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## THE HIDDEN ORIGINS OF SLAVERY

**B**UT CALIBAN COULD have been African. As they watched *The Tempest* in London in 1611, theatergoers were told that Caliban was “freckled,” dark in complexion. His father was a demon and his mother was Sycorax, a witch who had lived in Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Some people in the audience might have seen Africans in England. In 1554, according to trader William Towrson, five “Negroes” were transported to England where they were “kept till they could speak the language,” and then they were taken back to Africa as translators for English traders. Two decades later, in 1578, voyager George Best stated: “I myself have seen an Ethiopian as black as coal brought into England, who taking a faire English woman to wife, begat a son in all respects as black as the father was . . .” Best speculated about the cause of the African’s skin color: “It seemeth this blackness proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man, which was so strong that neither the nature of the Clime, neither the good complexion of the mother concurring, could anything alter.”<sup>2</sup>

What struck the English most about Africans was their color. “These people are all blacke, and are called Negroes, without any

apparell, saving before their privities," wrote an English traveler during his visit to Cape Verde in the 1560s. Similarly, Robert Baker described the Africans:

*And entering in [a river], we see  
a number of blacke soules,  
Whose likelnesse seem'd men to be,  
but all as blacke as coles.*

In the English mind, the color black was freighted with an array of negative images: "deeply stained with dirt," "foul," "dark or deadly" in purpose, "malignant," "sinister," "wicked." The color white, on the other hand, signified purity, innocence, and goodness.<sup>3</sup>

"Brutish," Caliban seemed to personify what the English considered African traits. Travel reports described Africans as "a people of beastly living, without a God, law, religion." Their color allegedly made them "Devils incarnate." The Devil had "infused prodigious Idolatry into their hearts, enough to relish his pallat and aggrandize their tortures," and to "fry their souls, as the raging Sun had already scorched their coal-black carcasses." Africans were also said to be cannibals: they allegedly ate human beings as the English would eat "befe or mutton."<sup>4</sup>

Belonging to a libidinous race, in Shakespeare's portrayal, Caliban was driven by the passions of his body. Prospero saw him as a sexual threat to the nubile Miranda, her "virgin-knot" yet unbroken. "I have used thee (filth as thou art) with humane care," Prospero scolded Caliban, "and lodged thee in mine own cell till thou didst seek to violate the honor of my child." And the surly native snapped: "O ho, O ho! Would't had been done! Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else this isle with Calibans." In contrast, belonging to a civilized race, Prospero raised his mind or rationality to authority over his instinctual life.<sup>5</sup>

Like Prospero, the English colonists in the Virginia wilderness felt a great urgency to destroy, as historian Winthrop Jordan wrote so brilliantly and poetically, "the living image of primitive aggressions which they said was the Negro but was really their own." Far away from the security and surveillance of society in England, the colonists feared the possibility of losing self-control over their passions. "Intermixture and insurrection, violent sex and sexual violence, creation and destruction, life and death—the stuff of animal existence was rumbling at the gates of rational and moral judgment." If the gates fell, the colonists feared, so

would civilization. Thus they projected onto blacks their hidden and rejected instinctual parts of human nature. Jordan imagined the English colonizers insisting: "We, therefore, we do not lust and destroy; it is someone else. We are not great black bucks of the fields. But a buck *is* loose, his great horns menacing to gore into us with life and destruction. Chain him, either chain him or expel his black shape from our midst, before we realize that he is ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

How did this English fear of sensuality play out in the history of Virginia? And how did it intersect with "the hidden origins of slavery"?

### *A View from the Cabins: Black and White Together*

Again, *The Tempest* offers clues. In the theater, the audience heard Prospero refer to the African as "Caliban, my slave." "We cannot miss him. He does make our fire, fetch our wood, and serves in offices that profits us." When Shakespeare's play was first performed in London, there were no Africans in Virginia. Indeed, the introduction of Africans was something that had not even been considered at the time.<sup>7</sup>

In 1613, two years after the play was first performed in London, the colony sent its first shipment of tobacco to London, a small but significant four barrels. The exports grew dramatically from 2,300 pounds in 1616 to 19,000 the following year, and to 60,000 by 1620. Virginia's rapidly rising tobacco economy generated an insatiable demand for labor.

In 1619, a Virginia colonizer recorded a momentous event in the history of the English New World. "About the last of August," wrote John Rolfe in his diary, "came in a dutch man of warre that sold us twenty Negars."<sup>8</sup>

The first Africans to be landed in Virginia had probably been captured in wars or raids by enemy tribes before they were sold as slaves. Their ordeal must have been similar to the experience of Olaudah Equiano. After serving as a slave, he purchased his freedom and wrote an account of his captivity:

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slaveship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror. . . . When I was carried on board I was immediately handled, and tossed up, to see if I were sound,

by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief. . . . When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. . . . I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat. . . . [After a long voyage, the slaves finally sighted land.] We thought. . . we should be eaten by these ugly men. . . and. . . there was much dread and trembling among us, and nothing but bitter cries to be heard all the night from these apprehensions, insomuch that at last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work.<sup>9</sup>

Though they had been “sold,” the first Africans in Virginia probably were not slaves, persons reduced to property and required to work without wages for life. In 1619, Virginia had no law legalizing slavery. Like many English colonists, the Africans were sold as indentured servants, bound by contract to serve a master for four to seven years in order to repay the expense of their passage.

