case, the black man had more privileges." The plan was "satisfactory to the planter and the negro," affording the latter "an experience which will do much to fit him for the freedom which he is destined if the war continues." But African American struggles for freedom would not wait. "The negroes come back on to the plantation," a provost marshal reported, "with altogether different feelings . . . a spirit of independance [*sic*]—a feeling, that they are no longer slaves, but hired laborers; and demand to be treated as such." Confronting workers demanding wages and privileges that Banks denied them, planters grew frightened and frustrated. "The wish of the negro is now the white man's law," William Minor lamented. "A man had as well be in purgatory, as attempt to work a sugar plantation under existing circumstances."⁴⁰

Responding to critics near and far and another dreadful season (76,801 hogsheads), Banks took formal steps to abolish slavery and to introduce free labor ideas and institutions in Louisiana. In January 1864, Banks suspended the slavery provision of Louisiana's state constitution until the adoption and ratification of a new constitution that abolished slavery. Then, in February, he established new labor regulations that finally gave laborers (or "hands")—no longer slaves—the right to choose their employers. In addition to increasing workers' monthly wages and shares of net proceeds, Banks also included provisions on schools for black children and land allotments for laborers' private use. These were significant advances. But teaching the freedpeople "the necessity of toil," despite "the revolution through which we are passing," remained paramount in Banks's agenda. Once laborers chose their employers, they would be "held to their engagement for the year, under the protection of the Government." Instances of malingering, disobedience, indolence, insolence, and crime would be punished by the forfeiture of wages and "labor upon the public works, without pay." To further insure a full year's labor, Banks required that at least half of the monthly wages be retained until the end of the season and advised employers "to discourage monthly payments so far as it can be done without discontent, and to reserve till the full harvest the yearly wages." Banks, at the same time, pledged the crops toward the payment of laborers to assure final compensation.⁴¹

Although Union officials acknowledged at last what Louisiana's slaves had envisioned all along—that slavery would not survive the war—they continually failed to grasp the limits of their own ideology. What ultimately ended slavery and inaugurated the elusive search for freedom lay within the enslaved peoples

themselves, whose visions of freedom extended beyond Union labor regulations. Never losing sight of their own interests, they sought the kind of economic independence that northerners' sermonettes told them they ought to desire. In 1863, a group of "old and crippled" slaves in Terrebonne Parish, for instance, were allowed to work their runaway planter's estate—the planter had taken all of his able-bodied slaves to Texas—without any assistance. "No White men in Louisiana could have done more or better than these Negroes[.]" remarked a federal official, "& they well deserve the reward of their labor (the Crop) and the Encouragement of the Government." But the federal government provided little to no encouragement to such promising efforts.⁴² The vast majority of the freedpeople had no choice but to sign labor contracts as directed and compelled by Union officials. Within these confines, however, they struggled to increase their independence, preemptively seizing Saturdays and holidays as their own time and preferring to tend to their garden plots over plantation crops. Women, the majority of the labor force in war-torn Louisiana, often took the lead. "They seem to think they can leave work when they please," a planter complained of his female workers.⁴³

Over the course of the war, Union labor policies gradually, though never completely, accommodated laborers' insistent demands and complaints. Maj. Gen. Stephen A. Hurlbut, Banks's replacement, issued new labor guidelines in March 1865 which expanded laborers' rights and wages, including a stronger clause on liens against crops and other property to insure payment. Hurlbut's order, however, retained his predecessors' structure—lengthy labor contracts that combined compensation and compulsion—and reproduced their racial logic. Contract violations, including leaving a plantation without permission, would still result in the forfeiture of all earned wages and "forced labor on public works, without pay." Union officials continued to assume that Louisiana's freedpeople lacked the motivation to work, the individual initiative that defined a free labor society. To underscore this point, Hurlbut imposed a poll tax on "all colored persons" in the Gulf Department "so that the active labor of this race may contribute to the support of their own helpless and disabled."⁴⁴ These were the regulations in place as the war drew to a close.

