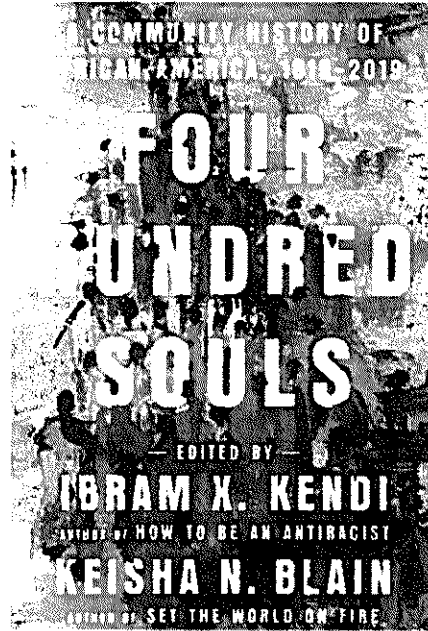


1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



Topic: Slavery and America Part 2: 1699 - 1779

December 9, 2021

6:30 – 8:00 pm

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

1699-1704

Upcoming 1619 programs

All programs hosted on Zoom from 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.

Topics subject to change.

January 13, 2022

Slavery in America Part 3: 1779 - 1859

Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619-2019

February 10, 2022

Slavery In America Part 4: 1859 - 1939

Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619-2019

Please check our 1619 Discussion homepage at:
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Contact: John Piche' at jpiche@heightslibrary.org

THE SELLING OF JOSEPH

BRANDON R. BYRD

SAMUEL SEWALL, A WHITE BUSINESSMAN, RECORDED THE transaction in his typical fashion: "October 12. Shipped by Samuel Sewall, in the *James*, Job Prince, master, for Jamaica: 'Eight hogsheads of Bass Fish.'" The date of departure. The ship carrying his specified goods. The captain ensuring their safe arrival. Their final destination. His book of receipts repeated the mundane rhythms of his ships, of the seas.

The insatiable hunger for slaves lurked in its banality.

The whole business with the West Indies was simply unfortunate, Samuel thought. He had "been long and much dissatisfied with the Trade of fetching Negroes from Guinea." He even "had a strong inclination to Write something about it." That the feeling "wore off" was no indictment of his godliness. Weren't "these Blackamores . . . of the Posterity of Cham, and therefore . . . under the curse of slavery"? Did their masters not bring them "out of a Pagan Country, into places where the Gospel is Preached"? Samuel felt some relief when his West Indian partners reminded him that there were reasons, both divine and natural, for the enslavement of Black people. A part of him wanted, all of him needed, to accept that "the Africans have Wars with one another: our Ships bring lawful Captives taken in those Wars," and to take comfort in the knowledge that "Abraham had servants bought with his Money, and born in his House." The idea of bondage as ancient and foretold, as divine and redemptive, quieted more troubling thoughts. It put his mind momentarily at ease.

The opening of the African trade, the breaking of the Royal African Company's monopoly, removed the comfort of abstraction. The growing number of enslaved people made Samuel recoil. "There is such a disparity in their Conditions, Color & Hair, that they can never embody with us, and grow up into orderly Families, to the Peopling of the Land," he wrote in his diary. These strangers will be the end of our experiment, he predicted.

But were they not men, "sons of Adam," too? Up close, Samuel could not help but notice enslaved people's "continual aspiring after their forbidden Liberty." His doubt resurfaced, the questions rose, until he began to buckle under the weight bearing down on his conscience. Had men misinterpreted the Scriptures, manipulated the stories of curses wrought and servants bought by the ancient prophets? Was the promise of conversion merely an apology for maintaining property in men? He suspected that the defenses of slavery might not hold up to scrutiny, that "the Numerousness of Slaves at this day in the Province, and the Uneasiness of them under their Slavery, hath put many upon thinking whether the Foundation of it be firmly and well laid." He had the feeling, the budding hope, that he was not alone in his suspicions.

He was thinking of ships laden with human souls, of the hundreds of lives bought and sold in Boston, when someone named Brother Belknap rushed in with a path to salvation. The petition being prepared for his General Court called "for the freeing of a Negro and his wife, who were unjustly held in Bondage." It was a portent. Providence. I am called of God, Samuel knew at once. He began writing his apology—the defense of the negroes that no colonist had dared to write before.

Samuel's plea for the slaves, his admonition to any freeman who would hold their fellow men as slaves, came as it had to, in the form of a sermon. Like any good preacher, he began with his argument: "FOR AS MUCH as Liberty is in real value next unto Life: None ought to part with it themselves, or deprive others of it, but upon most mature Consideration." His elaboration called on scripture to show that "all Men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life." He reminded his fellow Christians that "GOD hath given the

Earth [with all Commodities] unto the sons of Adam . . . And hath made of One Blood, all Nations of Men, for to dwell on all the face of the Earth." He summoned the story of Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers although he "was rightfully no more a Slave to his Brethren, than they were to him." He lamented that "there should be more Caution used in buying a Horse, a little lifeless dust; than there is in purchasing Men and Women: Whenas they are the Offspring of GOD, and their Liberty is, Auro pretiosior Omni." More precious than gold.

Samuel understood the terrible doubts that plagued the minds of the men he hoped to sway. He remembered his own willingness to accept that God had made slaves of negroes, pagans, and the posterity of Ham. So he answered the objections of the skeptics to his attack on slavery. He showed the way to their own salvation, toward that elusive state of grace. Repent. Release your slaves. Stop the trade in men. "To persist in holding their Neighbours and Brethren under the Rigor of perpetual Bondage, seems to be no proper way of gaining Assurance that God ha's given them Spiritual Freedom." Man-stealing was assuredly a path away from Heaven.

SAMUEL SEWALL WROTE the advertisement in his typical fashion.

SEVERAL IRISH MAID SERVANTS
TIME MOST OF THEM FOR FIVE YEARS ONE
IRISH MAN SERVANT WHO IS A GOOD
BARBER AND WIGGMAKER, ALSO FOUR
OR FIVE LIKELY NEGRO BOYS

He knew his business dismayed his uncle. Betrayed his namesake. He had read *The Selling of Joseph*, of course; the old man had seen to that. But he had also read the rebuttal from Judge John Saffin. He had been comforted by the argument that hierarchies were necessary, that bondage was natural, that the enslavement of negroes was part of an orderly, divine world. He had been convinced of his own godliness by the idea that "Cowardly and cruel are those Blacks innate."

He had made peace with what the province, with what his place in

it, required. The doubts, the troubling idea that he was a man-stealer, a seller of his own brethren, had faded with each successful sale of a negro slave. Apprehension gave way to conviction. To self-assurance. To the unassailable belief that liberty required slavery. Capital was the real god of this new world, he thought. The future belonged to him; his uncle's protest was already forgotten.

1704-1709

THE VIRGINIA SLAVE CODES

KAI WRIGHT

It is hereby enacted, That all servants imported and brought into this country, by sea or land, who were not christians in their native country . . . shall be accounted and be slaves.

—ACT CONCERNING
SERVANTS AND SLAVES, SECTION 4

IT'S A TRUISM THAT WE SEE THE PAST AS FAR MORE DISTANT than it is in reality: my parents were adults before they could share bathrooms with white people; my grandmother was middle-aged before she could confidently enter a voting booth in Alabama. Yet these images fade easily into gentle sepia tones for me today. That's because it's safety, not wisdom, we're after when we look backward. We picture ugly things at a comfortable distance.

But Americans distort the past in other ways, too. We see horrible people as exceptional, and their many accomplices as mere captives of their times. We tell ourselves we would contain such wickedness if it arose today, because now we know better. We've learned. In our illusory past, progress has come in decisive and irrevocable strokes.

I wonder if that's how Mary and Anthony Johnson felt in 1652 when they petitioned the court for tax relief in Northampton County, Virginia. They had both been enslaved in their youth, but by midcentury they were free landowners, with four children and servants of their own.

They were part of a small Black population that had been in Virginia since colonists arrived in Jamestown, and they must have been optimistic, though they would've seen a lot of change in their lives.

They would have witnessed a developing debate among white Christians about whether Africans were fully human and thus entitled to the protection of God's love. They would have heard about each new law that came down from the legislature, as lawmakers tried to break up the colony's multiracial class of indentured servants. The Johnsons probably would have felt the shift as the colony reordered its mixed servant class into two distinct racial castes. They surely would have felt the cultural and economic space for free or indentured Black people steadily shrinking, as law after law codified who could have sex with whom; who had the legal standing to appeal to the courts when wronged and who had none; who could work or buy or pray their way out of servitude and who couldn't.

What would the Johnsons have thought about the future as this social reordering unfolded? Anthony and Mary did not live to see the Virginia General Assembly hand down the omnibus legislation that would define their heirs' lives and the next century and a half of American life:

It is hereby enacted and declared, That baptism of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage; and that all children shall be bond or free, according to the condition of their mothers.
—Act Concerning Servants and Slaves, section 36

Known colloquially as the "slave codes," the 1705 Act Concerning Servants and Slaves was an effort at finality. It put an end to decades of debating over how to make it clear that Virginia was a white man's colony, one in which a white man's colonial investment was secure, and one in which the law protected the white man's right to enslave Black people. It became the model for all the British colonies in North America. One colony after another codified its racial caste systems and assured white planters that they could enslave increasing numbers of Black people.

What's striking is the care that was taken to make it so. In the

comfortingly distorted view of the past, American slavery came about in the passive tense. That's just the way things were back then. Slavery was an inherited reality, a long-standing if unsavory fact of trade and war. In reality, colonial legislatures consciously conceived American chattel slavery at the turn of the eighteenth century, and they spelled out its terms in painstaking regulatory detail. Virginia's slave codes contained forty-one sections and more than four thousand words.

No master, mistress, or overseer of a family, shall knowingly permit any slave, not belonging to him or her, to be and remain upon his or her plantation, above four hours at any one time, without the leave of such slave's master, mistress, or overseer, on penalty of one hundred and fifty pounds of tobacco to the informer. — Act Concerning Servants and Slaves, section 32

The slave codes of 1705 are among American history's most striking evidence that our nation's greatest sins were achieved with clear forethought and determined maintenance. And in this case as in many others, white elites were incited to act by their fears.

Between 1680 and 1700, Virginia's enslaved Black population increased from 3,000 to 16,380, driven by a decreasing flow of white indentured servants from England and the fact that Africans had better survival rates on the colony's plantations. In the neighboring Carolinas, Black people were nearly a third of the population by 1672, a growth driven by the need for labor on the colony's booming rice plantations.

These demographics presented real threats to white planters, including a potential cross-racial labor movement. Plantation work was close and intimate, and it fostered a troubling solidarity between the growing Black population and white indentured servants. White planters could not afford for such a dangerous bond to form—which is why in 1705 Virginia's legislature did as much to codify white privilege as it did to establish Black subjugation.

All masters and owners of servants, shall find and provide for their servants, wholesome and competent diet, clothing, and

lodging, by the discretion of the county court; and shall not, at any time, give immoderate correction; neither shall, at any time, whip a christian white servant naked, without an order from a justice of the peace. —Act Concerning Servants and Slaves, section 7

Still, there were just too many Black people, and they did not accept bondage. In the years leading up to and surrounding the slave codes, Black defiance was widespread, with unrest stretching from the plantations themselves all the way back to West Africa's Slave Coast. New York passed its own code in 1705, motivated in part by the size of its Black population.

