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A COMMUNITY OF SOULS

An Introduction

IBRAM X. KENDI

IN AUGUST 1619, WHEN THE TWENTY “NEGROES” STEPPED OFF the ship *White Lion* and saw the British faces, they didn’t know.

As their feet touched Jamestown, Virginia, they didn’t know their lives would never be the same. They didn’t know they would never see their community again.

Maybe they did remember the waters on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean surging into the Cuanza River that flowed into their West African homeland. Maybe they did not, too weary from the Middle Passage to picture Ndongo.

The West African nation of Angola derives its name from *ngola*, the royal title of Ndongo’s head of state. The twenty Ndongo people who arrived in Jamestown in August 1619 had likely been seized in a slave raid earlier that year in modern-day Angola and brought to the Portuguese port colony of Luanda unaware that they were pregnant with a new community.

In Luanda, they joined about 350 other captured Ndongo people, all now herded like chattel onto the *São João Bautista*. The Portuguese slave traders set sail for Spain’s plantation colony of Vera Cruz, Mexico. But they never arrived. The *White Lion*, an English privateer captained by John Jope, and another English privateer, the *Treasurer*, attacked in the glistening Caribbean waters. Not as abolitionists. As warriors against Europe’s declining superpower at the time: Spain.

The men-of-war kidnapped from the kidnappers a community of sixty or so enslaved people, probably the healthiest and youngest aboard. They divided the human bounty between the *Treasurer* and the *White Lion* and headed north to the British colonies.

The twenty or so Ndongo people went into labor as the *White Lion* sailed up the Atlantic. Historical forces were shaping this community—and the community was shaping historical forces. The community delivered—and was delivered—on Virginia's shores on August 20, 1619, the symbolic birthdate of African America.

The Ndongo people were not the first people of African descent to land in the Americas. The first arrived before Christopher Columbus. Some people from Africa may have joined Spanish explorers on expeditions to the present-day United States during the sixteenth century. A revolt of enslaved Africans prevented Spanish slaveholders from establishing plantations in current-day South Carolina in 1526. "A muster roll for March 1619 shows that there were already thirty-two African slaves" in Virginia, historian Thomas C. Holt explained. But no one knows how or when they arrived. No one knows the *precise* birthdate of African America.

Perhaps no one is supposed to know. African America is like the enslaved woman who tragically never knew exactly when she was born. African America is like the enslaved man who chose his own birthday—August 20, 1619—based on the first record of a day when people of African descent arrived in one of the thirteen British colonies that later became the United States. Since 1619, the people of African descent arriving or born in these colonies and then the United States have comprised a community self-actualizing and sometimes self-identifying as African America or Black America. *African* speaks to a people of African descent. *Black* speaks to a people racialized as Black.

BLACK AMERICA CAN BE defined as individuals of African descent in solidarity, whether involuntarily or voluntarily, whether politically or culturally, whether for survival or resistance. Solidarity is the womb of community. The history of African America is the variegated story of this more-than-400-year-old diverse community. Ever

since abolitionist James W. C. Pennington wrote *The Origin and History of the Colored People*, the inaugural history of Black America published in 1841, histories of Black America have almost always been written by a single individual, usually a man. But why not have a community of women and men chronicling the history of a community? Why not a Black choir singing the spiritual into the heavens of history? *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619–2019* is that community choir for this historic moment.

Award-winning historian and editor Keisha N. Blain and I assembled a community of eighty Black writers and ten Black poets who represent some of the best recorders of Black America at its four-hundred-year mark. The community is a remarkable sampling of historians, journalists, activists, philosophers, novelists, political analysts, lawyers, anthropologists, curators, theologians, sociologists, essayists, economists, educators, poets, and cultural critics. The writing community includes Black people who identify (or are identified) as women and men, cisgender and transgender, younger and older, straight and queer, dark-skinned and light-skinned. The writers are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Africa and the African diaspora. The writers are descendants of enslaved people in the United States.

Most of the pieces in this volume were written in 2019. We wanted the community to be writing during the four-hundredth year. We wanted *Four Hundred Souls* to write history and *be* history. Readers of this communal diary will forever know what Black Americans were thinking about the past and present when African America symbolically turned four hundred years old.

Each of the eighty writers here chronicles a five-year span of Black America's history to cover the four hundred years. The volume's first writer, the Pulitzer Prize-winning creator of *The 1619 Project*, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, covers from August 20, 1619, to August 19, 1624. The volume's final writer, Black Lives Matter cofounder Alicia Garza, covers from August 20, 2014, to August 20, 2019. Each piece has been written distinctively while being relatively equal in length to the others, making for a cohesive and connected narrative with strikingly different—yet unified—voices. A choir.

And collectively this choir sings the chords of survival, of struggle, of success, of death, of life, of joy, of racism, of antiracism, of creation, of destruction—of America’s clearest chords, year after year, of liberty, justice, and democracy for all. Four hundred chords.

Each piece revolves around a person, place, thing, idea, or event. This cabinet of curiosities of eighty different topics from eighty different minds, reflecting eighty different perspectives, is essential to understanding this community of difference that has always defined Black America.

Four Hundred Souls is further divided into ten parts, each covering forty years. Each part concludes with a poem that recaptures its span of history in verse. These ten poets are like lyrical soloists for the choir, singing historical interludes. Sometimes history is best captured by poets—as these ten poets show. Indeed, the first verses sprang from those original twenty Ndongo people.

VIRGINIA’S RECORDER GENERAL John Rolfe, known as Pocahontas’s husband, produced Black America’s birth certificate in 1619. He notified Sir Edwin Sandys, treasurer of the Virginia Company of London, that “a Dutch man of Warr . . . brought not any thing but 20 and odd Negroes” and traded them for food.

Not anything?

Life was not promised for this newborn in 1619. Joy was not promised. Peace was not promised. Freedom was not promised. Only slavery, only racism, only the mighty Atlantic blocking the way back home seemed to be promised. But the community started to sing long before anyone heard that old spiritual:

We shall overcome,
we shall overcome someday.

There is no better word than *we*. Even when it is involuntary—meaning to be Black in America is to almost never be treated like an individual. The individual of African descent is not seen. The Black race is seen in the individual. All Black women are seen in the woman. All Black men are seen in the man.

Racist power constructed the Black race—and all the Black groups. *Them*. Racist power kept constructing Black America over four hundred years. *Them* constructed, again and again. But the antiracist power within the souls of Black folk reconstructed Black America all the while, in the same way we are reconstructing ourselves in this book. *We* reconstructed, again and again. *Them* into *we*, defending the Black American community to defend all the individuals in the community. *Them* became *we* to allow *I* to become *me*.

Individuals of African descent came to know that they would not become free until Black America became free. Individuals bonded into community to overcome.