The contentious dynamic forged by laborers, planters, and federal officials during three tumultuous years would outlive the Civil War, with no party able to determine Louisiana's fate alone. The war unleashed the revolutionary consciousness deeply engrained in the minds of Louisiana's enslaved workers, a force that destroyed antebellum social relations, if not to the extent they had

hoped for. Planters longed for the old regime. Only "corporal punishment"—rather than "increased pay"—would effect "obedience, honesty and faithful labor," a planter stated, among "a people entirely oblivious of moral obligations resulting from their contract." By the spring of 1865, planters had no choice but to concede acrimonious negotiations over labor contracts as a sad fact of life. After a disappointing season, many of A. Franklin Pugh's laborers either searched for new employers or held out for a contract under Hurlbut's terms, flatly rejecting the offer of a share of the crop. "It was very distasteful to me, but I could do no better," Pugh admitted. "Every body else in the neighborhood has agreed to pay the same and mine would listen to nothing else."⁴⁵ Indeed, planters ignored at their own peril federal authority over labor (and, as before, over sugar markets) and laborers' demands. As the work of reconstructing their plantations and the nation-state began, Louisiana planters found themselves envisioning a different kind of freedom, the kind they knew to exist in the West Indies after "apprenticeship."

Eyeing Coolies and Cane

Louisiana sugar planters looked abroad to cope with their postwar predicament because the world they knew and ruled was no more. The state's once thriving sugar industry was on the brink of extinction, with no better prospects on the horizon. The last wartime harvest from the 1864 crop had yielded only 10,387 hogsheads of sugar, not even enough to meet the local market that had to resort to imported Cuban sugar. Less than 200 of the 1,291 antebellum sugar plantations remained in operation by 1865, one after another a casualty of war, debt, and other forces beyond the planters' control.⁴⁶ Many planters were pressed to liquidate their estates on terms that an Ascension Parish planter called "a Suicidal Sacrifice of property." Two years after the war, a Freedmen's Bureau agent still noted numerous plantations "not cultivated owing to the insolvency of their owners or proprietors." Above all else, Louisiana planters blamed emancipation for their woes and demanded that the federal government deliver them from the throes of wage labor. "History proves that the labor of free negroes can not be made profitable," a planter argued before a federal commission. "The negro population is so large in comparison with the white, and the territory so great, that I don't see how it is possible that the parties can exist free together." Sugar production, he insisted, could not survive in units smaller than five hundred acres, given the high capital requirements, or "without an absolute certainty" of labor.⁴⁷

Louisiana sugar planters also faced greater competition from abroad, their wartime demise—not unlike Saint Domingue earlier—contributing to major shifts in global sugar production. The Civil War provided a major impetus to sugarcane production in Hawai'i, a kingdom that had fallen increasingly dependent on the U.S. economy throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. By 1850, haoles (white foreigners) had engineered a transformation of the islands into a model of capitalist social relations, transferring most of the land, capital, and government positions into their own hands. The stage was set for a haole oligarchy, whose sights fixated on sugar beginning in the 1860s when Louisiana's secession and destruction opened up the West Coast market.⁴⁸ On top of Hawai'i and Europe's budding beet sugar industry, Louisiana planters continued to face their venerable rivals from the Caribbean in a national market that they no longer controlled. A St. Louis merchant had informed his brother, a Louisiana sugar planter, during the war that prices were "altogether governed by values in the New York market," which relied on Puerto Rican and Cuban sugar imports. The future looked bleak. The lack of "sufficient protection from the General Government" and "unfair competition in Cuba," mourned the *New Orleans Times*, would likely worsen as "the people at large are much more interested in obtaining cheap sugar than in fostering the sugar producing interests of Louisiana."⁴⁹

Asian migrant laborers, the so-called coolies, played a pivotal role in the global expansion of sugar production in the second half of the nineteenth century, a development not lost on Louisiana sugar planters. Exporting cheap sugar became synonymous with importing cheap Asian labor, both integral aspects of a worldwide system of capital accumulation. The "pacific domination" of the industrial working class in western Europe and North America through mass sugar consumption, as Sidney Mintz argues, was intricately tied to the brutal domination of enslaved African labor and, increasingly, Asian indentured labor in the Mascarenes, the Caribbean, and the Pacific.⁵⁰ Within this context, and as the congressional passage of the anti-coolie-trade law in 1862 indicated, the Civil War by no means halted American renderings of Asian coolies. To the contrary, as Americans (and Confederates) wrestled with conflicting visions of freedom, they were again drawn to coolies, whose wartime representations reproduced their ambiguous and contradictory antebellum status. Asian coolies recurrently and paradoxically embodied the hopes, fears, and anxieties of those struggling to sustain and abolish slavery.