White planters needed legal order to control the unruly and growing Black workforce upon which the colonies' wealth extraction depended. The slave codes provided it. They were among the first American laws to carefully detail the terms and conditions for brutalizing Black people.

If any slave resist his master, or owner, or other person, by his or her order, correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction, it shall not be accounted felony; but the master, owner, and every such other person so giving correction, shall be free and acquit of all punishment and accusation for the same, as if such incident had never happened. —Act Concerning Servants and Slaves, section 34

The 1705 slave codes would not be the final word on anti-Black violence. There would be many more laws: the Fugitive Slave Acts, the post-Reconstruction "Black codes," the Jim Crow court rulings offering impunity for vigilante justice, the sentencing laws of the 1980s, the police militarization of the 1994 Crime Bill, and today's ongoing legal deference to cops who feel threatened by the unarmed Black children they kill.

The myths Americans tell themselves about the past—that it is distant, that people did bad things out of ignorance rather than malice, that the good guys won in the end—encourage a false faith in the

present. They allow us to believe our norms are fixed and that the forward march of progress may sometimes be delayed but never reversed. Bad times will get better, because they always have. We'll be safe.

But the past is close. The slave codes of 1705 are close. The past is filled with people who carried out evil acts with foresight and determination, supported by the complicity of their peers. It contains progress but just as many reactionary entrenchments of old power. White supremacy became the norm in America because white men who felt threatened wrote laws to foster it, then codified the violence necessary to maintain it. They can maintain it with the same intention today, if we allow it.

1709-1714

THE REVOLT IN NEW YORK

HERB BOYD

UN APRIL 6 OR 7, 1712, LESS THAN A YEAR AFTER NEW YORK City's municipal slave market opened for business, two dozen enslaved Africans "gathered in an orchard of Mr. Crook 'in the middle of town,'" according to Governor Robert Hunter.

They "had resolved to revenge themselves," the governor explained, "for some hard usage, they apprehended to have received from their masters." Harsher restrictions on the growing number of enslaved Africans in New York City had led to more resistance.

From the eleven captives brought to New York City in 1626, by 1700 the Black population had increased to more than six thousand, of whom approximately one thousand were enslaved to British owners. In the eighteenth century, depending on the time and place, there were more enslaved African Americans in New York than in some Southern states; more in New York City than in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1800 there were 20,613 enslaved Blacks in New York and 13,584 in Tennessee.

With the city's enslaved population increasing exponentially, harsher restrictions were imposed, and these measures, much like those in the South, only intensified the growing anger and discontent. Slave codes in New York forbade enslaved Africans to assemble in groups larger than three; any slave who broke the law was punished by forty lashes on the naked back; and slaveholders could punish enslaved people for any misdeed in any way they chose except killing

them or cutting off their limbs. And any slave who plotted with others to murder his or her enslaver was tortured and killed.

But that did not stop the rebels in 1712.

Anglican chaplain Anthony Sharpe reported that the majority of the rebels were un-Christian "Koramantines and Pawpaws from the Akan-Asante society of the Gold Coast—probably imported within the previous year or two (so much for the assumption that newcomers from Africa were more docile)." Another account said the plotters tied "themselves to secrecy by sucking ye blood of each other's hand and reassuring themselves by accepting a charm from a free Negro."

Two Native Americans were among the rebels who set fire to a building and, armed with a few guns, clubs, and knives, waited for the whites to approach. "Several did, and were then attacked by the slaves who killed about nine men and seriously wounded five or six others."

Alarmed by the uprising and the deaths, Governor Hunter invoked martial law. The rebels hastily retreated into the woods. The next day the governor and his soldiers sealed off the island of Manhattan to prevent the rebels from escaping. "Hunted down," stated one report, "six of the conspirators cut their own throats (one man killing his wife and himself) rather than be captured."

While only about twenty-five enslaved people were involved in the rebellion, more than seventy others were arrested and brought to trial before a special court convened by the governor. Twenty-three were convicted of murder and two of attempted murder. Twenty were hanged outright, and others experienced excruciating forms of death, including being roasted, slow-turning, on a fire or broken on a wheel. Another had every bone of his body smashed by a man wielding a crowbar until he was dead. Six of them, however, including a pregnant woman, were pardoned. The means of punishment and modes of execution, lawmakers claimed, were consistent with the slave codes of 1708, since the rebels had conspired and wantonly killed members of the community.

After the trials and executions, even more stringent laws were enforced, and the Common Council ordered that no slave could travel about the city after dark without a lantern. The assembly enacted a new law that made manumission or emancipation prohibitively ex-

pensive for enslavers and stipulated that no freed slave could thenceforth own a house or land in the colony.

The new laws were so restrictive that a free Black person became rare in Manhattan. "The real legacy of the 1712 uprising was a new era of routinized brutality and official cynicism toward slaves," said one observer. "Crowds of townsfolk often gathered to watch slaves hanged or burned to death for one offense or another."

Soon enslaved people were not allowed even to speak adversely to a white person, lest they be publicly flogged at a whipping post, as was the fate of one audaciously outspoken Black woman. She was tied to a wagon, dragged through the streets, and subsequently transported to another colony.

That woman, Robin, was just one of many Black New Yorkers who lived in fear, waiting for the next knock on the door, or who watched helplessly as a loved one was snatched from their loving grasp and taken away. If these tragic acts were visited upon African Americans in the North, it's no wonder that even more massive and deadly insurrections occurred in the South.

Things would get worse before they got better, and the hostility vented on the Black population, slave or otherwise, was relentless and vindictive. As such, it was only a matter of time before another band of enslaved and outraged men and women would decide they could no longer endure in silence the obdurate oppression, the lashes of hatred and racism.

In 1741, nearly a generation after the militia put down the slave revolt of 1712, white New Yorkers trembled again in the wake of a rebellion, this one based on an even more elaborate conspiracy, and this one including some white sympathizers. Time and again white racism produced Black resistance. It is one of the longest-running plotlines in African American history.

1714-1719

THE SLAVE MARKET

SASHA TURNER

IN 1714 THE "MEAL MARKET" STOOD IN THE CENTER OF NEW York City. Located where Wall Street meets the East River, between Pearl and Water Streets, the newly designated slave market became the government-authorized site for selling the city's enslaved people. Built by the municipal government, the Meal Market (so called because grains also were sold there) had been there for three years.

But New Yorkers had bought and sold humans for much longer than three years. As early as 1626, the Dutch had imported captive Africans into New York (then New Amsterdam), and starting in 1648 had traded for enslaved people directly with Angola. A New York census recorded settlers importing at least 209 enslaved people from Africa and 278 from the West Indies between 1700 and 1715.

Long before municipal authorities had slave markets, white New Yorkers traded enslaved people aboard ships and in merchant houses. They also traded humans on paper, through lease and mortgage agreements, wills, and private transfers. The slave market was more than a physical location. It was everywhere.

The growth of the slave market was dependent upon the belief that humans were a commodity whose only "socially relevant feature" was the price their bodies commanded. Chains and owner initials effaced tribal markings and clothing that had marked belonging, social distinction, and rank. Traders boiled the needs of these humans down to economic calculations of the cost of sustaining bare life. Investors

dispensed food and medicine merely to keep laborers "wholesome," making them "grow likely for the market."

Just as speculators observed the changing height and size of children strictly with an eye on their labor readiness and market value, so, too, they assessed women of childbearing age based on the "possibilities of their wombs." From the 1662 Virginia law that decreed that all children born of Black women were slaves, to wills that included enslaved people as property, Euro-Americans used the power of language to enact a new reality that a human could be a commodity. The slave market was governed by the chattel principle.

In contrast to the plantation colonies, which purchased the enslaved by the shipload from the oceanic and domestic trades, New Yorkers bought and sold enslaved people individually or in small groups at commercial houses without public notice. The comparably fickle nature of slave ownership in New York made enslaved Africans vulnerable to multiple sales. One enslaved woman named Phyllis was sold six times between owners in Long Island, New York City, and New Jersey. Jack, a boy of twelve, was sold at least ten times to buyers on both sides of the Hudson. The exchangeability of enslaved children was especially pronounced in nonplantation settings like New York that marginally relied on slave labor. Enslaved children were frequently sold to neighbors, friends, and business associates by owners who had no need for more than one enslaved person or were unwilling to pay maintenance costs for an extra enslaved person.

The slave market was a space of exchange, not just an auction block. The mobility of the slave market as determined by slave exchangeability created a nuisance for well-to-do New Yorkers and government officials. A free-range slave market permitted tax-free slave sales, cheating municipal authorities of craved revenues. By the 1710s, enslaved people parading the streets scouting buyers or renters became bothersome to New Yorkers. New York merchants' and vessels' growing participation in the transatlantic slave trade further increased captive presence across the city.

After arriving only in small handfuls for decades, captives landed in New York at an accelerated pace as the eighteenth century went on. Between 1715 and 1741, some four thousand Africans arrived in New

York. The period between 1715 and 1718 accounted for the highest number of arrivals, approximately 40 percent of the total during that era.

Sellers relied on theatrics to create the illusion that humans were just another marketable commodity, valued at the price demanded, and that they were healthy and hardy laborers. Preparation of captives for the market began at least one week prior to opening sale. Agents refreshed them with water and food, filling out and strengthening their emaciated and exhausted bodies. To conceal the "undesired testimony [of] the violence and unsanitary conditions of the slave ships," agents bathed, shaved, and oiled the captives. From palm oil and lard to the more generic "Negro Oyle," traders used various forms of grease to polish captives' skin, giving them the illusion of health and vitality. Slaves marketed locally were similarly treated to extra rations and grooming. Eliminating evidence of aging, sickness, and ill and hard usage was integral to enhancing the value of enslaved people.

Market theatrics were especially crucial to New York's Wall Street. Enslaved people arriving in New York were mostly leftovers (called refuse slaves) from plantation colonies like Barbados and Virginia, where a handful of estates often cleared entire shipments. New Yorkers rarely bought shiploads of enslaved people, instead buying people individually or in small groups. Between 1715 and 1763, for example, only 16 out of 636 British slavers ported in New York, and then only after they had sold the majority of their cargo in the Caribbean and the American South. Captives arriving in the New York market had been twice rejected by Caribbean and Southern mainland buyers, because of perceived medical complaints, physical weakness, old age, and undesirable personal histories (infertility, rebelliousness, or criminal conviction). Traders fattened, polished, and preened refuse slaves as best they could to convince buyers their commodity held value.

Traders carefully staged the slave market to mask the humanity of people who had been turned into a commodity, making it into a theater of jollity and amusement. They plied buyers with wine and brandy while the auctioneer tickled them with jokes and antics, treating them to a lively show of the enslaved body, which was forced to be receptive to being touched and to feign happiness with their bondage. Danc-

ing, jumping, singing, and parading the streets were commonplace “rituals of the marketplace” demonstrating slave value and, crucially, also denying emotions that would have betrayed the humanity of the enslaved.

Jollification and the threat of the lash, however, could not mask the sorrow of parting from loved ones and the revulsion at being fondled by lecherous buyers. The shame and humiliation that enslaved people suffered remained plainly visible in their tears and in the silent screams of their eyes.