And we—the community—did manage to overcome at times. The community managed to secure moments of joy and peace amid sorrow and war. The community managed to invent and reinvent cultures and subjects and objects again and again. The community managed to free itself again and again. But someday has not yet arrived. The community is still striving to overcome four hundred years later.

There may be no better word to encapsulate Black American history than *community*. For better or worse, ever since the twenty Ndongo people arrived, individuals of African descent have, for the most part, been made into a community, functioned as a community, departed the community, lived through so much as a community.

I don't know how the community has survived—and at times thrived—as much as it has been deprived for four hundred years. The history of Black America has been almost spiritual. Striving to survive the death that is racism. Living through death like spirits. Forging a soulful history. A history full of souls. A soul for each year of history.

Four Hundred Souls.

PART ONE



1619–1624

ARRIVAL

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES

FOUR HUNDRED YEARS AGO, IN 1620, A CARGO SHIP LOWERED its anchor on the eastern shore of North America. It had spent sixty-six grueling days on the perilous Atlantic Ocean, and its 102 passengers fell into praise as they spotted land for the first time in more than two months.

These Puritans had fled England in search of religious freedom. We know all their names, names such as James Chilton, Frances Cook, and Mary Brewster. Their descendants proudly trace their lineage back to the group that established self-governance in the “New World” (that is, among the white population—Indigenous people were already governing themselves).

They arrived on the *Mayflower*, a vessel that has been called “one of the most important ships in American history.” Every fall, regaled by stories of the courageous Pilgrims, elementary school children whose skin is peach, tan, and chestnut fashion black captain hats from paper to dress up like the passengers on the *Mayflower*. Our country has wrapped a national holiday around the Pilgrims’ story, ensuring the *Mayflower*’s mythical place in the American narrative.

But a year before the *Mayflower*, in 1619, another ship dropped anchor on the eastern shore of North America. Its name was the *White Lion*, and it, too, would become one of the most important ships in American history. And yet there is no ship manifest inscribed with the names of its passengers and no descendants’ society. These people’s arrival was deemed so insignificant, their humanity so incon-

sequential, that we do not know even how many of those packed into the *White Lion*'s hull came ashore, just that some "20 and odd Negroes" disembarked and joined the British colonists in Virginia. But in his sweeping history *Before the Mayflower*, first published in 1962, scholar Lerone Bennett, Jr., said of the *White Lion*, "No one sensed how extraordinary she really was . . . [but] few ships, before or since, have unloaded a more momentous cargo."

This "cargo," this group of twenty to thirty Angolans, sold from the deck of the *White Lion* by criminal English marauders in exchange for food and supplies, was also foundational to the American story. But while every American child learns about the *Mayflower*, virtually no American child learns about the *White Lion*.

And yet the story of the *White Lion* is classically American. It is a harrowing tale—one filled with all the things that this country would rather not remember, a taint on a nation that believes above all else in its exceptionality.

The Adams and Eves of Black America did not arrive here in search of freedom or a better life. They had been captured and stolen, forced onto a ship, shackled, writhing in filth as they suffered and starved. Some 40 percent of the Angolans who boarded that ghastly vessel did not make it across the Middle Passage. They embarked not as people but as property, sold to white colonists who just were beginning to birth democracy for themselves, commencing a four-hundred-year struggle between the two opposing ideas foundational to America.

And so the *White Lion* has been relegated to what Bennett called the "back alley of American history." There are no annual classroom commemorations of that moment in August 1619. No children dress up as its occupants or perform classroom skits. No holiday honors it. The *White Lion* and the people on that ship have been expunged from our collective memory. This omission is intentional: when we are creating a shared history, what we remember is just as revelatory as what we forget. If the *Mayflower* was the advent of American freedom, then the *White Lion* was the advent of American slavery. And so while arriving just a year apart, one ship and its people have been immortalized, the other completely erased.

W.E.B. Du Bois called such erasure the propaganda of history. “It is propaganda like this that has led men in the past to insist that history is ‘lies agreed upon’; and to point out the danger in such misinformation,” he wrote in his influential treatise *Black Reconstruction* (1935). Du Bois argued that America had falsified the fact of its history “because the nation was ashamed.” But he warned, “It is indeed extremely doubtful if any permanent benefit comes to the world through such action.”

Because what is clear is that while we can erase the memory of the *White Lion*, we cannot erase its impact. Together these two ships, the *White Lion* and the *Mayflower*, bridging the three continents that made America, would constitute this nation’s most quintessential and perplexing elements, underpinning the grave contradictions that we have failed to overcome.

These elemental contradictions led founder Thomas Jefferson, some 150 years later, to draft the majestic words declaring the inalienable and universal rights of men for a new country that would hold one-fifth of its population—the literal and figurative descendants of the *White Lion*—in absolute bondage. They would lead Frederick Douglass—one of the founders of American democracy—to issue in 1852 these fiery words commemorating an American Revolution that liberated white people while ensuring another century of subjugation for Black people:

This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom.

What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, “may my right hand forget her cunning, and may

my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!” To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. My subject, then fellow-citizens, is AMERICAN SLAVERY. I shall see, this day, and its popular characteristics, from the slave’s point of view. Standing there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.

The contradictions between these two founding arrivals—the *Mayflower* and the *White Lion*—would lead to the deadliest war in American history, fought over how much of our nation would be enslaved and how much would be free. They would lead us to spend a century seeking to expand democracy abroad, beckoning other lands to “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” while violently suppressing democracy at home for the descendants of those involuntary immigrants who arrived on ships like the *White Lion*. They would lead to the elections—back-to-back—of the first Black president and then of a white nationalist one.

The erasure of August 1619 has served as part of a centuries-long effort to hide the crime. But it has also, as Du Bois explained in *The Souls of Black Folk*, robbed Black Americans of our lineage.

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. . . . Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and

warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving?

Would America have been America without her Negro people?

We cannot fathom it. Black Americans, by definition, are an amalgamated people. Our bodies form the genetic code—we are African, Native, and European—that made America and Americans. We are the living manifestation of the physical, cultural, and ideological merger of the peoples who landed on those ships but a year apart, and of those people who were already here at arrival. Despite the way we have been taught these histories, these stories do not march side by side or in parallel but are inherently intertwined, inseparable. The time for subordinating one of these histories to another has long passed. We must remember the *White Lion* along with the *Mayflower*, and the Powhatan along with the English at Jamestown. As Du Bois implores, “Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable?”

The true story of America begins here, in 1619. This is our story. We must not flinch.