Curiously, for a long time, Africans remained a very small percentage of the work force.<sup>10</sup> The African population in Virginia increased very slowly—a contrast to the English colony in the Barbados of the West Indies, where there were 20,000 Africans by 1660, constituting a majority of the total population. In 1650, Africans constituted only 300 of Virginia’s 15,000 inhabitants, or 2 percent. In 1675, of the colony’s approximately 32,000 inhabitants, blacks totaled only 1,600, or 5 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Why were so few Africans being imported into Virginia when the demand for labor was so great and constantly inclining?

Carrying to Virginia negative images of Africans, English planters undoubtedly felt hesitant about peopling their colony with Calibans. Unlike their counterparts in the Barbados, they were not primarily businessmen seeking to make money and return to England. Rather, they had brought their families with

them and were planning to stay. They had come to the colony intending to create a reproduction of English society in Virginia.

Thus, in the early decades of the Virginia colony, planters chose to rely on white indentured servants. In the seventeenth century, 75 percent of the colonists came as servants. In 1664, the Council of Foreign Plantations reported that the colony’s population had been “increased principally by sending of Servants.” Tobacco agriculture and the generation of profits depended on these white workers. Describing how one planter with six indentured servants had made a thousand pounds with one crop of tobacco, John Pory of Virginia observed: “Our principal wealth. . . consisteth in servants.”<sup>12</sup>

Recruited in England but also Germany and Ireland, these men and women were the outcasts of society. They included convicts, “rogues, vagabonds, whores, cheats, and rabble of all descriptions, raked from the gutter,” as well as individuals who had been “decoyed, deceived, seduced, inveigled, or forcibly kidnapped and carried as servants to the plantations.”<sup>13</sup> Like the Africans, many of the white indentured servants came involuntarily, “spirited” here by unscrupulous recruiters. The “spirits,” an Englishman reported, “take up all the idle, lazie, simple people they can entice, such as have professed idleness, and will rather beg than work.” In an English court, Christian Chacrett was accused of being “a Spirit, one that [took] up men and women and children and [sold] them on a ship to be conveyed beyond the sea” to Virginia. Some of the servants were victims of the Irish “slave trade.” In Ireland, English poor laws for the correction and punishment of rogues and idle people led to the wholesale kidnapping of young women and men to supply the labor needs of the colonies. One of them, John King, recalled how he and others were “stolen in Ireland” by English soldiers. Taken from their beds at night “against their Consents,” they were put on a ship. “Weeping and Crying,” the Irish captives were kept on board until “a Lord’s day morning” when the ship set sail for Virginia.<sup>14</sup>

Coming from different shores, white and black laborers had very limited understanding of each other. Mutual feelings of fear and hostility undoubtedly existed. Still, they shared a condition of exploitation and abuse. The workers were sometimes forced to wear iron collars around their necks, often beaten and even tortured for recalcitrance, and always required to have passes whenever they left their plantations. Together, these exploited men and women of two races experienced the day-to-day exhaustion and harshness of plantation labor. They had to cut trees and clear brush, plow

the soil and prepare it for planting. In the hot and humid tobacco fields, they worked side by side—their backs bent over row after row of tobacco, their arms sore from topping young plants, their legs cramped from carrying heavy loads of tobacco leaves to the wagons, their nostrils filled with dust, and their ears stinging from the barking commands of their masters. Wary from a day of toil, they returned to their roughly built cabins and huts, where they were fed a dreary mess made from ground Indian corn called “lob-lolly.” A white servant in Virginia was undoubtedly expressing the anguish of many laborers, whether from England or Africa, when he wrote: “I thought no head had been able to hold so much water as hath and doth daily flow from mine eyes.”<sup>15</sup>

Occasionally, perhaps often, whites and blacks ran away together. In one case, the Virginia court declared: “Whereas [six English] Servants and Jno. a negro Servant hath Run away and Absented themselves from their masters Two months. It is ordered that the Sherriffe take Care that all of them be whipped . . . and Each of them have thirty nine lashes well layed on.” The problem of absconding workers became so serious that the Virginia legislature complained about “English servants running away with Negroes.”<sup>16</sup>

Some blacks and whites formed another kind of partnership. In 1630, the Virginia court decided that Hugh Davis was “to be soundly whipped before an assembly of negroes and others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of Christianity by defiling his body in lying with a negro.” Ten years later, the Virginia court punished a white man and a black woman: “Whereas Robert Sweat hath begotten with child a negro woman servant belonging unto Lieutenant Sheppard, the court hath therefore ordered that the said negro woman shall be whipped at the whipping post and the said Sweat shall tomorrow in the forenoon do public pennance for his offence at James city church in the time of divine service.” Similarly, William Watts, a white man, and Mary, a black servant, were punished for fornication in 1649. A year later, a white man and black woman, found guilty of having sexual relations, were required to stand clad in white sheets before a congregation. In 1667, the court convicted Irish servant John Dorman of getting a “Negro woman” with child. Between 1690 and 1698 in Westmoreland County, fourteen white women were punished for having illegitimate children; at least four of the nineteen children were mulatto.<sup>17</sup>