1719-1724

MAROONS AND MARRONAGE

SYLVIANE A. DIOUF

IN JULY 16, 1720, THE *RUBY* LANDED IN LOUISIANA. AFTER fifty-four days at sea, 127 men, women, and children from Senegal and Gambia disembarked.

Naturalist Antoine Le Page du Pratz received “two good ones, which had fallen to me by lot. One was a young Negro about twenty, with his wife of the same age.” After six months, the couple ran away. Native Americans captured them sixty miles away, and soon the husband “died of a defluxion on the breast, which he caught [*sic*] by running away into the woods.”

To du Pratz, the couple had run away because they were lazy. The man’s “youth and want of experience made him believe he might live without the toils of slavery,” he said. In fact, the young Senegambians had chosen marronage over enslavement—emblematic of the fierce African resistance of the early 1700s.

Between 1700 and 1724, marronage, revolts, and more than fifty insurrections aboard slave ships caused much alarm throughout the British colonies. In the thirteen North American colonies, maroons—“runaways who hid[e] and lurk in obscure places,” also called outliers—drew attention for the potential threat they posed.

In 1721 Virginia lieutenant governor Alexander Spotswood feared it would be difficult to apprehend “Negroes” who had settled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Should their number increase, he thought they would endanger the frontier settlers and threaten the peace of

the colony. Virginians and Marylanders knew maroon communities were well established in Jamaica, and to prevent a similar development, they instituted a policy of divide and conquer, offering Native Americans two guns and blankets or coats as a reward for each maroon they captured.

William Byrd II, the founder of Richmond, went so far as to recommend ending the slave trade, "lest [Africans] prove as troublesome and dangerous everywhere, as they have been lately in Jamaica. . . . We have mountains in Virginia too, to which they may retire as safely, and do as much mischief as they do in Jamaica." Lieutenant Governor William Bull of South Carolina warned that if the Cherokees were run out of the mountains, their land would become a "refuge to the runaway negroes . . . who might be more troublesome and more difficult to reduce than the Negroes in the mountains of Jamaica."

The specter of Jamaica continued to be used whenever it was convenient, but unlike Jamaican maroons, most maroons in the colonies did not live in distant communities; they melted into their surroundings at the borderland of populated areas. They typically lived in underground, human-made caves, or dens as they called them, dug several feet underground and closed by well-camouflaged traps. Families, mothers with children, and friends could remain hidden there for years. They hunted, fished, and gathered fruit. They received food from friends and relatives and helped themselves to the pantries of plantation owners. They acquired clothes, salt, firearms, and ammunition through trade with free and enslaved Blacks and with poor whites. In the hinterland, maroon communities—comprising from twenty to eighty people—raised crops, poultry, and pigs. They, too, traded and appropriated what they could not produce.

Maroon communities remained a constant threat to slaveholding colonies. In the early 1700s, a North Carolina act deplored that "many Times Slaves run away and lie out hid and lurking in the Swamps, Woods and other Obscure Places, killing Cattle and Hogs, and committing other Injuries to the Inhabitants." Newspapers regularly reported on their numerous "depredations." Petitions to legislatures denounced the damage they caused to livestock, crops, and stores, as well as to the citizens' sense of safety, all the more because they trav-

eled well armed. They encouraged desertion and often organized the liberation of loved ones.

In their "obscure places"—and more than any other population—maroons were attuned to the natural world. They found sustenance and protection in the environment; knowing it intimately was paramount to their survival. The popular image of the wilderness as dangerous and savage served them well. They built a parallel reputation as ferocious people who could measure up against wild beasts. But to them, danger and savagery lay in the slavers' world. "I felt safer among the alligators than among the white men," the maroon Tom Wilson once said.

Maroons' autonomy shattered the racist view of Black people as incapable of taking care of themselves. Besides, their very existence underlined the limits of the terror system used to control the enslaved population. Cornelia Carney—whose father and cousin and their friend were maroons—expressed a common sentiment when she said Black people were too smart for white people to catch them. Of course, that view was exaggerated. Maroons were captured and as a deterrent were tortured or gruesomely executed. Some gave up and returned to slavery. Some died in the woods.

But they had enough success stories to be an inspiration. The maroon Pattin, his wife, and their fifteen children lived underground for fifteen years and emerged only after the Civil War. In the Great Dismal Swamp, a Union soldier encountered children who had never seen a white man. Some maroons did not even know there had been a war.

In the end, the 1720s prediction that warring outliers would descend from the mountains did not materialize. Maroons did launch numerous assaults. Whenever they were outgunned and outnumbered, which was often, they employed the guerrilla tactic of disappearing. But American maroons were not antislavery insurrectionists. Individuals, families, and communities were the norm. They never had the numbers to lead a successful slave revolt. More than anything, they wanted to be left alone. When some plots were discovered, and during Nat Turner's revolt, they were suspected, but nothing could ever be substantiated.

Tenacious. Creative. Self-confident. Fearless. Resilient. They displayed all these qualities and more to their enslaved admirers. Maroons became folk heroes. In the 1930s, formerly enslaved men and women recalled their hard-won and defiant freedom. Maroons created an alternative to life in servitude, a free life in a slave society, a free life in a free state. Free Blacks and runaways were still subjected to white supremacy; only maroons were self-ruled. For three years, the maroon Essex endured hunger, frostbite, and the bites of hounds, but all these hardships were well worth it. When captured, he simply said, "I taste' how it is to be free, en I didn' come back."

Soon, though, maroons disappeared from popular consciousness and scholarly research. But not the essence of marronage: self-determination and freedom outside of white hegemony. The heart of the maroon beat in the establishment of Black towns, the emigration to Black nations, movements for Black power, and Black institution building yesterday and today. Marronage outlived the maroons.

1724-1729

THE SPIRITUALS

COREY D. B. WALKER



And so by fateful chance the Negro folk song—rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas.

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, *The Souls of Black Folk*

WHAT IS THE SACRED SOUND OF FREEDOM? FOR CONTINENTAL and diasporic Africans in North America in the early eighteenth century, the sound would inevitably have been polyphonic. Freedom would have been a sonic cacophony of beats, rhythms, and melodies, clapping and stomping in syncopated time that moved between and beyond purely notational patterns. It would have resembled, reflected, and refracted the stirrings of an Atlantic world in motion.

The sacred sounds of freedom in the Americas included "the syncretic Afro-Brazilian religions of *macumba* and Umbanda, the black Catholic *congado*, and the quasisacred remnants of the otherwise secular *batuque* circle dance." Eighteenth-century America served as a conjuring space for Black sacred sound. African religions—Abrahamic and indigenous—gave expression to the historical, cultural, and religious expressions of these communities. New world African communities deployed this sound in expressing the hopes, joys, dreams, histories, aspirations, and longings of a people with a history who were simultaneously an emerging people creating a new world. A di-

chotomous sacred and secular did not operate within this conjuring context. It was all one. Indeed, as the pioneering musicologist Eileen Southern notes, "The music is everywhere! Often, one needs only to stop and listen."

Enslaved communities in North America were ethnically diverse. These continental and diasporic Africans forged a new world community with a new sound. The music in these communities not only captured the diverse traditions and cultures of Africans, it also developed in dynamic ways to reflect the contingencies of life in North America. Sacred sound transmitted histories, traditions, stories, myths, religions, and culture. "Song texts generally reflected personal or community concerns. The texts might speak of everyday affairs or of historical events; texts might inform listeners of current happenings or praise or ridicule persons, including even those listening to the song. . . . But the most important texts belonged to the historical songs that recounted heroic deeds of the past and reminded the people of their traditions."

The sheer diversity, complexity, and variety of musical forms and styles point to the depth and character of this soundscape in motion. Scholars have attempted to understand this music in a number of ways. Musicologist Guthrie Ramsey reminds us, "A most striking quality of early black music historiography ideology is how writers—particularly African American ones—negotiated the generally accepted 'divide' between Euro-based and Afro-based aesthetic perspectives." Ramsey underscores the challenge of understanding eighteenth-century Black music: to develop an adequate knowledge of the music itself and translate it into an appropriate contemporary idiom. You run the risk of underdeveloping or overdetermining the immense African contributions shaping and forming the music when you make it conform to European-derived musicological registers. A further challenge is the need to hear the music absent the sound and play the music absent notes. You have to find another path to understanding.

Despite the diverse sources of Black sacred music in North America, spirituals were initially presented by Europeans in translation form, in the idioms of European notes and categories. But these

translations were inadequate to the task of expressing the music's rhythmic texture and robust sound. Dena Epstein writes, "Afro-American music included many elements not present in European music and for which no provision had been made in the notational system. For example, Lucy McKim Garrison wrote in 1862: 'It is difficult to express the entire character of these negro ballads by mere musical notes and signs. The odd turns made in the throat; and the curious rhythmic effect produced by single voices chiming in at different irregular intervals, seem almost as impossible to place on score, as the singing of birds or the tones of an Æolian harp.'" The worlds of continental and diasporic Africans could not be fully represented by the notational representation of latter-day ethnographers and musicologists.

So what is the sound of Black freedom? Perhaps it is best to begin by thinking reflexively about the probing question posited by W.E.B. Du Bois: "Do the sorrow songs sing true?"

1729-1734

AFRICAN IDENTITIES

WALTER C. RUCKER

SAMBA BAMBARA, FORCED TO WATCH THE TORTURE AND hanging of an unnamed woman compatriot, stood at the precipice between this world and the next. On December 10, 1731, he awaited his execution.

The leader of a slave plot in French New Orleans, Samba had a complicated past. A decade earlier he had served as an interpreter for the French Company of the Indies near Galam, a gold-producing state along West Africa's Senegal River. Indirectly aiding and abetting the commerce in Black flesh, Samba reportedly led a 1722 revolt in Senegal that temporarily cost the French a trading post. When the fort was recaptured and Samba's role was revealed, French authorities exiled him into Louisiana slavery.

Upon arrival in the French colony, he reassumed his role as an interpreter and used his linguistic skills to help his fellow Bambaras, when they had to appear in court, receive reduced sentences by translating testimony used against them in a favorable manner. His role as translator and his intimate knowledge of the French elevated Samba to the role of leader of the New Orleans Bambara. He leveraged his leadership role to conspire with other Bambaras to massacre all whites from Pointe Coupée to Balize, to free all Bambaras, and to force all Atlantic Africans who were not Bambara into servitude.

At this early moment in the long arc of African American history, concepts of a single Black race and of pan-African unity did not exist. Notions of Black people being one people had yet to be embraced

fully by Africans and their American-born kin. Samba Bambara's 1731 conspiracy was the product of a time when unifying labels like *Black* and *African* had yet to be internalized, had yet to reach their political potential.

In a period that saw the intensification of rivalries between the Spanish, French, and English crowns in North America, Atlantic Africans and American-born Creoles demonstrated their resilience in carving out freedom spaces in a hostile world. In November 1729, a number of enslaved women and men—many from the Bambara nation—joined a Natchez nation assault on a French outpost near present-day Natchez, Mississippi. They killed 237 French men, women, and children and burned Fort Rosalie to ash. Five years later, in June 1734, an enslaved woman named Marie-Joseph Angélique was accused of setting fire to the merchant quarter of Montreal to mask her attempted escape.