Eager to cultivate a climate favorable to abolition, antislavery writers of the Civil War era studied postemancipation societies in the Caribbean for relevant

precedents and lessons. The West Indies held the hidden truths behind the "recuperative power in Free Trade" and "Free Labor," Lydia Maria Child argued in a tract on the economic benefits of abolition. Hers was just one of many antislavery pamphlets produced to refute a popular perception, and a favorite proslavery argument, that emancipation had failed miserably in the Caribbean.⁵¹ The logistics and ramifications of postemancipation Asian migrations formed a topic of considerable import in these historical and travel accounts, such as in William G. Sewell's widely circulated and excerpted testimonial on the British West Indies. Unlike Child, Sewell expressed "no sympathy with the argument of the Abolitionists" and framed emancipation primarily as a "commercial" question. He visited the various British West Indian islands in 1859 and 1860 with no intent to draw "any inference" or "any conclusion" on slavery in the United States. His letters, originally written for the *New York Times*, were collected and revised in a book that went through two editions during the first years of the war. His timing could not have been better. A nation at war over slavery craved news from the Caribbean.⁵²

Sewell rekindled the idea that Asian coolies marked an advancement from slavery, a mark of free labor that would bear profits for both capital and labor in the right settings. Trinidad, in his estimation, was a prime example. It was an island with "a curious mixture of races—European, Asiatic, African, and American," with almost a quarter of the entire population "Eastern laborers," mostly "Indian coolies . . . fast giving to the island its only want, a laboring class." The "Creoles of African descent," the majority on the island but a diminishing minority on its plantations, were headed "not downward in the path of idleness and poverty, but upward in the scale of civilization to positions of greater independence." Everyone in Trinidad benefited from the system of migrant labor, entirely directed by "government supervision" that was "perfect and complete, and the consideration paid to the wants and comforts of the immigrant is carried to a point that many consider injurious to the planting interest." The "immigrant laborer" was "removed from the over-populated districts of the East to these sparsely-settled islands of the West," free of charge and for a new life of "social and moral progress" and decent wages. Asian workers thus took the place readily vacated by "West Indian Creoles," whose "increased intelligence" guided them to "a more independent mode of life." Both "Creoles and immigrants" had "in their respective spheres, materially improved, and live together in perfect harmony and contentment." Jamaica, Sewell insisted, likewise required "the contract or permanent labor of coolies" to resurrect its economy.⁵³

Sewell's observations of coolie labor in the Caribbean paralleled and bolstered Union rationalizations of wartime labor policies in Louisiana. However much Sewell found the "West India negro . . . doing exactly what a white man would do under the same circumstances," white supremacy pervaded everything he saw and wrote. "Let me not be mistaken," he assured his readers. "I am not setting up the West Indian Creole as an object for hero-worship. I do not place him on an equality with the American or the Englishman." The "untutored negro," after all, was utterly unfit for democracy, the "most easily influenced by a bribe" in the world. Sewell, however, celebrated the emergence of a Creole middle class, a testament to the unyielding power of free labor to overcome racial deficiencies. How, then, was he able to reconcile the universal appeal of free labor and the institution of coolie labor? Like Union officers in Louisiana, Sewell turned to race to justify a government-supervised system of compulsory plantation labor. Coolies, already beneficiaries of socioeconomic mobility through migration, were not equipped for anything else, at least for the moment. They were "industrious and intelligent" but "mild in disposition almost to effeminacy, docile and obedient, contrasting very favorably, in this respect, with the negro, who has more force and character, and the Chinaman, who has more cunning." Their migration was "decreed in the providence of God" to make "these fair and fertile islands" into "an asylum for millions of wanderers from heathenness" for their own "elevation" and "the restoration to prosperity of a splendid inheritance."⁵⁴