Increasingly, black servants were singled out for special treat-

ment. In 1640, for example, the Virginia legislature passed a law stating that masters should furnish arms to all men, “excepting negroes.” Blacks were also serving longer time periods for indenture as punishment for running away. In 1640, for example, three runaway servants—two white men and a black man—were captured and returned. They were each given thirty lashes. In addition, both white men were required to work for their masters for an additional year and for the colony for three more years. But the third runaway received the most severe punishment: “Being a Negro named John Punch shall serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere.” During the same year, six white men and a black man were arrested for running away. Communicating between two plantations, they had carefully planned their escape and gathered “corn powder and shot and guns”; after stealing a skiff and sailing down the Elizabeth River, they were apprehended. One of the white men, Christian Miller, received an especially harsh penalty—thirty lashes, an “R” (for Rogue) to be burned into his cheek, a shackle on his leg for at least a year, and seven years of service to the colony after he had completed his obligation to his master. The Negro Emanuel was given a similar punishment, except he was not ordered to serve additional time, implying he was required to labor for life.<sup>18</sup>

Some estate inventories showed that African laborers were more highly valued than English indentured servants, indicating that the former had a longer period of bound service. For example, the inventory of the estate of William Burdett, dated November 13, 1643, included this list:

	lb tobacco
Sarah Hickman to serve one year at	0700
John Gibbs to serve one year at	0650
Nehemia Coventon Aged 12 years to serve 8 years at	1000
Symon Caldron a boy very lame and 14 years old to serve 7	0500
William Young another boy full of the scurvey to serve six years at	0600
Edward Southerne a little Boy very sick having seven years to serve at	0700
Michael Pacey a boy to serve six years at	1100
Caine the negro, very ancient at	3000

One negro girl about 8 years old at	2000
32 goats young and old at	2500
A parcel of hogs at	1800

What was happening was evident: Africans were being degraded into a condition of servitude for life.<sup>19</sup>

Other documents reveal they had also become property. According to the Virginia court records of 1642, Thomas Jacob transferred a “negro Woman Susan” to Bridgett Seaverne and her son: “I do hereby declare that I have given the negro unto them and their heirs and Assigns Freely forever.” Two years later, William Hawley borrowed money from William Stone and provided as collateral “my Negro Mingo.” In 1646, Francis Pott sold a Negro woman and boy to Stephen Charlton “to the use of him . . . forever.” Wills provided that white servants were to serve their “full term of time” and Negroes “forever.” A 1648 deed included a provision for a “Negro woman and all her increase (which for future time shall be born of her body).” In 1652, a Negro girl was sold to H. Armsteadinger “and his heirs . . . forever with all her increase both male and female.” A year later, William Whittington sold John Pott “one Negro girl named Jowan; aged about Ten years and with her Issue and produce during her (or either of them) for their Life time. And their Successors forever.” In 1645, Ralph Wormeley presented in court a certificate of a gift to Agatha Stubbings in “Consideration of Matrimony”—“Four Negro men and Two women . . . Ten Cows, six Draft Oxen.” Africans had become classified as property: slaves as well as their future children could be inherited and also presented as gifts. By the 1650s, 70 percent of the blacks in Virginia were serving as de facto slaves.<sup>20</sup>

In 1661, the Virginia Assembly began to institutionalize slavery, to make it de jure. A law regarding the punishment of servants referred to “those Negroes who are incapable of making satisfaction by addition of time.” In other words, they were required to serve for life. Eight years later, the Virginia legislature defined a slave as property, a part of the owner’s “estate.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact that Africans had been reduced to slaves and that a system of unpaid labor was more profitable than paid labor, planters still preferred to depend on white indentured servants. After 1670, there was a decrease in the number of indentured servants migrating to Virginia. The labor shortage, however, did not turn planters to Africa as a more reliable source of labor. “It was not until at least a decade after the decline in the supply of [white

indentured] servants,” historian Russell Menard observed, “that the number of blacks imported each year rose above a trickle.” Why did the importation of Africans suddenly rise above “a trickle” in the late seventeenth century?<sup>22</sup>

### “English and Negroes in Armes”: Bacon’s Rebellion

Here again, *The Tempest* can be illuminating. The theatergoers were given a scenario that was uncanny in its anticipation of what would happen in Virginia. What they saw on stage was an interracial class revolt to overthrow Prospero. When the jester, Trinculo, and the butler, Stephano, first encountered Caliban, they found him repulsive—a fishlike monster and a devil. They gave him wine, and the inebriated islander offered to show Trinculo every “fertile inch o’ the island.” To his fellow servants, Caliban declared his desire to be free from Prospero’s tyranny:

*No dams I’ll make for fish,  
Nor fetch in firing  
At requiring,  
Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish.  
'Ban, 'Ban, Ca-Caliban  
Has a new master. Get a new man.  
Freedom, highday! highday, freedom!  
freedom, highday, freedom!*

Seeking freedom, Caliban concocted a plot for rebellion. If Stephano would kill Prospero (“knock a nail into his head”), the butler would become the lord of the island and husband of Miranda. Caliban promised: “She will become thy bed.” Stirred, the butler exclaimed: “Lead, monster; we’ll follow.” Warned in advance about the “foul conspiracy of the beast Caliban and his confederates,” Prospero unleashed his hunting dogs against the rebels: “Fury, Fury! There, Tyrant, there! Go, charge my goblins that they grind their joints.” Thus Prospero suppressed an interracial insurrection rooted in class, a condition shared by Caliban and Stephano as workers.<sup>23</sup>

Like Prospero, the English elite in Virginia erected a hierarchical racial and class structure. Most English colonists had migrated to Virginia as indentured servants. They planned to complete their period of indenture and become landowners. According to Governor William Berkeley, white servants came with a “hope of bettering their condition in a Growing Country.” The American

expanse seemed to offer them the possibility of starting over, creating new selves and new lives. Land in Virginia, taken from the Indians, was available and cheap. After completing the time and terms of their servitude, indentured servants became freemen; as such, they could claim title to fifty acres of land. As landholders, they could nurture the hope of becoming wealthy through tobacco agriculture.<sup>24</sup>

The profitability of tobacco production, however, unleashed a land boom. Colonists with financial advantage scrambled to possess the best lands along the navigable rivers. Representing a landed elite, they dominated the Virginia assembly and began to enact legislation to advance and protect their class interests. They passed laws that extended the time of indentured servitude for whites and increased the length of service for white runaways. In this way, they minimized competition for lands and at the same time maximized the supply of white laborers by keeping them in servitude for as long as possible.<sup>25</sup>

Finding it increasingly difficult to become landowners, many white freemen and indentured servants were becoming angry and frustrated: they felt they had been duped into coming to America. In 1649, pamphleteer William Bullock warned planters about the men and women who, "not finding what was promised," had become "dejected." In England, they had been viewed as the "Surcharge of necessitous people, the matter or fuel of dangerous insurrections." In Virginia, they became an even greater threat to social order, joining what the planter elite fearfully called a "giddy multitude"—a discontented class of indentured servants, slaves, and landless freemen, both white and black, the Stephanos as well as the Calibans of Virginia. This unruly underclass constituted a volatile element. In the early 1660s, for example, indentured servant Isaac Friend led a conspiracy to band together forty servants and "get Arms." He issued the rebellious cry: "Who would be for Liberty, and free from bondage" join the revolt. Many others would flock to their armed campaign. Together they would "go through the Country and kill those that made any opposition," and would "either be free or die for it." The authorities were informed about Friend's plan and quickly suppressed the plot. Again, in 1663, a Gloucester court accused nine "Laborers" of conspiring to overthrow the Virginia government and sentenced several of them to be executed. This incident gave planters a frightening example of "the horror" in Virginia—the presence of "villains" engaged in a "barbarous design" to subvert "rights and privileges" in the colony.<sup>26</sup>

Unruliness and discontent, however, continued to grow. Fearing this landless class, the Virginia legislature restricted suffrage to landowners in 1670. Governor William Berkeley reported the explosive class conditions in his colony, where "six parts of seven" of the people were "Poor Indebted Discontented and Armed." The ownership of guns was widespread among whites, for every white man had a right to bear arms and was required by law to have a gun in order to help defend the colony. The landed elite distrusted this class of armed poor whites so much that they were even afraid to organize them for military service. On one occasion, in 1673, Governor Berkeley raised troops to defend Virginia against Dutch warships, but he did so very reluctantly. Of the men he enlisted in his army, Berkeley apprehensively noted, at least one-third were freemen or debtors. They could not be trusted, he cautioned, for in battle, they might revolt and join the enemy "in hopes of bettering their Condition by Sharing the Plunder of the Country with them."<sup>27</sup>

Three years later, the revolt Berkeley feared took place, led by Nathaniel Bacon, a planter in upcountry Virginia. To address the Indian threat in the back region of the colony, Bacon raised a militia from the ranks of the "giddy multitude." Bacon's actions shocked Berkeley and his council, who were more worried about armed white freemen than hostile Indians. In their view, Bacon's followers were a "Rabble Crew, only the Rascallity and meanest of the people...there being hardly two amongst them that we have heard of who have Estates or are persons of Reputation and indeed very few who can either write or read." Ignoring their concerns, Bacon led a march against the Indians, killing hostile Susquehannahs as well as friendly Occaneechees. He justified his expedition as a "Glorious" defense of the country. But Governor Berkeley angrily declared Bacon a rebel and charged him with treason, an act punishable by death. Bacon retaliated by marching five hundred armed men to Jamestown, the seat of government in Virginia.<sup>28</sup>