Surrounded by French and Spanish colonies on the North American mainland, the British colonies—numbering thirteen with the establishment of Georgia in 1733—faced the same realities and perils as their neighbors. Slavery and enslaved peoples were everywhere; thus, resistance was ubiquitous. By the 1730s, enslaved Africans and their descendants could be found in the Chesapeake colonies (Virginia and Maryland), the Lowcountry and Southern colonies (Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina), the middle colonies (New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania), and the New England colonies (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire). Even though Georgia banned slavery in 1735, enslaved Africans were present in the colony at its inception in 1733. In addition to hosting resident maroons, Georgia was part of an African corridor between British Carolina and Spanish Florida through which enslaved people seeking refuge in St. Augustine, and later Fort Mose, would travel. Indeed, Georgia was founded to serve as a military buffer to deter enslaved women and men from reaching freedom in Spanish Florida.

Within the thirteen British colonies, enslaved Africans and their descendants made the best of the hellish circumstances they faced. Key to their ability to survive were the ritual technologies carried

with them across the Atlantic. These complex systems of belief and worship sustained them and, over time, became the cement that connected peoples from many African ethnic groups who had no prior history of contact. The sojourn into American enslavement, far from being a story about the Americanization of African peoples, was punctuated by cultural innovation and experimentation between enslaved Africans from varying backgrounds.

The epicenters of Black culture in colonial North America were wildly disparate. Though African-born captives and their American-born kin could be found in all thirteen colonies, they clustered principally in the Southern and Chesapeake colonies of the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland. By 1731, however, enslaved Africans accounted for 18 percent of the total population of New York City. In the 1730s, New York had the largest population of Black people of any colonial city north of Baltimore and was second only to Charleston as the urban region with the highest concentration of Africans in North America. Populating Chesapeake tobacco and Southern rice plantations as well as prosperous port cities in the urban North, enslaved peoples were critical to the commercial success of British colonial efforts.

Just as the colonies they came to were varied, enslaved Africans embarked on European slavers from a wide range of coastal regions. Of the 26,107 souls who were carried to British North America in the cargo holds of slavers between 1729 and 1734, known points of origin ranged from the Bight of Biafra (5,531 souls) and Greater Senegambia (4,730 souls) to West-Central Africa (4,636 souls) and the Gold Coast (513 souls). Moreover, within each coastal region were many polities and ethnolinguistic groups. The men and women who would be transformed by Europeans into enslaved "commodities" did not belong to "tribes" and did not live in "backwaters"; nor were they ignorant of the worlds around them. Some understood the intentions of Europeans and, as a result, developed rich folkloric traditions about them as witches, demons, or flesh-eating cannibals. Some imagined their fate across the ocean as a descent into a hellish world populated by evil spirits. Untold thousands met their fears with the hope that suicide would offer either relief or salvation. Others mobilized Afri-

canized Christianity, Islam, or local religious faiths and ritual technologies to aid them in the travails ahead. Three generations into their sojourns in British North America, enslaved Africans and their descendants had not forgotten about Africa.

The creation of African nations or intentional communities was the principal means by which enslaved women and men maintained memories of their homelands. While European enslavers created many of the labels that identified the boundaries of these communities, these categories took on new meanings as enslaved Africans embraced them over time. Among the many ethnolinguistic labels that became part of a new African cultural geography in British North America were Bambara, Mandingo, and Gullah (Greater Senegambia); Eboe and Calabari (Bight of Biafra); Coromantee and Chamba (Gold Coast); Mina (Bight of Benin); and Congo and Angola (West-Central Africa). These identities were continuously reinforced by new streams of enslaved imports. Each of the thirteen British North American colonies witnessed fluctuations in the slave trade due to limited access to African coastal markets and the development of ethnic preferences. In this regard, Senegambians were heavily concentrated in South Carolina and Louisiana during the 1720s due, in part, to their proficiencies in cattle herding and rice cultivation. Enslaved peoples from the Bight of Biafra, widely regarded and rejected as "sickly" and "melancholy" "refuse" in prosperous colonies like Jamaica, were shipped to commercial backwaters like Virginia, where planters had less ability to influence the market. West-Central Africans from around modern-day Angola, representing 40 percent of the total traffic in enslaved Africans, were found everywhere in large numbers due to their ubiquity in the cargoes of slavers.

The slave trade into North America had flows and fluctuations across time and space, but it was patterned. As a result of the concentrations of specific Atlantic Africans in particular colonies and the formation of new African ethnic "nations," the developing slave cultures left indelible marks on what later became African American culture. Thus within the mother wit of many contemporary African Americans is the idea that dreaming about fish means that a close relative is pregnant (West-Central Africa). Some, especially in the


South Carolina and Georgia Lowcountry, have family memories of the ring shout (West-Central Africa), and many in and near Charleston still produce sweetgrass baskets (Greater Senegambia). Others, especially in Edenton, North Carolina, remember and continue to commemorate the Jonkonnu festival in December (Gold Coast).

Many African Americans still eat black-eyed peas at New Year's for good luck (Greater Senegambia). In the early twentieth century, some African Americans deployed prayer beads, prayed to the east multiple times each day while kneeling on mats, and were even interred—upon death—facing east (Greater Senegambia). Some recall that the folktale entitled "Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby" has an ancient and dignified origin (Gold Coast and Greater Senegambia) that extends far beyond Disney's racist mangling of this epic tale in the 1946 movie *Song of the South*. All these expressions—aspects of mother wit, ritual technologies and knowledge systems, festivals, and folktales—emerged from the processes by which enslaved Africans from varied backgrounds shared cultural values, merged political interests, and became, over time, one people.

1734-1739

FROM FORT MOSE TO SOUL CITY

BRENTIN MOCK

 LACK REPUBLICANS OFTEN URGE BLACK DEMOCRATS TO "flee the plantation," meaning to join the Republican Party, or to cease using what they perceive as the victimizing language of civil rights and racial justice.

The "flee the plantation" *cri de coeur* is applied to conjure the memory of enslaved Africans escaping their forced labor camps in pursuit of freedom. For many Republicans, the Democratic Party, or liberals in general, represent the slaveholders, while the Republican Party represents emancipation. Alternately, Black Democrats often fancy themselves as emancipators from the Republicans and their plantations that are conserving the racist status quo. In reality, neither side can claim the title of emancipator.

The plantation is a powerful symbol, as the foundational unit for racial capitalism and chattel slavery in the United States. It represents the enduringly difficult living conditions of African Americans as well as the enduring reality that their labor goes primarily not to benefit themselves but to enhance the profits of white people. Neither Democrats nor Republicans, conservatives nor liberals, have been able to upend that racist order. Nor has either provided sanctuary for African Americans from "the plantation." In fact, the Black experience in America can be defined in large part as the never-ending search for refuge, sanctuary, and safe spaces to live, away from the plantation in all its forms, but to no avail.

One of the earliest hopes for Black sanctuary was Fort Mose, Florida, the first known free Black settlement in British North America. It was built in 1738 by Africans who had fled the plantations of the Carolinas for the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine in northeastern coastal Florida. While St. Augustine had a somewhat integrated population, comprising Indian tribes and formerly enslaved Africans who had been arriving there since as early as 1683, Fort Mose was established outside the city exclusively for the newer African refugees from the plantation. The Spanish policy, decreed by the crown in 1693, was that any enslaved person who made it to Spain's American territories would be at least eligible for freedom.

As South Carolina's enslaved African population swelled in the 1730s, particularly in Charleston, word began circulating about the opportunity for liberty in St. Augustine. All the enslaved would have to do was survive a journey of hundreds of miles of swamp, marsh, and sometimes-hostile Natives along the coast to reach Spanish Florida. But liberty would come in limited form. "Spanish bureaucrats attempted to count these people and to limit their physical mobility through increasingly restrictive racial legislation," explains historian Jane Landers. "Officials prohibited blacks from living unsupervised, or, worse, among the Indians. Curfews and pass systems developed, as did proposals to force unemployed blacks into fixed labor situations."

African migrants had to adopt the Spanish Catholic religion to gain entrance to St. Augustine. They were accepted as laborers and received wages, but only the lower rates paid to St. Augustine's Native residents.

While the migrants' living conditions were not as grueling here as in the Carolina plantations, where they had been treated as property, their situation in Spanish Florida might have been only slavery in a slightly more elegant font. They were still subject to European rule, and they were not in control of their destiny as long as they lived in the Spanish domain. This was but one of the earliest indicators that freedom for African Americans, no matter how promising, would never be complete, no matter where and when they moved throughout the North American landscape.

That tenuous freedom persisted after the Civil War. In 1887 the

town of Eatonville was founded, just one hundred miles south of St. Augustine, outside Orlando. It was the first town to be "organized, governed and incorporated" by Black people. It existed in "relatively idyllic isolation" until the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision imposed "forced integration." For African Americans, fleeing the plantation would rarely if ever mean finding safe harbor from white surveillance.

In the 1970s, civil rights activist Floyd McKissick gave the Black sanctuary experiment a shot when he founded Soul City. He planned to build a Black city—an urban oasis in the middle of rural North Carolina—from scratch. Soul City was to serve as a sanctuary from the racism that had taken the lives of Black leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers—taking out the hopes and morale of many Black families in the process. Breaking ground in 1973, Soul City was the closest and most recent corollary to Fort Mose. But the trajectory to freedom was different: Soul City sought to draw African Americans to North Carolina, the general territory from which enslaved Africans had been escaping for Fort Mose some 240 years earlier.

Republicans of the 1970s were similar to the Florida Spaniards of the 1730s. President Richard Nixon's administration provided the initial funding and support for the building of Soul City. At the time, Nixon was looking to entice more African Americans into the Republican fold through the embrace of "Black capitalism," which he considered the only appropriate form for the popular new movement for Black Power. But slavery *was* capitalism. And it was capitalism that had lured rural and Southern Black workers to factories in cities, especially in the North and West in the mid-twentieth century, only to abandon many of those factories and cities by the century's end in search of cheaper, less-regulated, less-unionized shores. Nixon promised Black capitalism would be a solvent to the woes that racial capitalism created for Black people who were willing to break from the plantation of antiracist activism. But Nixon's motives were not genuine. It was a political ploy to siphon votes while hijacking the idea of Black Power for disempowering ends.

Similarly, in the 1730s the generosity that the Spanish Floridians

extended to Africans who had escaped enslavement was less than authentic. They positioned Fort Mose close to the northern Florida border as a defensive buffer between St. Augustine and the potential encroachment of British enslavers in the Carolinas and the newly formed colony of Georgia in 1733.

Georgia's proximity allowed British militias to base camp closer to the Florida settlements. Spanish authorities needed Black laborers to fortify Spain's economic investments throughout Florida, and they armed and weaponized formerly enslaved Black militias to fend off British invaders.

When Spain gave up Florida in 1763, it resettled some of its Black subjects in Matanzas, Cuba, where, as Landers writes, "Spanish support was never sufficient," and the former Fort Mose inhabitants "suffered terrible privations." When Spain took Florida back in 1784, it "made no effort to reestablish either Indian missions or the free black town of Mose."

Similarly, for Soul City, when Nixon resigned under charges of corruption in 1974, the federal government bailed on Soul City, allowing it to collapse before it had a chance to flourish. The "Soul Tech" job training and business incubator center that was supposed to be the anchor institution of Soul City became a county jail—a symbol of the type of cities into which Black souls would be herded in the coming decades.