In and through the British West Indies, Sewell, if unwittingly, bore witness to America's own potential, the wisdom of the North's past and the South's future. "Truth, we are told, will prevail," he wrote, "and freedom, we know, is truth." And "immigration" formed a centerpiece to a free society. Sewell warned that it had to be "a free immigration, violating in no points of theory and in no details of practice the grant of liberty conferred by the Act of Emancipation upon these islands and their populations forever." "Immigration" under contract was nothing less than tutelage for "a degraded people," managed by a benevolent and neutral government. Beyond laborers, Sewell beckoned "settlers and farmers from Europe or America, who will stimulate, by the force of example, the sluggish energy of the Creole peasantry . . . who will create an independent public opinion, and who will elevate the middle classes of Jamaica far above the present standard of questionable civilization." A free labor advocate through and through, Sewell envisioned the West Indies on a path toward general prosperity and individual mobility, with "the Anglo-Saxon's rapid and determined

strides" leading "negroes and half-castes" and "coolies" to opportunities unavailable under slavery or in Asia.⁵⁵

Racial arguments on behalf of coolies could be directed just as easily against them, romantic racialism and moral uplift giving way to racial dystopia and moral degeneracy. In his prize-winning book on the French West Indies, translated into English in 1863, Augustin Cochin made observations similar to Sewell's on the overall economic success of abolition and the racial traits of Asian workers, but he could not have drawn a more contrasting conclusion on "immigration." The "East Indian" was "sober, more intelligent than the black, but less robust," he wrote, while the Chinese were "generally robust and laborious" and acclimated to sugarcane production. Although he found neither group objectionable on these grounds, he explained that his opposition "rose from the ruling cause in every question of race—the cause on which religion alone can act,—morals." Only "one power alone could conquer" the "immorality of the Chinamen and Indians," but "these are the races of all others most difficult to convert to Christianity." Cochin dreaded their addition. "Baleful to the freedmen, an evil counsellor to the colonists, immigration creates above all a permanent danger to the social and moral state of the colonies," he implored. "On thinking of these nooks of the globe, where crowd and mingle together masses of negroes, Indians, Chinamen, and Malays, with a handful of whites, one shudders for the race, threatened by deplorable mixtures, and for morality and good order, afflicted by this invasion of a heathenism which Christianity has not time to break through." Lest his readers miss his point, he exclaimed: "Fancy a St. Domingo peopled by Coolies!" Cochin advised that energy be directed toward aiding the freedpeople instead.⁵⁶

Comparisons of the racial and economic merits of black and Asian labor generated contradictory conclusions regarding both groups. If the "negro" was "universally preferred" in the West Indies, as Cochin argued to defend emancipation and to condemn coolie labor, other observers exploited the same logic to defend slavery and to condemn coolie labor. Around the time Union troops took over New Orleans, *De Bow's Review* published an article that claimed abolition as a British ploy to monopolize the world market in "tropical agriculture" by eradicating the "slave-labor sugar of Cuba and Louisiana" and resorting to "coolie labor" in its own colonies. "We fight against nature's laws in seeking to impose tropical field labor on the white and olive races, and to release the black race from it," it concluded, "and we, moreover, violate true liberty in so doing." A delegate at Maryland's wartime constitutional convention made a similar

argument against abolition, stating that "the English nation . . . the great champions and advocates of freedom for the negro race, have themselves repudiated their own doctrines . . . and under the garb of coolie apprenticeship reintroduced slavery where they had once abolished it, and in a manner and by means much more objectionable than it any where exists in the United States."⁵⁷ Coolies in the Caribbean were some of the final straws clutched by proslavery propagandists in their struggle to hold onto their vanishing "peculiar institution."