Furnished arms by the white rebels, black men joined Bacon's army. They realized that they had a greater stake in the rebellion than their fellow white rebels, for many of them were servants bound for life. Black and white together, Bacon's soldiers formed what contemporaries described as "an incredible Number of the meanest People," "every where Armed." They were the "tag, rag, and bobtaylor," the "Rabble" against "the better sort of people." A colonial official reported that Bacon had raised an army of

soldiers "whose fortunes & Inclinations" were "desperate." Bacon had unleashed an armed interracial "giddy multitude" that threatened the very foundations of social order in Virginia.<sup>29</sup>

The rebels forced Berkeley to escape by ship and burned Jamestown to the ground. Returning with armed reinforcements, the governor quickly and violently suppressed the biracial insurrection. At a rebel fortification on an island in the York River, Captain Thomas Grantham encountered some four hundred "English and Negroes in Armes." Lying to them, Grantham said they had been "pardoned and freed from their Slavery." Most of them accepted his offer, but eighty black and twenty white rebels refused to surrender. Promised safe passage across the river, the holdouts were captured when Grantham threatened to blow them out of the water. All of the captured "Negroes & Servants," Grantham reported, were returned "to their Masters."<sup>30</sup>

By force and deceit, the rebels of the "giddy multitude" had been defeated, but they had fought in what historian Edmund Morgan called "the largest rebellion" known in any American colony before the American Revolution. During the conflict, the specter of class revolution had become a reality, and the scare shook the elite landholders. Five years after the rebellion, planters continued to harbor fears of class disorder and urged the king to keep royal soldiers in Virginia to "prevent or suppress any Insurrection that may otherwise happen during the necessitous unsettled condition of the Colony." Large landowners saw that the social order would always be in danger so long as they relied on white labor.<sup>31</sup>

The planters had come to a crossroads. They could open economic opportunities to white workers and extend political privileges to them, but this would erode their own economic advantage and potentially undermine their political hegemony. Or they could try to reorganize society on the basis of class *and* race. By importing and buying more slaves, they could reduce their dependency on an armed white labor force and exploit workers from Africa, who could be denied the right to bear arms because of their race.

After Bacon's Rebellion, the planters made their choice: they turned to Africa as their primary source of labor and to slavery as their main system of labor. The growing African population can be measured decade by decade from the tax lists of Surry County. Slaves constituted 20 percent of households in 1674, 33 percent in 1686, and 48 percent in 1694. In other words, near the end of the century, slaves totaled nearly half the population in the county.<sup>32</sup>

From 5 percent of the colony's population in 1675, blacks increased sharply to 25 percent by 1715 and over 40 percent by 1750. "There were as many buyers as negros," Francis Nicholson commented on a sale of 230 slaves in Virginia in 1700, "and I think that, if 2,000 were imported, there would be substantial buyers for them." "The negroes are brought annually in large numbers," a visitor to Virginia reported. "They can be selected according to pleasure, young and old, men and women. They are entirely naked when they arrive, having only corals of different colors around their neck and arms." Unlike the first "twenty Negars," these Africans arrived as slaves.<sup>33</sup>

What the landed gentry systematically developed after the insurrection was a labor force based on caste. After 1680, the legislature enacted laws that denied slaves freedom of assembly and movement. The "frequent meeting of considerable number of negroe slaves under pretense of feasts and burials" was "judged of dangerous consequence." Masters and overseers were prohibited from allowing "any Negro or Slave not properly belonging to him or them, to Remain or be upon his or their Plantation above the space of four hours." Militia patrollers were authorized to visit "negro quarters and other places suspected of entertaining unlawful assemblies," and to "take up" those assembling "or any other, strolling about from one plantation to another, without a pass from his or her master, mistress, or overseer." The manumission of slaves was prohibited unless the master paid for transporting them out of the colony. Significantly, all blacks, free and slave, were disarmed: an act entitled "Preventing Negroes Insurrections" ordered that "it shall not be lawful for any negro or other slave to carry or arm himself with any club, staff, gun, sword or any other weapon."<sup>34</sup>

New legislation also sharpened the color line. Who was "black" was given expanded definition. Earlier, in 1662, the legislature had declared that children born in Virginia should be slave or free according to the condition of the mother. In 1691, a new law prohibited the "abominable mixture and spurious issue" of interracial unions and provided punishment of white women who violated the anti-miscegenation law: a white mother of a racially mixed child would be subject to banishment and the child would be enslaved. Whether fathered or mothered by whites, mulattoes became slaves; as such, they were implicitly classified as black. Thus was born the "one-drop rule."<sup>35</sup>

In their pursuit of their short-term class interests, the elite had made decisions that would have tragic consequences for centuries to come.