1624-1629

AFRICA

MOLEFI KETE ASANTE

NO ONE KNOWS THE PRECISE DATE OF THE ARRIVAL OF Africans in North America. Africans could have arrived centuries before the historical record indicates. We know they arrived in what is now South Carolina with Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón in 1526. In 1565 a marriage was recorded between Luisa de Abrego, a free African woman, and Miguel Rodríguez, a Segovian conquistador, in Spanish Florida. This is the first known Christian marriage in what is now the continental United States. Those Africans in Spanish Florida eventually fought against the colonists and found refuge among Native Americans. The ones who did not escape into the forest eventually made their way to Haiti.

By the time the first British North American colony was established in 1607, Africans had already been in the Caribbean region for over one hundred years. Africans entered the Jamestown colony at Point Comfort in Virginia in 1619. By 1624, a tapestry of ethnic convergence in North America was already being woven. Yoruba, Wolof, and Mandinka people had already been taken from their coasts and brought to the Americas. It is this mixture of cultures that constitutes the quintessential African presence in the British North American colony.

Throughout these years, Africans back on the continent fought off the threat of political dismemberment as the European powers, including the English, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and French, attacked the continent's people and resources in a constant barrage of

murder, theft, and brutality. In 1626, on the eastern side of Africa, Emperor Susenyos I of Ethiopia agreed to allow Patriarch Afonso Mendes the primacy of the Roman See over the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The Roman See quickly renamed the Ethiopian Church the Catholic Church of Ethiopia; this arrangement would not be permanent because the Ethiopians would later advance their autonomy.

In other developments taking place in Africa, Muchino a Muhatu Nzingha of the kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba of the Mbundu people met with the Portuguese governor in 1622. By 1624, war was on the horizon. João Correia de Sousa, the Portuguese governor, offered Nzingha a floor mat, instead of a chair, to sit on during the negotiations—an act that in Mbundu custom was appropriate only for subordinates. Unwilling to accept this degradation, Nzingha ordered one of her servants to get down on the ground, and she sat on their back during negotiations. She agreed to become a Catholic in 1622, but by 1626 she knew she had made a mistake in her fight against Portuguese slave traders. Whatever negative traits the Portuguese saw in Africans, the English Puritans came to Massachusetts in the late 1620s with an attitude just as horrible. They believed that Africans were similar to the devil and practiced an evil and superstitious religion.

Back in West Africa, the remnants of the Ghana, Mali, and Songhay kingdoms were losing their people to the encroaching European merchants who kidnapped Africans in what became the largest movement of one population by another in world history. Mandinka, Peul, Wolof, Yoruba, Hausa, and other ethnic groups would be uprooted on one side of the ocean and planted on the other.

Since no *African slaves* were brought to the Americas, but only *Africans who were enslaved*, it is safe to assume that among the arrivals in the 1620s were the usual human variety of personalities with an equally impressive number of character traits. Out of the cauldron that was developing under the hegemony of Europeans emerged several recognized types: the recorder of events, the interpreter of events, the creator of events, the advancer of events, the maintainer of events, and the memorializer of events.

Each of these archetypes was rooted in African cultures and stretched back in time long before 1624. The *recorder* (whom the Wolof and Mandinka referred to as the *djeli* and whom the Serer, Asante, Yoruba, and Bakongo called by other names) functioned as the one who listened to everything, saw everything, and remembered the secrets of all, so that he or she could later recall patterns of the past. The *interpreter* was a seer, whose purpose was to make sense out of the familiar and the unfamiliar, so that the African population would be sustained by the integration of African motifs, icons, and values into the rifts of the new place. The *creator* of events emerged in the 1620s as the African person who farmed, cleared the forests, and confronted the difficulties of living in a world made by Europeans, whose assaults on African dignity and Native Americans' inheritance were constant. The *advancer* of events was the person who sought to adjust African cultures and values to the newly forming American society. To advance events is to expose the nature of American activities in the early frontiers of the colonies and to encourage a form of governance that would secure the rights of Africans. The *maintainer* of events exhibited a clear conception of the society in order to service the polity with integrity, harmony, and preparedness for any eventuality. The *memorializer* of events assumed a spiritual role in the community, suggesting to other Africans in the colonies the need for African people to take account of and remember the events that created community. Many times these individuals would bring out the spiritual characteristics inherited from their African origins.

All these roles were played by women and men in the early period of African socialization in the Americas; they would become the archetypes through which the African community would tell its own story, establishing its heroic nature and distinguishing its epochal struggle for liberation from that of other peoples over the generations.

1629-1634

WHIPPED FOR LYING WITH A BLACK WOMAN

IJEOMA OLUO

MY MOTHER IS WHITE, AND I AM BLACK. SHE IS MY BIOLOGICAL mother. Half of my genetic makeup came from her. My skin is not the rich deep brown of my father's, having been lightened to a deep tan by my mother. I have my mother's eyes, my mother's face—and yet she will always be white, and I will always be Black. When people want to know why my skin is the color it is, or why my features are racially vague, I will say, "I am half Nigerian," or "I am mixed-race Black," or "my mother is white." But I am not white—I'm not even half-white. My mother is white. I am Black.

My mother is white and I am Black because in 1630 a Virginia colonial court ordered the whipping of Hugh Davis, a white man, as a punishment for sleeping with a Black woman. He was whipped in front of an assembled audience of Black and white Virginians, to show everyone what the punishment would be for "abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a negro."

Prior to the whipping of Hugh Davis, anti-Black racism already existed in the colonies. At the time, when there were scarcely one hundred Africans in Virginia, anti-Black racist ideas operated mostly in religious terms—whites referred to themselves as Christians and Africans as heathens.

Anti-Black racism did not arrive on the shores of the New World fully formed. Step by step, anti-Blackness and slavery justified,

strengthened, and expanded each other, building a vast network of systemic inequity that dictates large amounts of Black and white American life to this day.

But in 1630 the whipping of Hugh Davis wrote one important concept of race in America into law: the exclusivity of whiteness.

Davis was not whipped because he had polluted a Black woman. There was no record of the Black woman in question being punished for polluting herself with whiteness. Davis was whipped for polluting whiteness—his own and that of his community. This was the first recorded case of its kind in the United States, establishing that whiteness was susceptible to pollution from sexual contact with Blackness, and that “pure” whiteness must be protected through law.

I remember my mother asking me a few years ago why I did not call myself half-white. I explained to her: “You cannot become part-white.”

Whiteness is a ledge you can only fall from.

The fact that whiteness was something that could exist only in purity, not in percentages, was something reinforced throughout my entire life. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of other children asking me if I was adopted. After answering that no, I was not adopted, the white lady they saw with me was my mother, they would still stare at me confused, unable to comprehend how I came to be. As I grew older, teachers, bosses, and police officers would see only my Blackness. When people met my mother, they would look at her with pity, imagining the story of a white woman lost—lured and abandoned by Blackness and left with two Black children to forever remind her of her fall.