The Civil War broke the antebellum consensus that the migration and employment of Asian coolies signaled a form of slavery, a consensus that had culminated in the passage of a federal law ostensibly designed to protect these unsuspecting subjects from their cruel captors. The consensus was broken not by proslavery ideologues—who continued to denounce British hypocrisy—but by free labor advocates. In a nation at war, with Union officials besieged by runaway slaves and in search of law and order, the British West Indies represented a beacon of hope. Government-sponsored "apprenticeship" and "immigration" afforded a historical justification for Union wartime policies, appearing as a hopeful harbinger of things to come, namely a peaceful, gradual, and profitable transition to free labor through long-term contract labor. If the British West Indies illustrated the profits of the rule of law, Saint Domingue epitomized the destruction of revolution, a fate to avoid at all costs. The revolutionary potential of the Civil War caused Union officials and antislavery writers, already partial to British imperial decrees, to accept, indeed to champion, state intervention as the most sensible and judicious path to freedom, even as they perpetually compromised their own notions of free labor in the process. The federal prohibition of the coolie trade, Union labor policies in Louisiana, and positive assessments of emancipation in the West Indies—even Sewell's and Cochin's divergent conclusions on coolies—were logical products of the free labor ideology refracted through white supremacy and exigencies of war.

Race had lain at the heart of antislavery and proslavery criticisms of Caribbean coolieisms before the war, but its significance grew as northerners came face to face with the task of applying their free labor principles to a people identified with slavery, free labor's antithesis. During the war, federal officials found it more convenient to rebuke slavery and slaves (and then ex-slaves) than to interrogate the limits of their own ideology and policies. In Louisiana, as elsewhere, they rationalized compulsory practices with assumptions on racial shortcomings. In a pattern that would become more pronounced after the war, as historian Thomas C. Holt argues, emancipators in the British West Indies and the

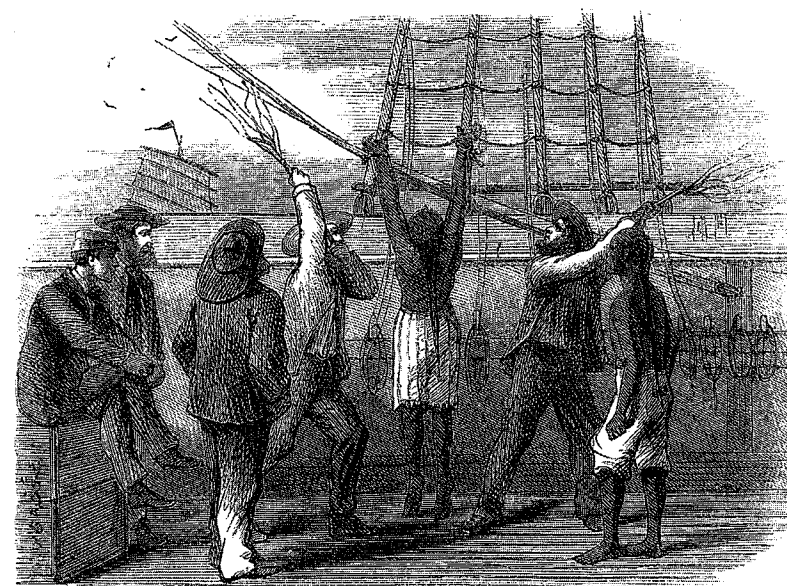
United States increasingly explained the freedpeople's resistance to their edicts with overtly racist theories, allowing "the reformers to maintain their faith in their liberal democratic ideology which justified the bourgeois world they had created."⁵⁸ In the same vein, as northerners looked abroad for historical guidance, they came upon another group of workers seemingly ignorant of what they deemed free labor's inherent and universal virtues, a godsend in Sewell's view and in Cochin's a recipe for nightmare.

The intellectual ethos behind antislavery arguments and the social and political ferment of emancipation, in the end, generated new American perspectives on coolies during the Civil War. First, coolieism was once again hailed as a free alternative to enslaved labor, a civilizing mission that benefited the coolies as much as anyone else. Second, the institution of coolieism was assailed for its inhumane conditions and its inferior human subjects. Neither perspective was unprecedented per se, but the varying ideas embedded therein had melded into new contradictory positions and juxtapositions neither possible nor desirable before the war. No one, for example, had suggested, as Sewell did, that the *success* of free labor among the freedpeople had created a legitimate demand for coolies in the Caribbean. And neither antislavery diplomats in China nor proslavery ideologues in the Old South had concentrated on the inhumanity of coolies in their opposition to coolieism. As long as slavery existed on U.S. soil and its defenders and foes fought over its relative morality and brutality, debates over the nature of the institution (coolieism) had taken precedence over the nature of its victims (coolies). As free labor advocates strove to resolve free labor's universalism with the realities of long-term contract labor in the South, they intensified the racial scrutiny of coolies (and blacks), within and beyond the United States.