### *"White Over Black"*

A hundred years after Bacon's Rebellion, one of the descendants of the planter class in Virginia was Thomas Jefferson. As a slaveowner, he actively participated in the buying and selling of slaves. "The value of our lands and slaves, taken conjunctly, doubles in about twenty years," he coolly calculated. "This arises from the multiplication of our slaves, from the extension of culture, and increased demands for lands." His observation was not merely theoretical: Jefferson's ownership of lands and slaves made him one of the wealthiest men in Virginia. Yet he continued to expand his slaveholdings. In 1805, he informed John Jordan that he was "endeavoring to purchase young and able negro men." In a letter to his manager regarding "a breeding woman," Jefferson referred to the "loss of 5 little ones in 4 years" and complained that the overseers had not permitted the slave women to devote as much time as was necessary to care for their children. "They view their labor as the 1st object and the raising of their children but as secondary," he continued. "I consider the labor of a breeding woman as no object, and that a child raised every 2 years is of more profit than the crop of the best laboring man." By 1822, Jefferson owned 267 slaves.<sup>36</sup>

Jefferson was capable of punishing his slaves with great cruelty. He used James Hubbard, a captured runaway slave, as a lesson to discipline the other slaves: "I had him severely flogged in the presence of his old companions." On another occasion, Jefferson punished a slave in order to make an example of him in "terrorem" to others and then sold him to a slave trader from Georgia. Jefferson wanted him to be sent to a place "so distant as never more to be heard among us," and make it seem to the other slaves on his plantation "as if he were put out of the way by death."<sup>37</sup>

However, Jefferson also believed that slavery was an immoral institution. "The love of justice and the love of country plead equally the cause of these people [slaves]," Jefferson confessed, "and it is a moral reproach to us that they should have pleaded it so long in vain . . ." As a member of the Virginia legislature, he supported an effort for the emancipation of slaves. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he recommended the gradual abolition of slavery, and in a letter to a friend written in 1788, he wrote: "You

know that nobody wishes more ardently to see an abolition not only of the [African slave] trade but of the condition of slavery; and certainly nobody will be more willing to encounter every sacrifice for that object."<sup>38</sup>

Jefferson personally felt guilty about his ownership of slaves. In a letter to his brother-in-law, Francis Eppes, on July 30, 1787, he made a revealing slip. Once "my debts" have been cleared off, he promised, "I shall try some plan of making their [his slaves'] situation happier, determined to content myself with a small portion of their liberty labour." He tried to excuse himself for appropriating only their "labour," not their "liberty." In a letter to a friend written only a day earlier, Jefferson exploded with guilt: "The torment of mind, I will endure till the moment shall arrive when I shall not owe a shilling on earth is such really as to render life of little value." Dependent on the labor of his slaves to pay off his debts, he hoped to be able to free them, which he promised he would do the moment "they" had paid off the estate's debts, two-thirds of which had been "contracted by purchasing them." Unfortunately, for Jefferson and especially for his slaves, he remained in debt until his death.<sup>39</sup>

In Jefferson's view, slavery did more than deprive blacks of their liberty. It also had a pernicious and "unhappy" influence on the masters and their children:

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion toward his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.<sup>40</sup>

Slavery had to be abolished, Jefferson argued, but when freed, blacks would have to be removed from American society. This had



to be done as soon as possible because slaves already composed nearly half of Virginia's population. "Under the mild treatment our slaves experience, and their wholesome, though coarse, food," Jefferson observed, "this blot in our country increases fast, or faster, than the whites." Delays for removal only meant the growth of the "blot." Jefferson impatiently insisted: "I can say, with conscious truth, that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way. The cession of that kind of property... is a bagatelle which would not cost me a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and expatriation could be effected."<sup>41</sup>

How could a million and a half slaves be expatriated? To send them away all at once, Jefferson answered, would not be "practicable." He estimated that such a removal would take twenty-five years, during which time the slave population would have doubled. Furthermore, the value of these slaves would amount to \$600 million, and the cost of transportation and provisions an additional \$300 million. "It cannot be done in this way," Jefferson decided. The only "practicable" plan, he thought, was to deport the future generation: black infants would be taken from their mothers and trained for occupations until they reached a proper age for deportation. Since an infant was worth only \$22.50, Jefferson calculated, the loss of slave property would be reduced from \$600 million to only \$37.5 million. Jefferson suggested that slave children be shipped to the independent black nation of Haiti. The transportation of the children from America would lead to the eventual "disappearance" of the entire black population. Jefferson called the success of his plan "blessed." As for taking children from their mothers, Jefferson remarked: "The separation of infants from mothers... would produce some scruples of humanity. But this would be straining at a gnat, and swallowing a camel."<sup>42</sup>

One of the reasons why deportation would have to be a condition for emancipation was clear to Jefferson: blacks and whites could never coexist in America because of "the real distinctions" which "nature" had made between the two races. "The first difference which strikes us is that of color," Jefferson explained. This difference, "fixed in nature," was important. "Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races?" he asked rhetorically. "Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of

color in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immovable veil of black which covers the emotions of the other race?" The differences between the races, in Jefferson's view, also involved intelligence. He publicly stated his "opinion" that blacks were "inferior" in the faculty of reason. However, he conceded that such a claim had to be "hazarded with great diffidence" and that he would be willing to have it refuted.<sup>43</sup>