When Black conservatives urge their neighbors to flee the plantation, it's not clear what or where they want Black people to flee to. Neither Republicans nor Democrats have offered somewhere safe. Certainly, African Americans have been creating sanctuaries in the United States throughout history, since the genesis of Fort Mose, but the United States has yet to honor any of them.

1739-1744

THE STONE REBELLION

WESLEY LOWERY

OFTEN THINK BACK TO A BALMY SPRING AFTERNOON WHEN I stood—my parents to my right and my two younger brothers to my left—beneath the rows of coffin-shaped pillars erected to chronicle a recent era of American terrorism.

We had traveled here, to Montgomery, Alabama, in early 2018, about one month after the grand opening of this exhibit: the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which is a fancy name for what is a gut-punch of a memorial. It features 804 slabs of stone, suspended in midair as if hanging from tree branches, that represent every American county where a man, woman, or child was lynched.

We had come not only to see but to search. As we entered the walkway that snaked beneath the pillars, my father recited the names of four or five counties, primarily in rural North Carolina, and reminded us of various married names and divergent branches of his family tree. Our eyes searched the roster etched into each stone. We weren't looking for a specific name or incident—there aren't any known lynching victims in our lineage—but we knew it was possible, perhaps even likely, that at least one of those memorialized here would be recognizable as kin.

As my eyes interrogated each name of the slain, my ears drew me to a conversation just a few feet away, where another group stood, marveling, beneath a stone coffin. They appeared to be a family. They were all white. I can't recall precisely what I overheard. But I can't

forget the realization, in that moment, that this family had no counties for which they'd been instructed to search.

This family was here to learn what my own had always known. While some nations vow never to forget, our American battle has always been over what we allow ourselves to remember.

Our historical record, we know, is subjective. Not every account is written down. The distinction between equity and injustice, riot and uprising, hinges on whose hand holds the pen. So often, it seems, our history is hiding from us, preventing the possibility that we dare look back and tell the truth—afraid of what doing so may require of us now.

Perhaps this is why we've been allowed to remember so little about the Stono Rebellion.

By the mid-eighteenth century, slavery had expanded so rapidly in the colony that would become the state of South Carolina that it was home to a Black majority. "Carolina looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people," Swiss traveler Samuel Dyssli wrote in 1737. "In Charleston and that neighborhood there are calculated to be always 20 blacks, who are called negroes, to one white man, but they are all slaves." The ratio wasn't quite that lopsided, but it was significant nonetheless. By 1740, Carolina's Black population was estimated at more than 39,100, while the white population stood at just 20,000.

But the booming population of enslaved people brought with it the same nightmare that has long tormented oppressive minorities: *what happens when they realize that they have us outnumbered?* Those fears were only exacerbated by a promise from the Spanish, eager to destabilize the British colonies, to free any enslaved person who made it to their territory in what is now Florida, specifically to St. Augustine. Soon the white slaveholders of Carolina would see their night terror come to life.

In the early hours of Sunday, September 9, 1739, about twenty Black rebels met on a bank of the Stono River, twenty miles southwest of Charleston, to carry out the plan that they had formed the night prior.

First, they marched to the Stono Bridge and broke into Hutchen-

son's store, which they robbed of guns and ammunition. The two white storekeepers were beheaded. Then they continued south, breaking into homes, executing the white families they found, and adding dozens of additional enslaved people to their ranks. At least twenty-three white Carolinians were left dead. The rebels are said to have acquired at least two drums, hoisted a flag, and indulged in defiant shouts of "Liberty!"

"Having found rum in some houses and drunk freely of it, they halted in an open field, and began to sing and dance, by way of triumph," wrote Alexander Hewatt, a white Charleston pastor, in his account of the uprising.

But the rebels would never make it to St. Augustine. In fact, most died in that very field—descended upon by an armed local militia.

The white residents vowed to never let this happen again. The colony's House of Assembly took steps to curtail the growing Black majority, implementing a ten-year moratorium on the importation of Black people and passing the Negro Act of 1740, which restricted the rights of enslaved people to assemble and educate themselves—undercutting the chances that future generations would discover the promise of freedom made by the Spanish to the South. For decades, white residents feared that some of the rebels, who had fled into the forest, would come back and again terrorize their towns.

The history we've been given recalls Stono—one of the bloodiest uprisings of enslaved people in the history of the land that would become America—as a cautionary tale, the story of the dangers of allowing Black men and women to dream of liberty. There's nothing to suggest that the rebels at Stono were political visionaries, that they aspired to overthrow the system of enslavement and plunder in which they lived each day as victims. They most likely just wanted to escape.

Generations of American storytellers have found that, when it comes to tales of uprising and rebellion, banishment digests easier than recollection. But what do we lose when we refuse to sit with the truth? What do we gain when we allow the rebels at Stono to tell their own story, when we see them not as rebels but as revolutionaries? What if the uprising, the riot, is not a story of disorder but one of a fearless fight for freedom?

History has left us just one known account of the rebellion from a nonwhite perspective, as part of the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s. This is an interview with George Cato, purportedly a direct descendant—the great-great-grandson—of the rebellion's leader, whose family had orally preserved the details of the insurrection for nearly two hundred years.

"I sho' does come from dat old stock who had de misfortune to be slaves but who decided to be men, at one and de same," Cato told his interviewer. "De first Cato slave we knows 'bout was plum willin to lay down his life for de right, as he sec it."

1744-1749

LUCY TERRY PRINCE

NAFISSA THOMPSON-SPIRES

A NINETY-SIX-YEAR-OLD BLACK WOMAN MASSES HER SPINE for a moment, kneads her Achilles, lifts her skirt slightly, secures her booted ankles into the stirrups, and starts on a long trek, "over the Green Mountains," to place flowers on the grave of her husband.

She has made the painful ride annually since 1794, and when she waves, a wry smile in her eyes, passersby remark, "Luce Bijah is still at it." Twenty years before, they shook their heads, incredulous, as Lucy Terry Prince rode home from making a successful stand before the Vermont supreme court. And since the eighteenth century, they sang her song with a knowing in their recitation.

Much of the extant research about Terry Prince focuses on the significance of her literary contributions. Born into slavery around 1730 and taken to Deerfield, Massachusetts, from Rhode Island, Terry Prince composed the first known poetry by an African American. She is customarily situated alongside Phillis Wheatley—the first African American with a published poetry book (1773)—and Jupiter Hammon, the first published African American poet, author of the 1761 broadside *An Evening Thought; Salvation by Christ With Penitential Cries*.

Terry Prince's "Bars Fight" remains the only known poetic work by its author and was preserved orally until its 1854 front-page regional print publication in the *Springfield Daily Republican* and later in Josiah Holland's 1855 *History of Western Massachusetts*. The ballad

recounts the eponymous incident when "King George's War between England and France broke out in 1745, with the Abenaki Indians, who had been displaced from Massachusetts to northern New England and Canada, allying with the French."

What I'm most interested in here, however, is not the poem itself but the spirit and power structures that produced—and protected—Lucy Terry Prince. She stood before major government officials and is memorialized as an artist, but much of her life—including whether she actually "wrote" the poem—is shrouded in mystique and urban legends.

Baptized in 1735, Lucy was possibly born on the African continent and brought to Rhode Island, where she was purchased by Ebenezer Wells and subsequently moved to Deerfield. Church records confirm that in 1756 she married Abijah Prince, a free man who had secured his freedom after his master's death in 1749 and somehow purchased Lucy's freedom as well. They settled in Northfield, where Prince held "some real estate rights" to "three divisions of the undivided land." It is clear that the Terry Prince family, which soon included six children, was well known in their community. Neighbors called the brook bubbling through their property "Bijah's Brook," and their house "a place of resort for the young people of the 'Street,'" their front porch a pulpit, a site "where folks were entertained and enlightened by recitations, music, and poetry." Even if much of her mobility came through her husband, Terry Prince's rhetorical cunning made her a respected and noted figure in her own right.

Terry Prince's emancipation, freedom, and property already marked her as somewhat remarkable, and she made waves that could have ended in disaster in two different legal incidents. When in 1762 Bijah stood to inherit a hundred acres from a grantee in what is now Guilford, Vermont, Lucy and Bijah became entangled in an ongoing legal battle over this land with a white man who tried to claim it. As the case escalated through the 1790s, Lucy litigated before the Vermont supreme court, making her the first woman—and Black woman—to argue before the court and to win her case at that.

When liberal arts institution Williams College refused to admit her son Festus because of his race, Terry Prince advocated on his be-

half during a three-hour argument. Her son was not admitted to the school, but we cannot understate the magnitude of Terry Prince's argumentation and willingness to take on white individuals and institutions in the eighteenth-century United States. Although race was not yet the fixed construct that it is today, Terry Prince's actions certainly could have compromised her and her family's safety.

When she died in 1821 at age ninety-seven, the Massachusetts paper *The Franklin Herald* published an obituary calling her "a woman of colour" and noting that "in this remarkable woman there was an assemblage of qualities rarely to be found among her sex. Her volubility was exceeded by none, and in general the fluency of her speech was not destitute of instruction and education. She was much respected among her acquaintance."

Even in death, Terry Prince was considered exceptional, and it is possible that she was exceptionally "strong" or stubborn.

A woman who held so many superlatives—the first to face off against the all-white and all-male supreme court, a vocal advocate for her child, and a town crier, a known eyewitness—likely occupied a fraught position, and we cannot underestimate how equally vulnerable and valuable her traits would have made her.

We need only to look to Anne Hutchinson—executed a century before Terry Prince's song—or to Nina Simone's "Backlash Blues" or to the case of Jacqueline Dixon for stories of "know-your-place aggression" and backlash against (Black) women who stood their ground. We cannot ignore the very real racial-sexual terror Terry Prince could have—and we don't know if she did—experienced for her actions.

Thus I do not want to risk emblemizing Terry Prince to the point of losing her humanity. As bell hooks and others have warned us, the danger in the myth of the strong, assertive Black woman is its elision of our pain and vulnerability. To fully see Lucy Terry Prince is to contextualize the conditions that made her choose to survive. Her song itself signals ongoing trauma from the incidents she witnessed. Phrases like "dreadful slaughter" and "killed outright" paint a painful scene still vivid in the psyche. And it is very likely that the named trauma of the Bars incident—and the unnamed traumas she experienced while enslaved and later as the mother of six children—affected

her daily life. To maintain her safety and the safety of her family, Terry Prince would have had to tread skillfully, codeswitching between assertiveness and (performing) “knowing her place,” as we have seen.

To that point, if we revisit the incident with Williams College, Terry Prince’s insistence on her son’s acceptance is actually in keeping with the cult of domesticity, which dictated that women took responsibility for the education of their children. It also helps that her magnum opus recounts the events of the Bars incident in a way that makes the white colonists look favorable and the Abenaki people the criminals. That her song was published posthumously and circulated orally during her lifetime rather than in print also makes it less a performance of gender or racial aberrance. When read another way, then, each of Terry Prince’s seeming transgressions against the expectations of her gender and race and time—with perhaps the exception of her property battle—might equally resituate her within them.

I say all this not to withhold praise from Terry Prince for her very real accomplishments but to suggest that the way she achieved them is what is most exceptional. By working both within and against a system that seldom rewarded women for acting out—and living to tell—Terry Prince demonstrates the performative dexterity often required of African American women across history to survive, to avoid singing the backlash blues.