To many, my mother represented the fears of those white colonial Virginians who had ordered Hugh Davis whipped brought to life. Purity forever tainted, bloodlines lost. Establishing whiteness as a race of purity meant it was not something that could be mixed, it could only be turned into something else—removing it from whiteness altogether. The idea that racial mixing would not spread whiteness or even alter it but would destroy it would become a primary motivation for many racist laws and attitudes.

With the whipping of Hugh Davis, we saw the first separation of Black from white in the North American colonies as an issue of white survival instead of racial preference. This fear would lead to violence far beyond the whipping of a white man for lying with a Black woman. Shortly after establishing the legal need to protect whiteness from contamination, the consequences for such contamination were shifted from the white participant to the Black person who dared pollute whiteness. By 1640, when another white man was brought before Virginia law for impregnating a Black woman, it was the Black woman who was whipped, while the white man was sentenced to church service.

By the 1800s, this fear and anger over the possible destruction of whiteness justified the segregation of cities and towns, workplaces and schools, that would consign Black Americans to substandard living, working, and educational conditions. It justified the arrests, beatings, and lynching of Black Americans. Even today the fear of racial destruction heard in warnings of “white genocide” made by white hate groups rationalizes violence against Black Americans.

The idea of white purity not only served to narrowly define whiteness for over four hundred years, it also ensured that Blackness could hardly benefit socially, politically, or financially from proximity to whiteness in any meaningful way. If a white parent’s offspring ceased to be white because the other parent was Black, then those offspring were cut off from all opportunities that whiteness afforded, and so were their offspring for generations to come. If we cannot always recognize Blackness in skin tone, we can recognize Blackness in unemployment rates, poverty rates, school suspension rates, arrest rates, and life expectancy.

And so today I am Black, and my mother is white. I am Black because I have no choice but to be, and I am Black because I choose to be. While I may always be Black to the cop who pulls me over, and to the manager evaluating my work performance, I also choose to be Black with my friends and family. I choose to look in the mirror and see Black.

I have been accused of allowing white supremacist notions of race

to dictate how I see myself. I have been told that in this day and age, over fifty years since antimiscegenation laws were deemed unconstitutional, I have the freedom to claim the whiteness of my mother.

Every time I was told that my hair was too kinky, it was my Black hair that was disparaged. Every time I was told that my nose was too wide, it was my Black nose that was rejected. Every time I was called a monkey or a gorilla, it was my Blackness that was hated. Every time I was called loud or angry, it was my Blackness that was feared.

And it is my Blackness that has fought back. My Blackness that has survived. The vast majority of Black Americans, often through the rape of Black ancestors by white enslavers, have the ancestry of white Americans running through them. But when the privileges of whiteness were kept from us, it was our Blackness that persevered. I am so very proud of that.

I love my mother. I see her face when I look in the mirror. But whiteness, as a political and social construct, exists because of the fear of my very existence, and it functions to this day to aid in my oppression and exploitation.

Until the systemic functions of whiteness that began with the whipping of Hugh Davis are dismantled, I cannot claim whiteness. And as long as my survival is tied to my ability to resist the oppression of white supremacy, I'll be damned if I'll let whiteness claim me.

1634-1639

TOBACCO

DAMARIS B. HILL

BEFORE HE BECAME A PLANTER, ROLFE TOLD GO-GO THAT stalagmite was a diamond. He had never seen any actual diamonds but couldn't admit it.

Diamonds in the colonies were travelers' lies, like the streets of gold and the mercy of missionaries. The only real thing in his life was an African girl he plucked from Bermuda, the one twin who wasn't traded for Spanish tobacco seeds on the high seas off the legal coast of what used to be called Virginola. That girl was carried into Jamestown and appeared as a speck of wonder to the eye of a young Indian princess called Pocahontas. This girl's skin with its brush of indigo was a lush wonder among the pale settlers the Indian princess witnessed.

And now Rolfe loved her. He showed her how to find the veins in each tobacco leaf, showed her how to crawl between the rows and look for parasites. Ever since the enslaved African and tobacco appeared in Jamestown, English colonists found ways to trade for food and plant tobacco after the last frost. Pocahontas was young and sure that this little girl was a Jogahoh, a trickster who knew the secrets of the earth. And that became the name they started calling her, Go-Go. What power did Rolfe have to make the magic people do his bidding?

No one was left to tell the record keepers about Go-Go's sister, the one Rolfe traded for the sweetest tobacco seeds a Spanish conquistador could smuggle. He quickly pacified his anxiety about leaving the

other twin with the conquistadors sailing back to Portugal, because they were on their way to their wives. Why worry about the girl? Where was the room for worry in the New World? The anxiety about a lost twin? Where was space to remember any of them?

It is August 1635. Rolfe is long dead, and the indigo girl Go-Go is an old woman who has made generations in the marshes of Virginia, while the English cycle in on sponsored passage to the Americas, dreaming about a better life than London had to offer. In the squalor of London, they were nursed at poverty's breasts, especially the women. Even with the odds of three men to one woman, none of them found fortune on the passage. No man had a penny to pay. After a few weeks at sea and as the rations got low, few of the men honored English law or cared how some hoity man lost his head for raping his rich wife, as was the punishment. The men were tired of taking turns on one another and began to reason about raping women. This was not the only abuse these English women would come to know. Their bodies would come to know how a snake is wicked only if it is under your foot and how a leech can become an anchor. They came to know that either could drown you in a few inches of water and that the lush leaves of tobacco did not provide shade. They came to know the work without boundaries.

Before and after 1636, ships come from Angola and the Caribbean carrying Africans who add life to the scourge of death in the colonies. When they arrive, the Indians and indentured whites who speak to them tell them about the ten colonists who became two in the first year. Then they tell them about the packs of English who creep up like wild crops in the forest and always with a woman running away. Then they say that everything was new when the Rolfe showed up with seeds and the indigo girl, the Jogahoh, who grew up without sickness and became the woman Go-Go. Then they count her children and grandchildren aloud. They explain how to know her. Her hands and skin stained blue with other-world Godliness. The Indians tell the Africans that Go-Go was the one who made this tobacco spring from the earth. The Indians tell the Africans that the English have proven to be liars since the first lot, and that the latest lie is: "Only the African can keep the Spanish tobacco alive." The lie is that

the Africans are the only ones who can cut tobacco at the base and survive the stalk.

The truth is that King Charles can't get enough of taxes. By 1639, he divides Virginia into shires, and everyone needs to count every body to calculate the assessment owed to the king for his armies. It is in this year that Go-Go calls out her sister's sacred name as she watches her pale-eyed granddaughter sold across the river to cover the tax on tobacco.