Edgar Holden's elaborately illustrated article, "A Chapter on the Coolie Trade," exemplified how anxieties surrounding emancipation affected wartime interpretations of Caribbean coolieisms, including the China-Cuba coolie trade, long the object of American scorn. Published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1864, Holden could not have been more unambiguous in his antislavery sympathies. "Gigantic outrages have been enacted," he declared, "but more than this, an old form of slavery has been instituted under a new name, and many a deluded Coolie is to-day under a more hopeless and terrible bondage than the African from the Gaboon." His "very brief account," he hoped, might provide insights on "one of the greatest problems of the age—the finding [of] an efficient substitute for slave labor." From kidnappings and farcical inspection in China

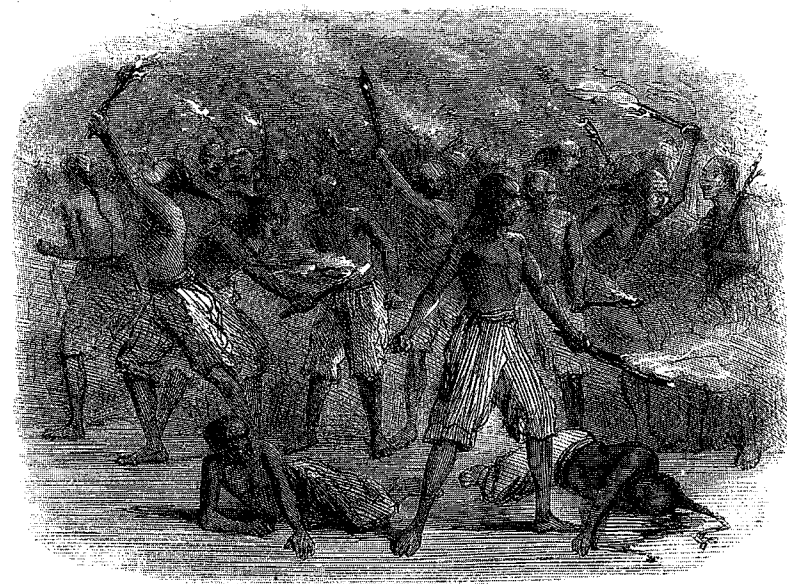
to sale and abuse in the Americas, the entire trade smacked of human bondage in the worst form. Up to this point, his account merely reinforced the resounding sentiment against the trade, a sentiment that federal legislators had encoded into law. Holden's portrayal, however, took a curious turn as he shifted from a broad historical overview of the coolie trade to the voyage of the U.S. vessel *Norway*, a ship filled with a cargo of 1,037 coolies, "our crew" numbering sixty, and "several lady passengers and children" on their way back to the United States via Cuba. He foreshadowed the ill-fated voyage by quoting a letter from Havana on the "malicious and vengeful disposition" of the coolies and the likelihood of "a serious outbreak, perhaps revolution" if "the present system of oppression" persisted.⁵⁹

Rather than demonstrating the inhumane aspects of the trade, Holden's words and accompanying pictures dehumanized coolies. Aside from casual asides on



"Preserving the Peace," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 29 (June 1864): 5. Edgar Holden's article, "A Chapter on the Coolie Trade," condemned the inhumanity of the coolie trade.

Courtesy of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW236402.



"On the Lower Deck," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 29 (June 1864): 10. Holden's article also dehumanized Chinese migrant laborers in the process.

Courtesy of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW236412.

the "barbarians" committing suicide or "constantly quarreling," he devoted the bulk of his article to "a plot the most cold-blooded and inhuman," divulged "in the heat of passion and revenge" by a coolie engaged in a "not unusual quarrel" below deck. "The leaders were desperadoes who had voluntarily come to the barracoons," Holden revealed, "having studied the plot for weeks; and ere they had been on board an hour were at work, urging, with every plea of cupidity or revenge, the rising *en masse*, murdering every man who opposed, seizing the ship and cruising as they chose." The rebels planned to set fire to the vessel and, as the crew ran to put out the flames, "to rush up" and "massacre every man as he came in their way, and thus gain possession." Two days later, as foretold, the crew awoke in the middle of the night to flames and "a yell like that of ten thousand demons" and instantly managed to lock the main hatch and arm themselves with every weapon on board. The initial uprising had been contained with minimal injury, only an officer wounded and a coolie shot in the breast.