Her legacy extends beyond “Bars Fight” to a complex figure who must have suffered as much as she succeeded. A trickster, both a “respectable lady” and a bold troublemaker, Lucy Terry Prince should be the subject of more study—and new ballads, new songs.

1749-1754

RACE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

DOROTHY E. ROBERTS

IN THE 1700S, EUROPE EXPERIENCED AN INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT, known as the Age of Enlightenment, that set the course of scientific theory and methods for the next three centuries. Leading thinkers embraced reason over superstition and shifted the basis of their conclusions about the universe from religious beliefs to secular science, giving science the ultimate authority over truth and knowledge. In many respects, the Enlightenment advanced ways of understanding the natural world and human behavior, but it was also the period when the modern scientific concept of race as a natural category was installed.

The expansion of the slave trade in the 1700s necessitated an expanding conceptual racial system of governance, spurring the change among European intellectuals from theological to biological thinking. During the Enlightenment, race became an object of scientific study, and scientists began to explain enslavement as a product of nature. Racial science was deployed to explain unequal outcomes in health, political status, and economic well-being as stemming from natural racial differences rather than from racist policies.

By 1749, European naturalists had begun to use race as a category for scientifically classifying human beings. The major groundwork for modern biological typologies was laid by Carl Linnaeus, whose twelve-edition catalog of living things, *Systema Naturae*, was published between 1735 and his death in 1778. Linnaeus divided *Homo*

sapiens into four natural varieties—*H. sapiens americanus*, *H. sapiens europaeus*, *H. sapiens asiaticus*, and *H. sapiens afer*—linked respectively to the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa, and he ascribed innate physical, social, and moral characteristics to each group. Although Linnaeus, like the biologists who succeeded him, claimed these racial categories were based on objective observations of nature, they were far from neutral. Eighteenth-century classifications positioned races in a hierarchy, placing Europeans at the top with the most positive traits (“Vigorous, muscular. Flowing blond hair. Very smart, inventive. Ruled by law”), and placing Africans at the bottom and with the most negative features (“Sluggish, lazy. Black kinky hair. Crafty, slow, careless. Ruled by caprice”).

The Enlightenment is typically touted as a radical break from the Christian theology that preceded it. However, one aspect of its thinking transported from theology to science—the belief that some powerful force apart from human intervention divided all human beings into separate races. Many European theologians held that God created the races and made Europeans in His image. After the Enlightenment, with the Divine no longer an acceptable basis for scientific evidence, European scientists pointed to nature as producing innate distinctions between races. (A century later, after the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, scientists began attributing race to evolution.) Thus, the racist theological concept of race survived the Enlightenment transition from “supernaturalist to scientific explanations of human origins and potential.”

Benjamin Franklin, one of the most revered intellectuals of his day, was instrumental in importing Enlightenment thinking to the British colonies in North America. There, Enlightenment scientists’ understanding of race served a critical political function: the view that nature had created racial distinctions resolved the contradiction between the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and tolerance and the enslavement of African people. The shift to secular thinking reinforced the view that Black people were innately and immutably inferior as a race and therefore were subject to permanent enslavement. After chattel slavery ended, the biological concept of race continued to shape the social and biological sciences, medical practice, and so-

cial policies, forming a scientific foundation for eugenics, Jim Crow, and post-civil rights color-blind ideology that ignores racism’s persistent impact.

Excluding Black people from the emerging democracy was excused as an inevitable product of nature. Thomas Jefferson elucidated this racist scientific thinking in his 1781 treatise *Notes on the State of Virginia*. He justified the exclusion of Black people from the democracy he and Franklin had helped to create based on “the real distinctions which nature has made.” He concluded: “This unfortunate difference in colour, and perhaps in faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people.”

Quaker preacher John Woolman had already disagreed with this racist line of thought in the 1750s. He wrote a religious treatise, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, in 1746 but didn’t publish it until 1754, after abolitionist Anthony Benezet was elected to the Philadelphia yearly meeting press editorial board. Woolman urged his fellow Christians to see the evils of slavery by contesting enslavers’ rationales for denying the equal humanity of Black people. He advocated not only for ending enslavement but also for refusing to benefit from enslaved labor until abolition was achieved. Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* advertised the publication of *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*. By the close of 1754, many Quakers had concluded that slavery was incompatible with Christianity and had begun to build an abolition movement. But the scientific understanding of race as a biological fact of nature was flourishing and would help to bolster slavery for decades to come.

Benjamin Franklin subscribed to the view not only that Black people were naturally distinct from white people but also that these distinctions necessitated differences in political status. In 1751 he authored *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*, which argued that Anglo-Saxons should expand into the Americas because Europe was overpopulated. Franklin’s claim depended in part on concerns about the “darkening” of certain parts of the Americas and its effect on the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants. “Who can now find the vacancy made in Sweden, France or other warlike nations, by the Plague of heroism forty Years ago; in France by the expulsion of the Protestants;

in England by the settlement of her Colonies; or in Guinea, by one hundred years' exportation of slaves, that has blacken'd half America?" he wrote.

Franklin explained in terms of natural distinctions between races why he did not want more Africans brought to the America that he and his enlightened colleagues were building:

The number of purely white people in the world is proportionally very small. All Africa is black or tawny. Asia chiefly tawny. America (exclusive of the newcomers) wholly so. And in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes are generally of what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English make the principal body of white people on the face of the earth. I could wish their numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, scouring our planet, by clearing America of woods, and so making this side of our globe reflect a brighter light to the eyes of inhabitants in Mars or Venus, why should we in the sight of superior beings, darken its people? Why increase the sons of Africa, by planting them in America, where we have so fair an opportunity, by excluding all blacks and tawneys, of increasing the lovely white and red? But perhaps I am partial to the complexion of my Country, for such kind of partiality is natural to Mankind.

Although Franklin supported abolishing the slave trade, he did not support Black people's freedom and equal citizenship in the American polity until later in his life. Rather, his central objective was to include white people only in the new nation he and his "enlightened" peers were creating.

1754-1759

BLACKNESS AND INDIGENEITY

KYLE T. MAYS

THE DISPOSSESSION OF MILLIONS OF NATIVE AMERICANS AND the simultaneous genocide and enslavement of Indigenous Africans remain two intertwining and parallel events that have fundamentally shaped the United States. These historical travesties continue today in the form of rampant anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous erasure from the national consciousness.

The year 1754 was instrumental in prerevolutionary America. In that year the French and Indian War—a conflict between the British colonies, New France, and a host of Native American nations fighting on each side—emerged, an event that would change the dominant European population east of the Mississippi and lead into the modern world's first global conflict, the Seven Years' War (1756–63). The war ended with the Treaty of Paris, in which France ceded all land east of the Mississippi to Britain. After France was defeated, kinship was no longer a major part of Native-British relations as it had been with the French: the "British were the conquerors; the Indians were the subjects."

It was also a moment ripe with contradictions between freedom and unfreedom. For almost a century, Europeans had constructed Native North American peoples as savages in order to justify taking their land. Native people became central characters in how Europeans constructed their belonging to the "New World" as the original inhabitants of the land, thus erasing those Native people. In this way,

they separated the European world from the Indigenous and African ones, creating a distinction between civilization and savagery, or human and nonhuman.

The population of this contested land comprised white men with property, indentured servants, enslaved Africans, and precariously placed Native peoples. As the British colonies and New France faced off, the combined power of anti-Black racism and African slavery became further entrenched in colonial society. For instance, between 1735 and 1750, Georgia was one of the few colonies that attempted to limit slavery, especially because of its close proximity to Spanish Florida. However, as Georgia's rice economy increased, its planters desired more enslaved people from West Africa. Between 1750 and 1755, Georgia's enslaved population increased nearly 3,500 percent.

Slavery became a further entrenched part of the colonies during the French and Indian War. In 1757 the Reverend Peter Fontaine of Virginia, the oldest of the original thirteen colonies, commented, "To live in Virginia without slaves is morally impossible."

This period also brought more interactions between people of African descent and Native North Americans. Paul Cuffe, born on January 17, 1759, was an early person of mixed ancestry, with both Indigenous African and North American Indigenous roots, born to Kofi (Akan), who was sold into slavery as a preteen, and to Ruth Moses (Wampanoag). After the Revolutionary War, Cuffe became one of the wealthiest Black shipping merchants of his time and played a central role in trying to establish a colony in Sierra Leone for people of African descent from the new United States. However, what is often missed in his history is that he represents some of the earliest Afro-Indigenous people in the United States—those with a relationship not only to the mark of Blackness but also to U.S. Indigenous roots. Cuffe had attempted to assert his North American Indigenous roots during his earlier years, but because of the rampant anti-Blackness, he would later more strongly identify as Black. What we can learn from Cuffe and others like him is that the first enslaved Africans did not lose their Indigenous roots—they maintained them as best as they could. They also often found possibilities in their encounters with Indigenous peoples in the United States.

Dispossession and enslavement were foundational to prerevolutionary America. However, they also created connections between Black and Indigenous peoples that might not have otherwise happened. These histories should serve as our opportunity to think about what it might mean for Black Americans not only to remember their foundational role in shaping American democracy but also to reflect on how they have always found kinship with Native American peoples. What would an alliance between Black and Native Americans look like today, and how would that continue to fundamentally change this country so that it not only met the founders' ideals of what democracy could look like but also radically reshaped them?

1759-1764

ONE BLACK BOY: THE GREAT LAKES AND THE MIDWEST

TIYA MILES

THE RESOLUTION OF ARMED CONFLICT BETWEEN BRITISH troops and a multitribal Indigenous fighting force in May 1763 depended, in part, on the ownership of one Black boy. Did the child believe his chances for staying alive and perhaps gaining freedom were greater in his current condition, as the property of a British officer? Or did he think he might fare better under the authority of the Indigenous political and military leader who sought to obtain him? Did he even know that his life was on the trading floor, as officials in the besieged fort town of Detroit negotiated a potential cease-fire in the altercation known as Pontiac's War? Only a few words exist in the colonial archive to distinguish this child from any other in history: He was "a Negroe boy belonging to James [Kinchen]" desired as "a Valet de Chambre to Marshal Pontiac."

Pontiac, the Ottawa-Ojibwe military strategist for whom this conflict was named, had risen as a leader of his people in the wake of the French and Indian War. This prolonged battle between Britain and France had erupted in 1754 over control of land and trade on the North American mainland. After the French scored several victories, the British finally prevailed, forcing the French into a surrender following the decisive Battle of Quebec in 1759. France and Great Britain negotiated a peace treaty in Paris that officially ended the conflict in 1763, or so those representing these imperial powers thought.

French and British negotiators had failed to include members of the multiple Indigenous nations who occupied the Saint Lawrence River valley, Great Lakes, and Ohio River valley lands that they had contested. The new geopolitical order hampered Native American negotiating power, increased British settler presence, weakened Native traders' economic position, and contributed to the subsequent loss of Indigenous lands and lives. The British now controlled the region's military forts as well as the European side of the lucrative fur trade, and they treated Native trading partners with far less respect than had the French.