1639-1644

BLACK WOMEN'S LABOR

BRENDA E. STEVENSON

ENSLAVEMENT IN THE AMERICAS WROUGHT MULTIPLE, complex horrors in the lives, families, communities, and cultures of the millions of Africans who fell captive to the inhumane system of the Atlantic slave trade. Those who arrived in British North America were hardly immune to these brutalities. Not the least of these abuses was the persistent assault on gendered identities as part of the effort to erase captives' humanity, self-worth, and traditional roles within their Indigenous cultures and communities.

One of the first attempts to codify these practices took place in March 1643, when Virginia's General Assembly passed the following measure:

Be it also enacted and confirmed that there be four pounds of tobacco . . . and a bushel of corn . . . paid to the Ministers within the several parishes of the colony for all tithable persons, that is to say as well for all youths of sixteen years of age as [upwards?] and also for all negro women at the age of sixteen year.

These few words designated a Black female of sixteen years or older as a "tithable"—meaning that taxes paid to the church would be assessed on these women. Neither white nor Indigenous women had that distinction. In that way, Virginia's earliest leaders legally equated

African women with men, erasing these women's public claim to feminine equality with other women. These elite white men did so through British colonial society's most important legal institution, their elected governance body. Their justification was that taxing Black women was a necessary part of the financial support structure for the colony's most important sociocultural establishment, the Church of England.

The impact on the lives of African women in the colony, whether they were indentured, enslaved, or free, was immediate. Enslavers passed the pressure of having to provide the taxes assessed for their Black bonded women directly onto these women. The legal designation of Black women as fundamentally different, in body and character, from other women in colonial society directly influenced African women's workloads and the punishments they endured if they could not meet these expectations. These enhanced labor assignments, in turn, damaged women's health, prenatal care, and the amount of attention that they could give their dependent kin. Single, free Black women struggled to make their own tax payments, a financial obligation that contributed to the likelihood of their impoverishment and dependency. They also suffered the consequences of being viewed as less desirable spouses in the eyes of other free Blacks who were reluctant to take on their additional financial responsibilities. This "othering" of Black women in colonial American society was foundational in the assault on Black femininity, masculinity, the Black family, and the sociocultural roles of Black adults.

From this initial effort, and from many more that were rapidly legalized or customarily practiced in the seventeenth century, an image of Black womanhood emerged that adhered to female gender prescriptions neither of Africans nor of Europeans. It was a womanhood synonymous with market productivity, not motherhood; with physical prowess instead of feminine vulnerability; and with promiscuity rather than modesty or a heightened moral sensibility. Such a distortion of Black women's physical, emotional, cultural, gendered, and spiritual selves led to the broad public's imagining of Black women as workhorses, whores, and emasculating matriarchs. Today

this historical misrepresentation remains a common “justification” for the theft of our children; our physical, medical, political, and sexual exploitation; and our broad criminalization.

The timing of the 1643 legislation was neither accidental nor incidental. It occurred once it was clear that the colony would survive and could turn a profit with sufficient labor resources. By the third decade of British residence, African female workers were a part of the formula for colonial settler success. The fledgling British mainland colony’s 1620 census counted fifteen such female workers that year, all thought to have arrived on the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer* in 1619. While more than a few perished in the Anglo-Powhatan War of 1622 or other military hostilities, as well as from disease, exposure, malnutrition, random acts of violence, poor medical attention, and accidents, the cargoes of bound Black female workers continued to arrive. Although no population enumerations have been recovered for 1640, ten years later Virginia was home to three hundred Africans, many female laborers among them.

The skills that the first arrivals brought with them prepared them to be productive farmers and livestock keepers. Many who arrived from Angola, for example—like many of the earliest captives in British North America—were skilled farmers. In their home communities, they had cultivated a variety of crops, some for many generations. The crops included various types of corn and grains such as millet and sorghum, as well as bananas, plantains, beans, peanuts, pineapples, rice, pepper, yams, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, palm oil, and citrus fruits. They were accustomed to clearing land by using slash-and-burn methods, and they used hoes to prepare soil and to remove weeds. They practiced crop rotation. Many also had raised, butchered, traded, and prepared for the table cattle, goats, chickens, sheep, pigs, and other livestock.

Labor in their West-Central African homes was gender distinct, unlike their experiences in early-seventeenth-century Virginia and other British settler colonies. Among farming peoples, men cleared the brush and cultivated tree crops such as those that produced palm oil and wine and from which they made medicines and sculpted. Women planted, weeded, and harvested other crops. Men were re-

sponsible for building houses, making cloth, sculpting, working iron, and long-distance trading and hunting. Women cooked, cared for their children, and performed other domestic tasks. Women in seaside communities also dived for marketable seashells and boiled salt water in order to produce salt, another highly sought-after market item.

It did not take long before their skills as livestock keepers, domestics, and especially agriculturalists were recognized, prompting one mid-seventeenth-century Virginia governor to note that the planting of crops would occur “on the advice of our Negroes.” Settlers, however, demanded that Black women perform the same tasks as Black men. These women, like Black and white indentured men, had to clear their owners’ heavily wooded frontier lands, carry wood, and help construct dwellings, outhouses, and fences. Archaeological records from the seventeenth-century Chesapeake, for example, document the kinds of upper skeletal damage that young Black women sustained, probably by carrying heavy loads of wood on their heads or shoulders. They routinely planted, nurtured, weeded, and harvested corn and other plants, in addition to caring for tobacco—the most important cash crop of the era, and a very labor-intensive one. As early as five years after the first known captive arrivals, one planter could boast that his Black and white laborers produced a tobacco crop valued at ten thousand English pounds.

When not working outside under the supervision of men, African women worked for their mistresses. Their assigned domestic tasks included barnyard labor, tending to livestock, cooking, butchering, salting and preserving meat, making soap and candles, housecleaning, laundry, sewing, carding, spinning, weaving, bathing, dressing and dressing the hair of their mistresses, and caring for children—their owners’ and their own. Many also had to perform sexual labor.

Between 1639 and 1644, work defined Black women’s lives, and the law of 1643 codified their differentiation from other women. This law led to a host of inhumane, defeminizing consequences for African and African-descended women. The endorsement by British North America’s first permanent colony’s two essential bodies of influence, the General Assembly and the Church of England, proved unshakable.

1644-1649

ANTHONY JOHNSON, COLONY OF VIRGINIA

MAURICE CARLOS RUFFIN

I COME DOWN TO MY WATER ON MORNINGS SUCH AS THESE. Sunrise breaks through fog and tree limb like skin beneath skin, the smell of another's fire. This is what the memory of my own death and rebirth has done. Killed my sleep and woke my spirit so that rest is not possible. So many mornings, I wander as a sick bear cub does. It's fog, a dream to my mind. But clear as this gnarled branch under my boot.

