

The Story of America's First Slaves

The Atlantic Creoles

America's first slaves were subjugated as much for their cultural alienation as they were for their race.

By Ira Berlin

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Black life on mainland North America originated not in Africa or America but in the netherworld between the two continents. Along the periphery of the Atlantic—first in Africa, then Europe, and finally in the Americas—it was a product of the momentous meeting of Africans and Europeans and then their equally fateful rendezvous with the peoples of the New World.

The “Atlantic creoles” traced their beginnings to the historic encounter of Europeans and Africans, emerging around the trading factories or *feitorias* established along the coast of Africa in the 15th century by European expansionists. Many served as intermediaries in this developing crop of transatlantic trading enclaves, employing their linguistic skills and their familiarity with the Atlantic's diverse commercial practices, cultural conventions, and diplomatic etiquette to mediate between the African merchants and European sea captains. In so doing, some Atlantic creoles identified with their ancestral homeland (or a portion of it)—be it African or European—and served as its representatives in negotiations. Other Atlantic creoles had been won over by the power and largess of one party or another so that Africans entered the employ of European trading companies, and Europeans traded with African potentates. Yet others played fast and loose with their mixed heritage, employing whichever identity paid best. Whatever strategy they adopted, Atlantic creoles began the process of integrating the icons and beliefs of the Atlantic world into a new way of life.

The peoples of the enclaves—long-term residents and wayfarers alike—soon joined together, geographically and genetically. European men took wives and mistresses among African women, and before long the children born of these unions helped people the enclave. Elmina (a Portuguese enclave later seized by the Dutch) sprouted a substantial cadre of Euro-Africans (most of them Luso-Africans), men and women of African birth but shared African and European parentage, whose swarthy skin, European dress and deportment, acquaintance with local norms, and multilingualism gave them an insider's knowledge of both African and European ways but denied them full acceptance in either culture. By the 18th century, they numbered several hundred in Elmina in modern-day Ghana.

Africans and Europeans alike sneered at the creoles' mixed lineage and condemned them as haughty, proud, and overbearing. When they adopted African ways, wore African dress and amulets, or underwent circumcision and scarification, Europeans declared them outcasts (*tangosmaos* or *reneges* to the Portuguese). When they adopted European ways, wore European clothing and crucifixes, employed European names or titles, and comported themselves in the manner of “white men,” Africans denied them the right to hold land, marry, and inherit property.

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Not all *tangosmaos* were of mixed ancestry, and not all people of mixed ancestry were *tangosmaos*. Color was

only one marker of this culture-in-the-making, and generally the least significant one.

Whether the Atlantic creoles resided in Europe or Africa, it was knowledge and experience far more than color that set them apart from the Africans who brought slaves from the interior and the Europeans who carried them across the Atlantic, on one hand, and the hapless men and women upon whose commodification the slave trade rested, on the other. Maintaining a secure place in such a volatile social order was not easy. The Atlantic creoles' liminality, particularly their lack of identity with any one group, posed numerous dangers. While their intermediate position made them valuable to African and European traders alike, it also made them vulnerable: They could be ostracized, scapegoated, and on occasion enslaved. Maintaining independence amid the shifting alliances between and among Europeans and Africans was always difficult. Inevitably, some failed.

Debt, crime, heresy, immorality, official disfavor, or bad luck could mean enslavement—if not for the great traders, at least for those on the fringes of the creole community.

Simply put, men and women who understood the operations of the Atlantic system, including the slave trade, were too dangerous to be trusted in the human tinderboxes created by the sugar revolution. Rejected by the most prosperous New World regimes, Atlantic creoles were frequently exiled to marginal slave societies where would-be slaveowners, unable to compete with plantation magnates, snapped up those whom the grandes had disparaged as “refuse” for reasons of age, illness, or criminality. And in the 17th century, few New World slave societies were more marginal than those of mainland North America.

Atlantic creoles began arriving in the Americas in the 16th century. Some accompanied the conquistadors, marching with Balboa, Cortés, De Soto, and Pizarro. Others traveled on their own, as sailors and interpreters in both the trans-Atlantic and African trades. Wherever they went, Atlantic creoles employed their distinctive language, planted their unique institutions of the creole community, and propagated their special outlook. Within the Portuguese and Spanish empires, they created an intercontinental web of *cofradias*, so that by the 17th century the network of black religious brotherhoods stretched from Lisbon, Portugal, to São Tomé, Angola, and Brazil.

Whatever tragedy befell them, Atlantic creoles did not arrive in the New World as deracinated chattels stripped of their past and without resources to meet the future. Unlike those who followed them into slavery in succeeding generations, transplanted creoles were not designated by diminutives, or derisively named after ancient notables or classical deities, or burdened with tags more appropriate to barnyard animals than to human beings. Instead, their names provided concrete evidence that they carried a good deal more than their dignity to the Americas.