Some Native people refused to accept this dramatic change in circumstances. Pontiac counted himself as chief among them. Critically assessing the political landscape and embracing the bellicose message of the radical Delaware prophet Neolin, Pontiac organized a coalition of Ottawa, Ojibwe, Huron, Seneca, Delaware, Shawnee, and Miami defenders of the land. In addition to mounting surprise attacks on and seizures of British posts throughout the region, the coordinated plot included a siege of Detroit, a prosperous town and British stronghold on the western edge of European settlement, originally founded in 1701 by the French. Just as Pontiac held Detroit by the throat, blocking the residents' source of supplies at the Detroit River and taking two British officers captive, he stated the terms of his withdrawal. Pontiac would release Detroit if the British retreated to their original colonies east of the Allegheny Mountains and also left for Pontiac's exclusive use a certain "Negroe boy."

Pontiac's demand for a British evacuation and the exchange of one Black child said much about his clear understanding of how the balance of power was being reshaped in the Great Lakes. The British had expropriated, by military force and diplomatic fictions, massive swaths of lands and had acquired, by trade as well as by natural increase, thousands of enslaved people of African descent. Pontiac sought to reverse this order by calling for the British to depart, which would restore the most recent status quo, in which the less offensive French had occupied the inland forts. At the same time, he participated in the new order by attempting to muscle his way into Black slave ownership. By taking the boy for himself, the Ottawa leader would acquire not only

a captive worker but also, and just as important, a visible status symbol in the form of a personal attendant of African descent.

Black boys and young men, though rare in Detroit and the upper Midwest, were highly sought after by members of the British merchant and military elite. By owning one, Pontiac could express without words his political and military equality to his European adversaries. After this moment, and especially during the Revolutionary War era that would soon follow, the enslavement of African-descended people as a specific group of racialized others would spread across a region where Indigenous slavery had formerly been the most common means of labor exploitation.

We do not know what became of this one Black boy. But we know that the British officers refused Pontiac's offer, and that his siege of Detroit and bold bid to oust the British failed by the autumn of 1763. The child, we can presume, remained the property of a British officer within the palisaded town of Detroit, where approximately sixty-five others of (usually) Indigenous American or (sometimes) African descent were held captive in the mid-1760s. As former British officers and military personnel joined the ranks of the merchants, the Black men and boys they preferred to own were put to work alongside Indigenous men and boys transporting supplies and beaver hides hundreds of miles across the Great Lakes and into upstate New York. James Sterling, a British merchant who moved to Detroit in 1761, kept records that revealed a growing transregional network of merchant elites who shared the labor of a few enslaved Black boys and men and helped one another track down and secure runaways. Early Detroit was fueled by the labor of people of color twice contained, by the walls of the town and by a series of agreements between French, British, and later American leaders permitting slavery's continuation.

The place that would eventually become the capital of the Michigan Territory grew practiced at confining and surveilling unfree people, ensuring the regular theft of their labor for economic, political, and symbolic ends. A century later the state of Michigan would perfect this practice of extractive entrapment. In 1838 the Michigan state legislature approved construction of the first state prison in Jackson. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, Michigan had formally abolished ra-

cial slavery just one year prior, with the ratification of its new state constitution in 1837. By 1843, prisoners were working for private contractors to produce farm equipment, textiles, tools, saddles, steam engines, barrels, and more at no pay. Michigan expanded the facility until in 1882 the castle-like fortress was said to be the largest walled prison in the world. The state assigned inmates to mine coal on public lands and soon had farming activities and factories operating on sixty-five enclosed acres.

Michigan is still home to one of the most extreme human containment systems in the United States. Its prison population has increased by 450 percent since 1973, and the state maintains a higher rate of imprisonment than most countries. African Americans are the largest incarcerated group by far in Michigan, with a total population of 14 percent and a penal population of 49 percent. Latinos and Native Americans are incarcerated in Michigan at rates equal to their population percentage. However, white Michiganders, who make up 77 percent of the general population, are underrepresented in the prison population at 46 percent. Racialized sentencing policies have much to do with these statistics. Historians Heather Ann Thompson and Matthew Lassiter, the founding codirectors of the Carceral State Project at the University of Michigan, point to "draconian" state legislation that by the 1990s included the infamous "lifer laws," which exacted life terms for narcotics possessions of over 650 grams and extinguished the opportunity for parole. As men and women were thrown behind bars for nonviolent offenses in the 1980s through the early 2000s, Detroit neighborhoods were gutted, children were orphaned, and voter rolls were depleted. And just as this Black prison population skyrocketed at the end of the twentieth century, the state loosened legislation to allow for an expansion of convict labor.

In the modern mass incarceration moment, the racialized "carceral landscape" of colonial Great Lakes slavery found an echo. The story of one Black boy foreshadowed the fate of too many Black prisoners.

1764-1769

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS

WINTER SOLSTICE IN NEW ENGLAND, DECEMBER 21, 1767. The date Phillis Wheatley's first published poem saw the light of day was literally the day the sun shone least that year. So yes, let it be characterized by the potential of darkness. Let us consider the small flames of candles and whale oil lamps that the readers of the *Newport Mercury* would most likely have used to engage the first published poem by an African American, by an enslaved woman, by a daughter whose surviving memory was of her mother pouring water before the sun rose. Winter solstice and in the dark—what June Jordan would later call “the difficult miracle of Black poetry in America” was born.

We can imagine it was already cold when Phillis Wheatley sent the poem to post. Did she leave the house? Was some other person given the task to send her poem “On Messers Hussey and Coffin,” from Boston to Newport?

In winter, the artist known as Phillis, who had nearly died on the slave-trading ship *Phillis*, was almost always sick. Was it the physical impact of surviving in the hold as a young girl before her front teeth even came in? A Middle Passage-borne chronic illness? Was the climate of New England incompatible with her constitution? Was she physically homesick, ripped from the warmth of the Wolof territories where scholars now imagine she was born?

She was well enough to append a note to the printer contextualizing her first published poem. Or is the note a poem as well? It uses

the poetic device of alliteration to set the minds of the publishers at ease. The editors pass it along, so it reassures the (white) readers that the poet belongs. That she belongs, to somebody. Which is to say, she is owned by the prominent Wheatley family. And that this poem came, how curious, out of her interpretation of an astonishing tale she heard while she was doing what enslaved women are supposed to do, “tending table” for her owners.

In this note, before anything else, before even her name, she declares that “these lines” were “composed by a Negro Girl.” Capital N capital G. And there it is. The absurd iteration of capitalism as capture: the object speaks. You know, from the perspective of the northern hemisphere of Earth, on the days surrounding the winter solstice, even the sun appears to stand still.

The Negro Girl, whom we now know as Phillis Wheatley, was very familiar with the New England audience who would be reading her first published poem. Like other enslaved people whose life and measure of safety depended on the absolute agency and control of their white captors, and who had no recourse to the law to protect themselves or each other, she had to know this audience better than they could bear to know themselves. And this, she tells the printer, who will print the telling, is the source of her poetry.

She was serving the characters in this poem dinner at the home of her captors. “Tending table” she says, abbreviating attendance and attuned to what she knows are the tendencies of the white readers she has access to in 1767, to underestimate the power, foresight, and layered use of voice available to a Negro Girl. How diminutive. *Do not be threatened.* How cute.

Though it was not yet published, earlier that year she had written a poem to her neighbors across the street, the loud young men of Cambridge. “Improve your privileges while they stay!” she admonishes. Is she referring to the bad behavior they demonstrated when there was a butter shortage on campus or the system of white privilege she wants to topple? Privileges don't last always, her phrasing seems to imply. Years later, when she does publish that poem in her collection, it will be much revised. This poet knows how privileged

white people are about their bread and butter, slave commerce and trade. And so she must reassure them that she is just a benign caves-dropper in rhyme, tending, not overturning, their table.

However, her use of alliteration in her contextualizing note also reads to those of us coming along later as a claim for what the poet known as Solange recently called a Seat at the Table, an intervention into a language and literature that had heretofore failed to imagine her to "insert these lines composed by a Negro Girl."

Focusing on December 21, 1767, is already rereading the legacy of the Negro Girl known by multiple misspelled names. The poem that got her widespread acclaim and that was for years considered to be her first publication was an elegy for the famous Great Awakening evangelist George Whitefield. And indeed, much of her poetry is about death ("On death's domain intent I place my eyes," she says), mostly the deaths of white people. Prominent and powerful white people, or white people her prominent and powerful captors happened to entertain in their home.

But I find it significant that her first published poem is a poem of survival at sea—or almost dying at sea, a theme that she would write about for the rest of her life. Her later work returns to the gods of wind she references in this poem. Her most recently discovered poem, "Ocean," recounts her own return from England through a storm.

Of course, we must remember that the young poet had already almost died at sea in her first journey to the Americas, as she nearly wasted away in the hold of the *Phillis*. Is it too much to imagine that she returns to these scenes of violent ocean journeys to imagine another possibility for herself?

As James Levernier has noted, much of the poetry this Negro Girl published under the name Phillis Wheatley is of the "extraterrestrial and the supernatural." She writes about mythic characters, Greek gods, heaven and angels, the relevance of worlds beyond this world. She claims for herself the "tongue of a Seraphim," divine speech beyond the human scale. And therefore we could read this first published poem, about almost dying at sea, and the note that contextualizes it as the first act of Black speculative writing in English in the Americas.

This means that the note written ostensibly to the printer and the poem imagines me, Solange, Octavia Butler, and the rest of us as future readers, but also that her ocean poetry in general is a fantastic time-traveling navigation of what she calls "the tumult of life's tossing seas." In her poem "Ode to Neptune," she hails the sea god to keep "my Susannah" safe from a sea storm. An intimate prayer for her captor, Susannah Wheatley, syntactically reverses the logic of ownership. "[M]y Susannah" suggests her mistress belongs to her. In "To a Lady on her Coming to North America," she imagines, in the image of a white friend of the Wheatleys, privileges she would never have, depicting a woman with access to a climate more conducive to her own health and a return voyage that culminates in a healing reunion with her loving family, a longing especially poignant for someone kidnapped by slavers as a child.

In "To a Lady on Her Remarkable Preservation in a Hurricane in North Carolina," she describes a mother and daughter reunited after time separated by the sea. In "A Farewel to America," she says, "I mourn for health deny'd" from the perspective of someone living in bondage in a climate that makes her sick. In "Ocean," she voices her regret: "Oh had I staid!" This ostensibly refers to her fear that she will die during her return journey to Boston. It also could refer to the fact that Benjamin Franklin (to whom she planned to dedicate the book that this poem would have appeared in) suggested that she stay in England and live free from the Wheatley family. Does she regret the echoes of her second western transatlantic journey to care for the ailing Susannah Wheatley at the expense of her own autonomy?

Some scholars have noted that Phillis Wheatley's frequent writing about sea voyages demonstrated not only the reality of her life in a port town serving a merchant family but also the sense of her own divided life. Her own experience of what in Wolof cosmology is the space of death, a watery space that separates the living from the ancestors. In this case, the poet is separated by an ocean from her lineage and community.

Navigating that space through the supernatural and extraterrestrial technology of her own poetry may have given her access not only to those of us waiting for her in the future but also to those whom she

lost, who indeed may have "made their beds down in the shades below" the boat, to use the imagery of this solstice poem. In her death-focused poetry of elegy and survival, is she making space to do the ancestral work she needs to do to honor the people who did not survive the Middle Passage with her? Who jumped or were thrown overboard during the journey of the ship *Phyllis* that substantiated the future poet into a Negro Girl? Family? Community members? Her own parents? Who is actually sleeping in those beds?