In the hold of the small ship that stole me from my home. Tall but not yet strong I crouched in the dark with others like me, six men and two women between barrels of red palm oil and what bolts of Europe wool and silk went unsold. We shared skin, but not tongue. One woman's eye never blinked during her hand motions that showed when she was taken three children of her flesh became orphans.

Lashed to the underdeck in chains, we gaped like mud fish when water pooled in the hull not well sealed by pitch. I never left the green hills of my homeland, which the Portuguese men had taken to hunting as their own. But we were on the vast water, and I knew our pomegranate husk would sink if sea came. After starving on rope-tough meat and sitting in my own leavings for endless days, I liked to dive deep and never rise. But not so. We landed ashore. My rebirth and years of forced work followed.

But that was before. How my life has bloomed like a strange flower. Since I met my Mary. Skin of my skin. Soul of my soul. I was

told of steel horses. But that is less pleasing to me than this: once my freedom earned, my term of service done, my freedom fee collected—no more lashes to drive me to the field before the cockerel's crow—I bought Mary's freedom and the contracts of five men to work my will. And in the way of the good laws of this land—King Charles's laws—gathered a fifty-acre plot for each manservant. I claim this stretch of God's land as my own. And I work as I please.

Rising the path from the riverbank, I find a small bush. Not a bush but a deer melting back to earth. Feasted on. Nature's way. But I gather a few leafy branches, cover the critter, and cross myself. My hand comes to the right side of the cross, where Jesus's palm hung bleeding, when I freeze for leaves crunching behind. I don't have my musket or my scythe. But I have hands. I clinch my fist.

"Pap!" the voice says. My youngest, Walter, runs in the bramble, his knees bouncing in the dew. "Quick! Come see."

"Such a call!" I say, rubbing Walter's head. "Respect your old father." His mouth moves. His eyes dart. But he does not bend his head. I squeeze his shoulder in pride of him. His nerves ride him. That is his spirit. But his body is coming on strong, less bedeviled by bad humors in his lungs. The ones that took his older brothers when they were cubs.

"That white man, one of the brothers Parker. He walking in the patch." Walter leads along the creek trail, the beery nose scent of sas-safra everywhere. Turtle climbs a log. Reeds and rushes brush my legs. Many acres. God's land. My land. To be Walter's land.

My tobacco field with a ghost mist on it. The man stoops here and again. He touches my leaves as if they are born of his labor. Robert Parker. Some of these fields were his father's. But today the Parkers have only one man under contract and a few hay acres upriver.

John Casor, my third man, holds the rein of the Parker horse and holds a roped calf. John fears his old master, Robert. John stands on the path by the field, his look goes everywhere except to Robert.

"You let a fox in my patch," I say. I send Walter to the cornfield to give word.

John dips his head. "He wouldn't listen to the likes of Poor John." We have the same outside color, but his insides are smoke to me. He

shows dumb, but I know he is cunning. He shows weak, but he has a lion inside. He works less well than he can, so I task him to my fields longer.

My hands on my sides, I say, "You come out from there."

"Look ye here," Robert says, his sweaty hair dripping onto his shoulders, a long dagger in his belt. He has a false manner of speaking, a squire's manner. They call Robert a freeboot who betrayed the crown during his journeys. Other men would be in stocks if not in servitude. But here he stands. Free as clover. "It's my old mate, Antonio."

I step into my patch. When he came before, he did not smile as I picked at his body for flea beetles that eat tobacco. But that plague is gone, or I would pick again. "You know my chosen name is Anthony, after the saint."

"So it is," he says.

Colin, my best field man, gallops to the field's edge and dismounts. White-skinned. A big man, a head above us.

"I came as soon as I heard, Mr. Johnson. Now, this one wouldn't be bothering you today, would he? I'll toss him in the shuck if that's the matter."

"If you would have your head cleaved from your shoulders, papist." Robert spits in the dirt. Touches his dagger.

"No," I say. "I have need of an animal." My oldest daughter, Eliza, is to be married to a freeman like myself called Wiltwyck of New Sweden. I chose a fatted calf as her gift. A fat calf would mean a strong union and hardy children. But disease spread among the many beasts of the colony last spring. Robert has the last ones.

"I assure you this is finest of my stock, valiant Moor."

A fine calf announces itself the same as people, by temper. I run my hand across the babe's glossy coat. I place my finger at its teeth, and the creature suckles, its ears moving. A fine calf. I give Robert a leather pouch of forty shillings. He counts each one.

Colin passes to me a legal paper that I unroll. The village justice made this. I am not learned in the work of scribes, but my Mary, who has eyes of stars, is and smiled at it. My daughter Eliza, who is as

learned of work of scribes, will also smile when she has her calf. I show the paper to Robert, who does not look at it.

"I need not sign a deed for the likes of you!" Robert pushes the paper away. "Take the animal as he stands. That is your proof of possession."

"The Lord covers me and mine in eternity, and the king's law covers me and mine here. I keep my papers."

Robert spits again. Part of it hits his own boot. He mounts his horse and pulls the calf behind. Down the path, he dismounts. His dagger flashes in the sun and disappears by the animal's neck. The calf falls to dirt. Robert rides off. Colin shakes his head. John Casor shows his teeth. Colin says Robert has my shillings, and he is right. The calf's tail twitches in the dirt.

"What now, sir?" Colin says.

I am back on the ship in the hold. But my sons and daughters and their sons and daughters are with me in the dark. Chains clink on their legs. We are on the shore. We are in the woods. A girl in the mist of tomorrows watches me from a coach tied to one of the steel horses I was told of. She laughs like she is happy to meet me. And behind her in the coach are her sons and daughters and their sons and daughters.

"The calf dies," I say, "but the law will always hold me. And my Eliza will have her calf."

1649-1654

THE BLACK FAMILY

HEATHER ANDREA WILLIAMS

IN 1649 THREE HUNDRED BLACK PEOPLE LIVED IN THE ENGLISH colony of Virginia. Even fewer Black people lived in the more northern Dutch town of New Amsterdam that later, under British rule, would become New York City.

Slavery had not yet evolved into the pervasive institution that would devour the labor and lives of millions of people of African descent. Still, during these early years, among the small numbers of Black people who were free, enslaved, or lingering in some degree of unfreedom, it is possible to glimpse evidence of family formations and priorities that would become far more visible as slavery expanded.

By the time they reached an American colony, most captives had already experienced forced separation from their families and communities, some of them more than once. They had been taken from families and communities in West and Central Africa and may have lost contact with a close shipmate after the Middle Passage journey. Some lost the family and community they created while they sojourned in the Caribbean or South America before being taken to North America.