To such men and women, New Amsterdam—a fortified port controlled by the Dutch West India Company in the Dutch colonial province of New Netherland—was not radically different from Elmina, save for its smaller size and colder climate. Its population was a farrago of petty traders, artisans, merchants, soldiers, and corporate functionaries, all scrambling for status in a frontier milieu that demanded intercultural exchange. On the tip of Manhattan Island, Atlantic creoles rubbed elbows with sailors of various nationalities, Native Americans with diverse tribal allegiances, and pirates and privateers who professed neither nationality nor allegiance. In the absence of a staple crop, their work—building fortifications, hunting and trapping, tending fields and domestic animals, and transporting merchandise of all sorts—did not set them apart from workers of European descent, who often labored alongside them. Such encounters made a working knowledge of the creole tongue as valuable on the North American coast as in Africa. Whereas a later generation of transplanted Africans would be linguistically isolated and deskilled by the process of enslavement, Atlantic creoles found themselves very much at home in their new environment. Rather than losing their skills, they discovered that the value of their gift for intercultural negotiation appreciated. The transatlantic journey did not break creole communities; it only transported them to other sites.

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in the social order.

Along the edges of the North American continent, creoles found that their cultural and social marginality was an asset. Slaveholders learned that the ability of creoles to negotiate with the diverse populace of 17th-century North America was as valuable as their labor, perhaps more so. While their owners employed creoles' skills on their own behalf, creoles did the same for themselves, trading their knowledge for a place in the still undefined social order. In 1665, when Jan Angola, accused of stealing wood, could not address the New Amsterdam court in Dutch, he was ordered to return the following day with "Domingo the Negro as interpreter," an act familiar to Atlantic creoles in Elmina, Lisbon, San Salvador in modern-day El Salvador, or Cap Français in Haiti.

To be sure, slavery bore heavily on Atlantic creoles in the New World. As in Africa and Europe, it was a system of exploitation, subservience, and debasement that rested on force. Yet Atlantic creoles were familiar with servitude in forms ranging from unbridled exploitation to corporate familialism. They had known free people to be enslaved, and they had known slaves to be liberated; the boundary between slavery and freedom on the African coast was permeable. Servitude generally did not prevent men and women from marrying, acquiring property (slaves included), enjoying a modest prosperity, and eventually being incorporated into the host society. Creoles transported across the Atlantic had no reason to suspect they could not do the same in the New World. If the stigma of servitude, physical labor, uncertain lineage, and alien religion branded them as outsiders, there were many others in North America—men and women of unblemished European pedigree prominent among them—who shared those taints. That black people could and occasionally did hold slaves and servants and employ white people suggested that race—like lineage and religion—was just one of many markers in the social order.

The experience of Atlantic creoles provided strategies for containing the abuse and degradation of slavery and even winning freedom. Although the routes to social advancement were many, they generally involved reattachment to a community through the agency of an influential patron or, better yet, an established institution that could broker a slave's incorporation into the larger society.

By the middle of the 17th century, Atlantic creoles participated in almost every aspect of life in New Netherland. In addition to marrying and baptizing their children in the Dutch Reformed Church, they sued and were sued in Dutch courts and fought alongside Dutch militiamen against the colony's enemies. Black men and women—slave as well as free—traded independently and accumulated property. But even in linking themselves to the most important edifices of the nascent European-American societies, Atlantic creoles struggled to become part of a social order where exclusion or otherness—not subordination—could threaten all other gains. To be inferior within the sharply stratified world of the 17th-century Atlantic was a common and therefore understandable experience; to be the "other" and excluded posed unparalleled dangers. As a result, black men and women began to develop a variety of institutions that reflected their unique experience and served their special needs. They stood as godparents to one another's children, developing close family ties, and they rarely called on white people—owners or not—to serve in this capacity. At times, established black families legally adopted orphaned black children, further knitting the black community together in a web of constructed kinship.

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¹Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, 2000). From the perspective of the making of African American culture, see John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, UK, 1998), and the larger Atlantic perspective, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

²Speaking of the Afro-French in Senegambia in the 18th century, Philip D. Curtin emphasizes the cultural transformation in making this new people, noting that "the important characteristic of this community was cultural mixture, not racial mixture, and the most effective of the traders from France were those who could cross the cultural line between Europe and Africa in their commercial relations," in *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade*, (Madison, WI, 1975) 117. Peter Mark in his study of 17th-century Luso-African architecture describes the Luso-

Africans “physically indistinguishable from other local African populations.” “Constructing Identity: Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Architecture in the Gambia-Geba Region and the Articulation of Luso-African Ethnicity,” *HA*, 22 (1995), 317.