But Jefferson refused to consider evidence refuting his claim. For example, he would not acknowledge Phillis Wheatley as a poet. In 1773, this young black writer had published a book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Her poems stirred interest and appreciation among many readers. Praising them, a French official living in America during the American Revolution wrote: "Phyllis is a negress, born in Africa, brought to Boston at the age of ten, and sold to a citizen of that city. She learned English with unusual ease, eagerly read and reread the Bible... became steeped in the poetic images of which it is full, and at the age of seventeen published a number of poems in which there is imagination, poetry, and zeal." In one of her poems, Wheatley insisted that Africans were just as capable of Christian virtue and salvation as whites:

*'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.*

During the American Revolution, Wheatley proclaimed:

*No more, America, in mournful strain  
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,  
No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,  
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand  
Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land.  
Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,*

*Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?*

Like Jefferson and many theoreticians of the American Revolution, Wheatley understood the meaning of the struggle for liberty. She, too, identified British tyranny as a form of slavery, but Wheatley reminded her readers that her understanding of freedom was not merely philosophical, for it tragically sprang from her own experience—the slave trade, forced separation from parents, and bondage in America.<sup>44</sup>

Jefferson contemptuously dismissed her writing: “The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.” Considering blacks incapable of writing poetry, Jefferson caustically commented: “Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet.”<sup>45</sup>

Like Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker challenged Jefferson’s “opinion” of black intellectual inferiority. On August 19, 1791, this free black mathematician from Maryland sent Jefferson a copy of the almanac he had compiled. “I suppose it is a truth too well attested to you, to need a proof here,” Banneker wrote in his cover letter, “that we are a race of beings, who have long labored under the abuse and censure of the world . . . that we have long been considered rather as brutish than human, and scarcely capable of mental endowments.” Noting that the almanac would soon be published, Banneker explained that he was sending Jefferson the “manuscript” of the work so that it could be viewed in his “own hand writing.”<sup>46</sup>

Seeking to do more than demonstrate and affirm the intelligence of blacks, Banneker also scolded the author of the Declaration of Independence for his hypocrisy on the subject of slavery.

Sir, suffer me to recall to your mind that time, in which the arms of the British crown were exerted, with every powerful effort, in

order to reduce you to a state of servitude: look back, I entreat you . . . you were then impressed with proper ideas of the great violation of liberty, and the free possession of those blessings, to which you were entitled by nature; but, Sir, how pitiable is it to reflect that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of Mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of these rights and privileges which he hath conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence, so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act, which you professedly detested in others.

The American Revolution, in Banneker’s mind, had unleashed the idea that “liberty” was a natural right. Commitment to this principle demanded consistency. The overthrow of the British enslavement of the colonies required the abolition of slavery in the new republic.<sup>47</sup>

On August 30, 1791, Jefferson responded: “Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talent equal to those of the other colors of men; and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence . . .” But actually Jefferson did not take Banneker seriously. In a letter to Joel Harlow, Jefferson claimed that the mathematician had “a mind of very common stature,” and that the black scholar had aid from Andrew Ellicot, a white neighbor who “never missed an opportunity of puffing him.”<sup>48</sup>

Parsimonious toward Wheatley as a poet and skeptical toward Banneker as a mathematician, Jefferson was unable to free himself from his belief in black intellectual inferiority. Like Prospero, he insisted that, to borrow Shakespeare’s poetic language, “nurture” could not improve the “nature” of blacks. Comparing Roman slavery and American black slavery, Jefferson pointed out: “Epictetus, Terence, and Phaedrus were slaves. But they were of the race of whites. It is not their condition then, but nature, which has produced the distinction.” Black slaves in America, on the other hand, were mentally inferior: “In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection . . . It appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable

of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous."<sup>49</sup>

In Jefferson's view, blacks were not only inferior in intelligence but also belonged to a libidinous race. "They [black men] are more ardent after their female," he claimed; "but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation." They "preferred" white women with their "flowing hair" and "more elegant symmetry of form." The black presence in America threatened white racial purity. "This unfortunate difference in color, and perhaps of faculty is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people. Many of their advocates, while they wish to vindicate the liberty of human nature, are anxious to preserve its dignity and beauty.... Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master." For Jefferson, interracial sex and racially mixed offspring would rupture the borders of caste. America must not become a nation of mulattoes. "Their amalgamation with the other color," he warned, "produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent."<sup>50</sup>

Jefferson's abhorrence of interracial sex must have made the charges against his own misconduct extremely painful. In 1802, one of his political critics ignited a controversy; in the *Richmond Recorder*, James Callendar wrote: "It is well known that the man, *whome it delighteth the people to honor*, keeps and for many years has kept, as his concubine, one of his slaves. Her name is Sally. The name of her eldest son is Tom. His features are said to bear a striking though sable resemblance to those of the president himself. The boy is ten or twelve years of age. His mother went to France in the same vessel with Mr. Jefferson and his two daughters. The delicacy of this arrangement must strike every person of common sensibility. What a sublime pattern for an American ambassador to place before the eyes of two young ladies!" The editor of the *Richmond Examiner* dared Callendar to support his charge with explicit evidence. "I... have too much faith in Mr. Jefferson's virtuous actions and designs to be tremulous for his fame in a case like this," he declared. The editor argued that the child could be anyone's. "In gentlemen's houses everywhere, we know that the virtue of unfortunate slaves is assailed with impunity.... Is it strange therefore, that a servant of Mr. Jefferson's at a house where so many strangers resort... should have a mulatto child?