Once in America, some of these people created families through marriage, childbirth, and informal adoptions. They remained vulnerable to being sold or given away. Many of them struggled to keep their families intact, to provide protection for their loved ones, and to take advantage of loopholes that might extricate them and their family members from enslavement.

Some Black people also responded to the era's high mortality rates by taking responsibility for children who were not their own. In New Amsterdam, Emmanuel Pietersen and his wife, Dorothe Angola, raised a child of their deceased friends, and when the child reached the age of eighteen, Pietersen sought to gain legal protection for him. In his petition to officials of the colony, Pietersen asserted that his wife had stood as "godmother or witness at the Christian baptism" of Anthony, whose parents had died shortly thereafter. The petition asserted that Dorothe, "out of Christian affection, immediately on the death of his parents, hath adopted and reared him as her own child, without asking assistance from anyone in the world, but maintained him at her own expense from that time unto this day." Pietersen said that he too wanted to promote the well-being of the boy and asked the authorities to officially recognize that Anthony was born the child of free parents, had been raised by free persons, and should therefore be declared free and capable of inheriting from Pietersen. Emmanuel Pietersen realized the tenuous status of Black people in the colony and sought to ensure that the child he and his wife had raised would always be recognized as a free person, despite also being Black. The council granted Pietersen's petition.

Pietersen used very deliberate language in his petition. He was careful to assert that Anthony had received a Christian baptism and that Dorothe Angola had cared for the child out of her "Christian affection." These were consequential claims in those early years for Black people desiring to be acknowledged as free. After all, the Dutch, English, and other Europeans operated at the time under the belief that Christians should not be enslaved, and part of their stated justification for enslaving Africans was that they considered them heathens. If Black people could then prove their Christianity through baptism or marriage in the Christian church, as occurred in New Amsterdam, they might logically be exempted from slavery.

It seems that the baptism loophole was effective for some time. Between 1639 and 1655, Black parents presented forty-nine children for baptism in the Dutch Reformed Church in New Netherland. But in a society become ever more dependent on the labor of enslaved people, laypeople as well as clergy grew concerned about the corre-

spondence between baptism and freedom, and Christianity and freedom.

What would later become New York closed this loophole for maneuvering out of slavery. By 1656, the Dutch Reformed Church, caring more about saving slavery than saving souls, had stopped baptizing Black people. "The Negroes occasionally request that we should baptize their children," wrote a clergyman who ministered to the forty people Governor Peter Stuyvesant owned in Manhattan. "But we have refused to do so, partly on account of their lack of knowledge and of faith, and partly because of the worldly and perverse aims on the part of the said Negroes. They wanted nothing else than to deliver their children bodily from slavery, without striving for piety and Christian virtues."

Ironically, the minister deemed Black parents' desires to free their children "worldly and perverse" because of their emphasis on *physical* freedom, presumably in contrast to the *spiritual* freedom of the Christian people who claimed ownership over them. Although the minister went on to say that when he deemed it appropriate, he did baptize a few enslaved youth, he also noted, "Not to administer baptism among them for the reasons given, is also the custom among our colleagues."

Over time, New Netherland and other colonies imposed more and more restrictions against Black freedom. When Virginia codified the fact that baptism would not free Black people from enslavement, the language of the statute focused on "children that are slaves by birth." In that colony, too, policy makers blocked parents from using Christian baptism as a means of gaining freedom for their children.

In Virginia, Emmanuel and Frances Driggus took care of two adopted children, one-year-old Jane and eight-year-old Elizabeth, in addition to Ann, Thomas, and Frances, the three children who were born to the couple. They all belonged to Captain Francis Pott, although Jane and Elizabeth were not enslaved but indentured for terms of several years. To cover his debts, Pott mortgaged Emmanuel and Frances and eventually was forced to turn them over to his creditor, who lived twenty miles away from Pott's farm, where all the children remained. Emmanuel, who had been given a cow and a calf by

Pott, was eventually able to save enough money to purchase Jane's freedom in 1652, thereby releasing her from her indenture at age eight, twenty-three years earlier than scheduled.

By the end of that same year, Pott prevailed in a lawsuit against his creditor, and Emmanuel and Frances Driggus returned to live on his property in Northampton. Seven years had elapsed since they had lived with their children. Upon their return to Northampton, Emmanuel Driggus faced a new threat to his ability to free himself and his family from slavery through the sale of his cattle—the county moved to prohibit enslaved people from engaging in trade. But Driggus was able to get Pott to put in writing the fact that Driggus legally owned the cattle and was allowed to sell them. Pott later restricted this prerogative, however, when he declared in court a few years later that no one should engage in trade with his slaves without his approval.

Just as Emmanuel Pietersen in New Amsterdam petitioned to protect the free status of his adopted child, Driggus sought to protect his ability to sustain some limited degree of economic autonomy in order to free his family.

More stunning for the Driggus family, though, was when Pott sold their eldest daughter, ten-year-old Ann, for five thousand pounds of tobacco. He also sold a younger son, Edward, four years old. These children were sold into lifetime enslavement.

Frances Driggus died a few years after her children were sold. Emmanuel remarried, and several years later, as a free man, he gave to his daughters Frances and Jane a bay mare “out of the Naturall love and affection.” Jane was free and married; Frances's status is not clear.

Emmanuel Driggus was aware of the perilous lives of his daughters in the Virginia colony. His gift of a female horse who might produce other horses, he likely hoped, would provide his daughters, now in their twenties, with income that might render them a bit less vulnerable. After all, in the 1650s Virginia and other English colonies were racing toward full dependence on the forced labor of Black people.

1654-1659

UNFREE LABOR

NAKIA D. PARKER

IN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS AND IN POPULAR MEMORY, THE EN-slavement of people of African descent is often depicted as an unfortunate yet unavoidable occurrence in the otherwise glorious history of the American republic. Echoing this common sentiment, Republican senator Tom Cotton called slavery “the necessary evil upon which the union was built” in his objection to adding *The 1619 Project* to school curriculums. The United States was indeed built on chattel slavery, which deemed people of African descent inferior to white people and defined Black people as commodities to be bought, sold, insured, and willed. That was certainly evil. It was not, however, “necessary” or inevitable. The system of racialized slavery that is now seared into the American public consciousness took centuries to metastasize and mature.

The March 1655 court case of *Johnson v. Parker* in Northampton County, Virginia, exemplifies the insidious transformations in forced labor practices in the early American colonies. Anthony Johnson, the plaintiff in the case, was an African man who likely arrived in Virginia sometime around 1621 as a captive from Angola, transported across the Atlantic in the slave trade. In the course of thirty years, however, Johnson enjoyed a remarkable fate different from that of millions of African captives. Against insurmountable odds, Johnson survived the harrowing trek to the Americas known as the Middle Passage and eventually married, had children, secured his freedom, and acquired more than two hundred acres of land, livestock, and even indentured servants.