The crew then threw tarpaulins over the hatches, aimed a "stream of water" below, and "shot down with remorseless vengeance . . . till ere long not one could be seen from any point on deck."⁶⁰

The rest of the narrative, framed as a classic battle between the forces of evil and good, recounted the violent struggle between the "foiled wretches" and the outnumbered but better-armed crew. Amid the "ominous lull" following the original outburst, the crew found cracks through which "the miscreants could be seen gliding hither and thither, their dark forms tinged with a dusky red glare from the smouldering flames, or grouped together in consultation." For two nights, the coolies periodically, "with terrific yells" and "as if animated by one impulse," rushed "from one end of the deck to the other, making one's blood almost curdle at the conviction that they had actually found a way of escape." Four coolies chained above deck tried "to join in the *melée*," only to be discovered and beaten or shot. Refusing to surrender as ordered, one of the "rioters" "dipped a stylus in the blood upon the decks" and demanded that the ship proceed to Siam, where "a certain number may leave her," before resuming the original course. The ship would burn otherwise. The captain, crew, and ladies "bravely" worked together to suppress "the fury of the mutineers" who ultimately capitulated and "sued for pardon." By the time the ship disembarked in Havana, 130 Chinese had died, 70 from the "mutiny" and the rest mostly from a dysentery epidemic.⁶¹ Holden's story essentially was a tale of Saint Domingue (or any other slave rebellion), except, this time, the white minority won. That the crew and human cargo eventually landed in Cuba, where slavery and coolieism reigned, was a fitting conclusion.

Holden's article conveyed, at best, conflicting messages that emblemized the countervailing judgments on coolie labor swirling across the seas. Coolies were all over the map. They suffered under horrid conditions but rebelled for no reason and therefore deserved violent repression. From Hawai'i came early accounts of the "vicious" and "inefficient" nature of "Chinese coolies" and better hopes for "Hill Coolies of India" or "coolies from Polynesia" during the wartime sugar boom.⁶² Other prognostications had coolies bound for cotton production in Algeria and the U.S. South and American "free negroes"—acclaimed as a cheaper and superior labor source than "Coolie Importation"—for sugar production in the British West Indies. The colonization of blacks abroad, a vision of freedom popular among Republicans, deeply troubled *Harper's Weekly*, which warned against a "negro empire . . . rearing its head menacingly somewhere on our Southern border" and the replication of "systems of coolie and

negro immigration" in the United States. Republicans in Congress and American missionaries in China, meanwhile, continued to demand the prohibition of the "coolie slave-trade" that ensnared only "reckless and profligate fellows" and "ignorant and unsuspecting villagers."⁶³ Characterized as slaves and immigrants, rebellious and docile, male and effeminate, and neither black nor white, coolies were thrown back into the netherworld between slavery and freedom during the Civil War. The indeterminacy of their status was an opening that Louisiana planters would exploit in their drive to establish what William Minor hoped would be slavery "under some other name."

Demanding Coolies

In April 1861, Raphael Semmes arrived in New Orleans to assume the command of CSS *Sumter*, the first naval vessel to fly the flag of the Confederate States of America. After converting to "war purposes" the packet ship, which formerly plied between New Orleans and Havana, Semmes and his crew made their way down the Mississippi River toward the Union blockade in the Gulf of Mexico. In June, they broke away from Union ships on their trail and headed to the Caribbean, where they would spend the rest of the year enforcing their own blockade of sorts. The *Sumter*'s primary mission was to disrupt American trade in the West Indies, arresting, confiscating, and setting ablaze U.S. vessels as Semmes saw fit. "Our first prize made a beautiful bonfire and we did not enjoy the spectacle the less because she was from the black Republican State of Maine," he wrote elatedly in his log. The *Sumter* came upon a wide array of vessels—American, Spanish, Dutch, French, British, Prussian, Danish, and Swedish—engaged in all kinds of trade, including the shipment of sugar and