³Peter C. W. Gutkind, “Trade and Labor in Early Precolonial African History: The Canoemen of Southern Ghana,” in Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *The Workers of African Trade* (Beverly Hills, 1985), 27–28, 36; Ray. A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore, 1982), 243; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 302–308.

⁴The northern colonies of North America often received “refuse” slaves. For complaints and appreciations, see Joyce D. Goodfriend, “Burghers and Blacks: The Evolution of a Slave Society at New Amsterdam,” *NYH*, 59 (1978), 139; Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620–1776* (New York, 1942), 35; William D. Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst, MA, 1988), 4–5; Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in the North* (Syracuse, 1973), 18–25; James G. Lydon, “New York and the Slave Trade, 1700 to 1774,” *WMQ*, 35 (1978), 275–279, 381–390; Darold D. Wax, “Negro Imports into Pennsylvania, 1720–1766,” *PH*, 32 (1965), 254–287, and Wax, “Preferences for Slaves in Colonial America,” *JNH*, 58 (1973), 374–376, 379–387.

⁵A. Saunders, *A Social History of Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal, 1441–1555* (Cambridge, UK, 2010), 152–155; Russell-Wood, “Black and Mulatto Brotherhoods in Colonial Brazil,” *HAHR*, 54 (1974), 567–602, and Russell-Wood, *The Black Man in Slavery and Freedom in Colonial Brazil* (New York, 1982), ch. 8, esp. 134, 153–154, 159–160. See also Ruth Pike, *Aristocrats and Traders: Sevillian Society in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1972), 177–179. In the 16th century, some 7 percent (2,580) of Portugal’s black population was free; Saunders, *Black Slaves and Freedmen in Portugal*, 59.

⁶Nothing evidenced the creoles’ easy integration into the mainland society better than the number who survived into old age. There are no systematic demographic studies of people of African descent during the first years of settlement, and perhaps, because the numbers are so small, there can be none. Nevertheless, “old” or “aged” slaves are encountered again and again, sometimes in descriptions of fugitives, sometimes in the deeds that manumit—that is, discard—superannuated slaves. Before the end of the 17th century, numbers of black people lived long enough to see their grandchildren. Berthold Fernow, ed., *The Records of New Amsterdam from 1653 to 1674 Anno Domini*, 7 vols. (Baltimore, 1976), 5:337, cited in Joyce D. Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664–1730* (Princeton, 1992), 252 n25.

⁷Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff, eds., *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, WI, 1977); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, UK, 1983); Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge, UK, 1990); Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, ch. 3; Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* (Chicago, 1991); Martin A. Klein, “Introduction: Modern European Expansion and Traditional Servitude in Africa and Asia,” in Klein, ed., *Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage, and Emancipation in Modern Africa and Asia* (Madison, WI, 1993), 3–26; Toyin Falola and Lovejoy, “Pawnship in Historical Perspective,” in Falola and Lovejoy, eds., *Pawnship in Africa: Debt Bondage in Historical Perspective* (Boulder, CO, 1994), 1–26. A dated but still useful critical review of the subject is Frederick Cooper, “The Problem of Slavery in African Studies,” *JAH*, 20 (1979), 103–125.

⁸Charles T. Gehring, ed, petition for freedom, in *New York Historical Manuscripts*, 269. White residents of New Amsterdam protested the enslavement of the children of half-free slaves, holding that no one born of a free person should be a slave. The Dutch West India Company rejected the claim; *NY Documents*, 1:302, 343; E.B. O’Callaghan, ed., O’Callaghan, comp., *Laws and Ordinances of New Netherland, 1638–1674*, 4 vols. (Albany, 1868), 4:36–37. For the Dutch West India Company “setting them free and at liberty, on the same footing as other free people here in New Netherland,” although children remained property of the company, see van den Boogaart, “Servant Migration to New Netherlands,” 69–70.

⁹Goodfriend estimates that 75 of New Amsterdam’s 375 blacks were free in 1664, in *Before the Melting Pot*, 61.

¹⁰Kruger, “Born to Run,” 52–55, 591–600, tells the story of the creation of a small class of black landowners via gifts from the Dutch West India Company and direct purchase by the blacks themselves. Quote on p. 592. Also Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot*, 115–117; Peter R. Chrisoph, “The Freedmen of New Amsterdam,” *JAAHGS*, 5 (1984), 116–117. I. N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498–1909*, 6 vols. (New York, 1967), 2:302; 4:70–78; 100, 104–106, 120–148, 265–266; Gehring, ed., *New York Historical Manuscripts*; van den Boogaart, “The Servant Migration to New Netherland, 1624–1664,” 69–71. For the employment of a white housekeeper by a free black artisan, see *ibid.*, 69; Berthold Fernow, ed., *Minutes of the Orphanmasters Court*, 2:46; Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby, eds., *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History, 1626–1940* (New York, 1967), 12.

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