In her invocation with seraphic ardor of the ocean beds in the shades, or (s)hades below, she links herself to contemporary musicians and speculative authors (including myself) who imagine the social lives of the captives submerged in the Atlantic as an ongoing space of engagement and accountability. She claims the power to heal with her words, to reach beyond her time, place, condition, and realm.

Maybe there should be limits on the extent to which I speculate on the ongoing spiritual work of an artist whose very body was stolen in an act of capitalist speculative value. Maybe there should be no limits at all. But what we do know is that on Winter Solstice 1767 a young poet made space for her own work and a layered journey in multiple directions across and through the ocean, backward and forward in time. Her own offering in the dark, black words, claimed by a Negro Girl. An intervention in print, facile in the shadows of the language of commerce. On solstice. And yes. Even the sun would wait.

1769-1774

DAVID GEORGE

WILLIAM J. BARBER II

WHEN DAVID GEORGE WAS BORN IN ESSEX COUNTY, VIRGINIA, sometime around 1742, the man who claimed to own him and his parents was named Chapel. By his own testimony, George's parents "had not the fear of God before their eyes." But after his own religious conversion, George wrote as one who had both escaped bondage and learned the fear of the Lord that is, according to Proverbs 9:10, "the beginning of wisdom."

If the enslaver who had claimed to own George in colonial Virginia bore the name of a house of worship, Chapel's slaveholder religion did not define God for David George. A free man who was determined to free others through the good news he found in the Bible, George went on to establish the first Black Baptist church in the United States. In defiance of the first Chapel he had known, he established a chapel for freedom in the colonial South.

African Americans began to establish a shared religious life and culture in the late colonial period. While enslaved people from Africa had brought with them an array of cultures and religious practices, their Christian enslavers rationalized their use and abuse of enslaved people by investing in the salvation of their souls. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts sent missionaries to catechize children like George who had been born into slavery, teaching that it was the spiritual duty of Christian enslavers to provide for the religious education of the people they held in bondage. This top-

down effort to Christianize enslaved Africans met with limited success.

But the First Great Awakening, which swept through the colonies just before George was born, popularized an evangelical form of Christianity that emphasized the individual's decision to recognize their need for God's grace and accept Christ for themselves. The fear of God that George said his parents lacked became real to him through revivalist preaching that offered relief from that fear.

By the early 1760s, George had fled bondage in Virginia. He ventured south, negotiating a fugitive existence in and among Creek and Natchee people as well as white settlers who were debating their loyalty to Britain. While Chapel's family for a short time reclaimed George as property, he escaped again, and unlike many who would travel northward on the Underground Railroad, he kept heading south.

Though he was Black according to the law of the plantation, George found another identity in the evangelical faith he embraced while living in South Carolina. After marrying and starting a family, he met a Black Baptist preacher, George Liele, who worked with a white minister, Brother Palmer.

White historians believe that the church they established together in Georgia was the first Black Baptist church in America, but it is more accurate to say that George joined and established a freedom church that interrupted the lies of racism. While the circumstances of the Revolutionary War took George and his family to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, the testimony he left us makes clear that he joined an interracial evangelical movement in the Georgia colony that offered him a way toward freedom for the rest of his earthly journey.

I was introduced to the freedom church that George joined and helped spread by my parents, William and Eleanor Barber. Though they were born two centuries after George, they told me stories of my father's family's fugitive existence among Black, white, and Native people in eastern North Carolina that also stretches back to the colonial period. The day I was born in the hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana, where my father was in graduate school at the time, he argued with the hospital administration to insist that I was not simply

"Negro." He was not ashamed of our African American heritage; he was, instead, determined to tell the truth about the fusion history he knew we had inherited in our place.

When we consider the origins of Black Christianity in America, I am equally determined to tell the truth about what we learn from stories like that of David George. Yes, he was a Black man determined to be free. But he did not negotiate his fugitive existence on his own. He worked with white, Black, and Native people to get away from the oppression he had been born into. And when he heard the good news of the gospel and became a preacher himself, he was not building up a "Black church." He was demonstrating the potential of a freedom church to interrupt the lies of slaveholder religion.

About 250 years have passed since David George received the call to preach good news to all people. But the tension between the Chapel he grew up knowing and the chapel he helped to build is still central in American life. Though slavery officially ended after the Civil War, the Christianity that blessed white supremacy did not go away. It doubled down on the Lost Cause, endorsed racial terrorism during the Redemption era, blessed the leaders of Jim Crow, and continues to endorse racist policies as traditional values under the guise of a "religious right." As a Christian minister myself, I understand why, for my entire ministry, the number of people who choose not to affiliate with any religious tradition has doubled each decade. An increasingly diverse America is tired of the old slaveholder religion.

But this is why the freedom church that David George joined in the late 1760s is so important. We who speak out in public life to insist that God cares about love, justice, and mercy and to call people of faith to stand with the poor, the uninsured, the undocumented, and the incarcerated are often accused of preaching something new. But those who claim "traditional values" to defend unjust policies do not represent the tradition of David George, George Liele, and Brother Palmer. They do not represent the Black, white, and Tuscaroran people of Free Union, North Carolina, who taught my people for generations that there is no way to worship Jesus without being concerned about justice in the world.

The United States has a moral tradition, deeply rooted in the faith

of a freedom church, that has inspired movements for abolition, labor rights, women's rights, civil rights, and environmental justice. While that tradition has often been marginalized and overlooked, its values are no less traditional than those of the Chapel who claimed to own David George. To know George's story is to know that another kind of faith is possible. As James Baldwin said, "We made the world we are living in and we have to make it over again." But we don't have to make it from scratch. We can build on the faith of people like David George to become the nation we have never yet been.

1774-1779

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

MARTHA S. JONES

NOT EVERY REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT WAS MARKED BY THE firing of shots or the drafting of a declaration. In 1780 a woman known as Mumbet changed the course of the American Revolution when she sued for her freedom. She acted out of a turn of mind. She had been abused in the home of John Ashley, the man who claimed her as a slave.

It was time to preserve her life and get free. Mumbet believed that the law might help. Her home, in the newly independent state of Massachusetts, was governed by the aspirations of men like her owner who were free, white, and propertied. But those same men had produced a constitution that spoke directly to her: "All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness." These same rights, Mumbet argued in the court of common pleas in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, were also hers.

Even before Mumbet filed suit, her life had followed the course of the American Revolution in the way that so many enslaved people's lives did. As a household servant to the Ashley family in Sheffield, Massachusetts, she saw to the backbreaking and often dangerous work of keeping up a home in the late eighteenth century. She was also a silent figure in the parlor, in the dining room, and in the corri-

dors, as politics, military strategy, and more were debated. There in 1773 John Ashley hosted a meeting that produced the Sheffield Declaration, a manifesto that challenged British tyranny and championed colonists' individual rights: "Mankind in a state of nature are equal, free, and independent of each other, and have a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of their lives, their liberty and property."

Ashley was among the local men who felt the strain when Parliament pressed back. In 1774 the Intolerable Acts punished Massachusetts colonists for their defiance by repealing their charter, imposing governance from England, and limiting town meetings. It was not a declaration of war, but it was a spark for the hostilities that would follow. This was Mumbet's political education, from which she gleaned new lessons about how to oppose her own bondage.

Both sides of the conflict understood that people like Mumbet could change the course of events. The British expressly tapped into enslaved people's ever-present pursuit of liberty through a series of military proclamations. First in the fall of 1775, John Murray, Fourth Earl of Dunmore and the British royal governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation that he hoped would advantage his troop strength while also destabilizing the colony's plantations. Dunmore declared "all indentured servants, Negroes, or others . . . free that are able and willing to bear arms."

In the summer of 1779, British Army general Sir Henry Clinton did much the same. From his headquarters in Westchester County, New York, Clinton deemed all enslaved persons belonging to American revolutionaries to be free. Neither proclamation won the British much military success. But the lessons went beyond how not to win a war. Enslaved people learned that they possessed genuine bargaining power against imperial-scale authority. Neither Dunmore nor Clinton had acted out of humanitarian or antislavery impulses. Instead, they had been forced to subordinate their commitments to slavery for a military advantage. It was a lesson that enslaved people carried into subsequent conflicts, including the Haitian Revolution and the American Civil War, where they would again trade military service for the promise of freedom.

Contradictions—the enslavement of some alongside calls for the

liberty of others—were the foundation of the Ashley household in the 1770s. But perhaps Mumbet understood this juxtaposition differently: that the liberty of some in Massachusetts rested upon the bondage of others. Slavery and freedom were two parts of one society.

The words of Thomas Jefferson's 1776 Declaration of Independence emerged from a similar morass. When composing that galvanizing manifesto, Jefferson omitted language that would have condemned the slave trade. The Articles of Confederation, completed the following year in 1777, did not speak to the problem of slavery. It was a scheme that relegated human bondage to a matter to be regulated by the individual states.

Historians continue to debate the meaning of these silences. For Mumbet, these failures to speak directly to slavery and its future were not exactly an invitation. Her ongoing enslavement in the Ashley household showed how even in the midst of revolution, contradictions wrought of old inequalities could persist. Mumbet's claim to liberty appears all the more audacious in the face of the silence that characterized the founding texts.

Mumbet's freedom suit reflected her interpretation of what the Revolution might make possible. It was, however, no naive impulse. She took her ideas to a local lawyer, another party to the Sheffield Declaration, Theodore Sedgwick. He was likely a known figure to Mumbet, someone who had joined deliberations over colonists' liberty in the Ashley home. Sedgwick was also a highly regarded lawyer who accepted Mumbet's case along with that of a man named Brom.

Some historians have suggested that Sedgwick aimed to test the full meaning of the new state constitution. It was, however, a jury that finally heard the claim. Mumbet was declared free by strangers who concluded that "Brom & Bett are not, nor were they at the time of the purchase of the original writ the legal Negro of the said John Ashley." Ashley initiated an appeal to the state high court but dropped it just a month later. Mumbet—newly self-baptized as Elizabeth Freeman—was a free woman who had put a nail into slavery's casket, at least in Massachusetts. Her case along with others ended enslavement in one New England state, a revolution that came about when an aggrieved woman seized upon revolutionary ideas.

Last summer I visited the place in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where Elizabeth "Mumbet" Freeman was laid to rest in 1829. My trip was a pilgrimage in honor of a woman who changed the fates of Black Americans in Massachusetts. Her story is also a starting point for the long saga of how Black Americans have wrestled with constitutions. Freeman's story is but one in countless efforts by people of African descent to bend the aspirations set to paper by free, white, propertied men to their own ends.

I came to Stockbridge to honor this too-often-overlooked figure in U.S. constitutional history. There she is not forgotten. Still, buried in Theodore Sedgwick's family plot, Freeman is not honored as a figure of consequence in the epic battle for freedom over slavery in Massachusetts. Instead, her headstone is a tribute to her labor for Sedgwick's family in the years after winning her freedom. Her prominently sited marker tells of a loyal servant who had no equal "in her sphere," was trustworthy, dutiful, and efficient in the domestic realm, and was a tender friend and "good mother" to the white Sedgwicks.

It is another lesson in the politics of monuments. Freeman's burial site remains an incomplete and misleading monument to her life.