John Casor, another African man, was one of these servants. At the time of the lawsuit, he was working for Johnson under a contract. Unlike Johnson, Casor claimed he'd first come to Virginia not in captivity but as an indentured servant, and he therefore demanded his freedom after he believed he had fulfilled his indenture contract with Johnson. According to Casor, "Johnson had kept him his servant seaven yeares longer than hee ought [*sic*]." Casor likely knew that as an African man, he would face challenges in winning his freedom. In fact, fifteen years before Casor brought his case, in 1640, a Black indentured servant named John Punch ran away from his Virginia owners along with two white servants. After they were recaptured, the court sentenced the two white servants to thirty lashes and one extra year of servitude. Punch's punishment, however, was to "serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere," thereby becoming the first person of African descent considered a "slave for life." Although the institution of chattel slavery had not yet been completely codified into law and racist ideologies connecting Blackness with enslavement were not yet fully formed, it was nonetheless clear at this time that servants of African descent were viewed as different from their white counterparts, subject to being held in servitude for an undefined period of time, unlike white servants, who had clear terms of indenture and were never considered slaves for life.

With the precedent that only people of African descent were held as slaves for life set before Casor, and with his claims of freedom apparently unheeded by Johnson, Casor eventually appealed to one of Johnson's white neighbors, Robert Parker, for help in his quest for freedom. Parker took Casor's side and, over Johnson's objections, took Casor out of Johnson's possession and to his own farm, "under pretense that the said Negro [Casor] is a free man." Johnson, after consulting with his wife, two sons, and son-in-law, reluctantly acceded to Casor's demands, even providing him "corne and leather," as "freedom dues." A few months later, however, Johnson reconsidered his choice and sued Parker in court for stealing Casor. Johnson asserted that Casor never had an indenture; on the contrary, "hee had him [Casor] for his life." The court ruled in Johnson's favor and ordered Casor to

“returne unto the service of his said master Anthony Johnson,” decreeing that Robert Parker cover the costs of the court case.

With the decision of the Northampton County Court, Casor became the first person of African descent in a civil case to be deemed a “slave for life.” Although Johnson initially agreed to free Casor from his contract, the loss of his labor apparently proved too much to accept. Perhaps thinking about ensuring his financial standing and the future of his family, Johnson decided that he needed to possess as much property, both human and inanimate, as possible. And though the court sided with him in this instance, Anthony Johnson and his family faced increasing harassment and threats to his property from his white neighbors. Around 1665, Johnson and his extended family moved to Maryland. Other people of African descent who were able to gain their freedom also bought land in the surrounding area and formed a tight-knit community that provided much-needed support in the face of rising discrimination and mistreatment of Black people. Two years later, in 1667, Johnson’s son, John, acquired forty-four acres of land in Maryland and named the estate Angola, after the African homeland his father had been torn away from over forty years before.

Like Johnson, other masters of indentured servants in Virginia also made calculated choices about which unfree laborers to manumit or retain. In October 1657, Anne Barnehouse, the sister of Christopher Stafford, a white planter from England, followed the wishes stated in his will to free his servant Mihill Gowen, a man of African descent, and his son William, promising “never to trouble or molest the said Mihill Gowen or his sone William or demand any service of the said Mahill or his said sone William.” Barnehouse, however, did not free her servant Prosta, who was William’s mother and perhaps the partner of Gowen. Evidently, Barnehouse had no qualms about obeying the manumission wishes of her brother but could not part with her own servant, who was likely acutely aware of the differences in status between herself, her son, and the father of her child. Five years before the 1662 Virginia law of *partus sequitur ventrem* declared that children followed the legal status of the mother, Barnehouse likely realized that the productive and reproductive labor she could

extract from Prosta outweighed the morality of allowing her to enjoy freedom with her kin.

The English colonizers in the Chesapeake region were not the only Europeans to depend on Black people for labor. By the mid-seventeenth century, enslaved Africans comprised 20 percent of the population of New Netherland, the original homeland of the Lenape Indians—now occupied by Manhattan—making it the colony with the highest percentage of enslaved people at that time. Enslaved people of African descent performed all kinds of labor in the region for Dutch merchants of the West India Company. They cultivated small farms, built forts and churches, and protected the fledgling Dutch colony against Indian attacks.

Just like John Casor in Virginia, however, enslaved laborers of African descent in New Netherland used the labor they performed and the law as freedom strategies. Since enslaved Africans enjoyed the right to use the Dutch legal system, some individuals who participated on the side of the Dutch in conflicts with Indigenous nations petitioned—and often received—the status known as “half-freedom.” The Dutch understood early on that fostering divisions between African-descended peoples and Native people could serve their interests by forcibly removing Indigenous people from their lands to free it for slave-based cultivation. Half-freedom was an appropriate term: those who had this status could not pass it on to their children, unlike the enslaved people in the English colonies, and had to pay the West India Company an annual tribute in exchange for working for themselves. Despite the limitations of this standing, Africans made the most of their circumstances and never stopped pursuing complete freedom.

Africans in early America lived in a society that blurred the lines between freedom and unfreedom, a world of constrained possibilities, a world that could provide only “half-freedom.” And almost four hundred years later, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others serve as a stark and painful reminder that for people of African descent, the United States is still a place of “half-freedom.”

UPON ARRIVAL

JERICHO BROWN

We'd like a list of what we lost
Think of those who landed in the Atlantic
The sharkiest of waters
Bonnetheads and thrashers
Spinners and blacktips
We are made of so much water
Bodies of water
Bodies walking upright on the mud at the bottom
The mud they must call nighttime
Oh there was some survival
Life
After life on the Atlantic—this present grief
So old we see through it
So thick we can touch it
And Jesus said of his wound Go on, touch it
I don't have the reach
I'm not qualified
I can't swim or walk or handle a hoe
I can't kill a man
Or write it down
A list of what we lost
The history of the wound
The history of the wound
That somebody bought them

That somebody brought them
To the shore of Virginia and then
Inland
Into the land of cliché
I'd rather know their faces
Their names
My love yes you
Whether you pray or not
If I knew your name
I'd ask you to help me
Imagine even a single tooth
I'd ask you to write that down
But there's not enough ink

I'd like to write a list of what we lost.

Think of those who landed in the Atlantic,

Think of life after life on the Atlantic—

Sweet Jesus. A grief so thick I could touch it.

And Jesus said of his wound, Go on, touch it.

But I don't have the reach. I'm not qualified.

And you? How's your reach? Are you qualified?

Don't you know the history of the wound?

Here is the history of the wound:

Somebody brought them. Somebody bought them.

Though I know who caught them, sold them,

bought them,

I'd rather focus on their faces, their names.

