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# **From the Terrible Transformation to the Creation of the Negro: A Black Socialist Analysis of the First Century of Slavery in North America**

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In [\*Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America\*](#), the late popular historian Lerone Bennett refers to the African captives who arrived in Jamestown in 1619 as immigrants. “An estimated million of these slaves found their way to the land that

became the United States of America. But the first Black immigrants ... were not slaves,” Bennett wrote.

Bennett did not aim to obscure the harsh reality of slavery in American colonial society. Instead, Bennett had used this term to highlight the shifts in the colonial political economy that slavery ushered in. Duke University Professor Emeritus of History Peter H. Wood called this shift “The Terrible Transformation”: [“enslavement of people solely on the basis of race.”](#)

While this is the popular telling of the first century of slavery in North America, capitalist and liberal contradictions limit the true importance of remembering 1619. A socialist analysis is needed to truly reveal the complexities of that moment.

### **Rethinking the story of Anthony Johnson**

Many of those first Africans who arrived in Virginia had life experiences that were different than those who followed them. Many gained freedom, land and status in the early years of the Virginia Colony.

The story of Anthony Johnson has been used by historians as the prime example of this early moment. Initially documented as “Antonio a Negro,” Johnson was eventually manumitted and acquired land and wealth. However, Johnson acquired his status by participating in the same economy as his former captors and even maintained an indentured labor force of his own. By the end of his years, Johnson and his family had their “relative equality” revoked. Deemed foreigners and not citizens in Virginia, the Johnsons were exiled to Maryland.

When examined through a socialist analysis, Anthony Johnson’s story actually reveals the complete opposite of what Bennett attempted to teach. From his classification as a “Negro,” it is clear that racial consciousness, and burgeoning white power, was always apparent in the colonies. As noted in the previous article,

the lack of a formal system of slavery in those early years of Virginia had more to do with the colonial ruling class's reluctance to pay the high prices for slaves.

In British North America, Indigenous people had clearly been enslaved.

Even at his peak, Johnson struggled against white power, including efforts by a white neighbor to use the courts to steal his property. Most importantly, Johnson and the hundreds of other Africans that arrived in Virginia were certainly enslaved and on slave ships.

More importantly, the colonial ruling class did not live in a vacuum. In fact, the early settlers and landowners passed through Spanish and British colonies in the Caribbean and the Atlantic which were all highly functioning slave societies by the early 16th century.

### **From a society with slaves to a slave society**

The first decades of Virginia are best described as a society with slaves, and not a slave society. Mixed labor forces were initially used in Virginia, the way the labor in New England had functioned. A slave society is described as a political economy where slavery and slave ownership defined the relations of production.

It is safe to argue that the development of a Southern colonial slave society was overdetermined by the broader transnational society in which Virginia and the subsequent colonies of Maryland and the Carolinas existed. The formation of the United States has influenced a form of teleology in American history.

This means that because the 13 North American colonies collectively seceded from England, many assume these societies were always linked. To continue to tell the story of the early Virginia colony as an "Uncertain Century" where slavery was not preordained also conjures a form of American Exceptionalism. Nowhere else in the

colonial world, at that time, had a single-crop agricultural society been crafted with free-labor. Slavery was always an option in Virginia, even before the official laws emerged.

The Virginia planter class were highly familiar with the system of slavery.

Indentured servitude was always a trick and never meant to produce the “relative freedom” that Anthony Johnson had, which is why it was eventually destroyed.

At the beginning of the Virginia Colony, Christians could not, initially, be permanently enslaved, like Indigenous Peoples already had been. Anthony Johnson, an Angolan native who had likely been previously enslaved in the Caribbean, simply exposed the contradictions of early colonial society and, for a moment, slipped through the cracks.

Angola had been colonized by the Catholic Portuguese since the middle of the 15th century. Either in Africa, or as a part of the “seasoning” process in the Caribbean, Johnson would have already been baptized. However, christening only nominally changed the status of these early Africans. Even when they were tagged as servants, none of these laborers were expected to live out their terms of indenture. In the early years of the colony, mortality rates were as high as 55 percent. By the 1630s, mortality rates began to subside. As well, the number of white servants migrating to Virginia decreased.

### **Slavery dominated gender and family relations of Africans**

The planter class’s cost-benefit analysis then revealed the institutionalization of slavery in the American colonies to be far more profitable than the servitude scheme. But again, both systems were meant to be lifelong systems of servitude.

By the late 17th century, the Middle Atlantic colonies began to craft laws that clearly

defined the institution of slavery in the U.S. Africans could not gather in large numbers without whites present. Africans could not own weapons. Africans could not own land.

Conversion to Christianity did not protect Africans from enslavement. Importantly, freedom was determined by the status of one's mother, not one's father. In 1656, Elizabeth Key, the offspring of an African mother and European father had won freedom and land because of her father's status. Planters overturned English common law by linking freedom to the status of the mother.

This is why the study of race, class and gender are crucial in grasping the origins of slavery and capitalism. Whereas in the Caribbean, the cost-benefit analysis of the planter class deemed it cheaper to work enslaved Africans to death, in the North American colonies it was assessed that "natural" birth was best for profit margins. So, unlike other parts of the Americas, there was far more gender parity in the Africans important to British North America.

### **Toward a Black socialist analysis**

The institutionalization of slavery in the British American colonies did not only produce the wealth of the United States and England, it produced the modern global system of capitalism. As Walter Rodney notes in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, even when plantation economies emerged in Indian Ocean societies, Egypt, Zanzibar or India, it was still a part of the expanding system Europeans crafted in the Americas, including Virginia.

With all due respect to Bennett's work, Bennett's thesis on colonial slavery was the product of his own liberal and capitalist contradictions. A socialist analysis revealed in the writings of people like Eric Williams, C.L.R. James, Walter Rodney and Omali Yeshitela, Angela Davis and Cedric Robinson are far more useful than Bennett's

theses.

In his seminal work [\*Black Marxism: The Black Radical Tradition\*](#), Cedric Robinson documents the move towards chattel slavery took far longer than a few decades and notes it did not even begin with African-European relations. It was instead a process initiated “for Europeans and by Europeans,” Robinson notes.

Instead of the Terrible Transformation, Robinson referred to this process as the “invention/creation of the negro.” Race became the ideological justification for the oppression of African people because it was needed to produce capitalism. This is why Robinson used the term racial-capitalism to describe the institution and Chairman Omali Yeshitela of the African People’s Socialist Party uses the term Parasitic Capitalism to describe the system.

### [Part 1: Slavery, Settler Colonialism, Gender Oppression and Resistance in the Early Colonial Years](#)