Certainly not." But the editor added: "If he [Jefferson] has acted improperly... let us see to what extent the evil goes, whether it is venial or whether it is so heinous, as to cut him off from the love of the people."<sup>51</sup>

The seeming scandal could not be contained. Newspapers published audacious poems mocking what they saw as their libidinous president.

*In glaring red, and chalky white,  
Let others beauty see;  
Me no such tawdry tints delight —  
No black's the hue for me!*

*Thick pouting lips! how sweet their grace!  
When passion fires to kiss them!  
Wide spreading over half her face,  
Impossible to miss them.*

*Oh! Sally! harken to my vows!  
Yield up thy sooty charms —  
My best belov'd! my more than spouse,  
Oh! Take me to thy arms!<sup>52</sup>*

The editor of the *Boston Gazette* joined the chorus of critics. "We feel for the honor of our country," he declared. "And when the Chief Magistrate labours under the imputation of the most abandoned profligacy of private life, we do most honestly and sincerely wish to see the stain upon the nation wiped away, by the appearance at least of some colorable reason for believing in the purity of its highest character."<sup>53</sup>

Throughout the controversy over the charges of his relationship with Sally Hemings, Jefferson himself displayed a curious comportment. In a letter to James Madison, he offered an oblique denial. Describing how Callendar had "intimated he was in possession of things he could and would make use of in a certain case" and how he had demanded "hush money," Jefferson added: "He knows nothing of me which I am not willing to declare to the world myself." But except for this one instance, Jefferson acted as if the controversy did not exist and as if there were no mulatto children resembling him on his plantation. Even his grandson, Thomas Randolph, admitted that the Hemings children looked so much like Jefferson that at some distance or in the dusk one of the grown slaves "might have been mistaken for Mr. Jefferson."

Yet, he added, Jefferson himself “never betrayed the least consciousness of the resemblance.” Randolph stated that the resemblance was so striking that both he and his mother “would have been very glad to have them thus removed,” but “venerated Mr. Jefferson too deeply to broach such a topic to him.”<sup>54</sup>

Beneath the swirling controversy lay a hidden intimate past. In 1784, at the age of forty-one, the recently widowed Jefferson had gone to Paris as a special minister from the new republic. Accompanying him was his twelve-year-old daughter, Patsy. Three years later, Jefferson was joined by his daughter Polly, accompanied by her servant, the fifteen-year-old Sally Hemings. Hemings was one of the slaves Jefferson’s wife had inherited from her father, John Wayles; this slave was also the offspring of Wayles and his mulatto slave mistress, Betty Hemings, making Sally Hemings three-quarters white and the half-sister of Jefferson’s wife. “When Abigail Adams on June 26, 1787, met the sea captain who had brought Jefferson’s eight-year-old Polly across the Atlantic,” wrote historian Fawn Brodie, “she discovered with consternation that the slave accompanying the child was not a middle-aged woman, as she had expected, but an adolescent girl of considerable beauty.” Known at Monticello as “Dashing Sally,” recalled a slave who knew her, she was “mighty near white,” with “long straight hair down her back.”<sup>55</sup>

Reporting what his mother had told him, Madison Hemings wrote that his mother’s stay in Paris was about eighteen months. “During that time my mother became Jefferson’s concubine.” In 1789, Jefferson wanted Sally Hemings to return with him to Virginia. “She was just beginning to understand the French language well, and in France she was free, while if she returned to Virginia she would be re-enslaved. So she refused to return with him. To induce her to do so he promised her extraordinary privileges, and made a solemn pledge that her children should be freed at the age of twenty-one years.” She accepted his offer, and “soon after their arrival [in Virginia], she gave birth to a child, of whom Jefferson was the father. It lived but a short time.” She gave birth to four more of Jefferson’s children—Beverly, Harriet, Madison, and Eston. “We all became free agreeably to the treaty, entered into by our parents before we were born.” In 1998, over two centuries after Sally Hemings’s arrival in Paris, DNA evidence validated Madison Hemings’s story.<sup>56</sup>

What worried Jefferson more than the threat of miscegenation or the controversy over Sally Hemings was the danger of race

war. “Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites,” he anxiously explained, “ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of one or the other race.”<sup>57</sup>

Unless slavery was abolished, Jefferson feared, whites would continue to face the threat of servile insurrection. Commenting on the slave revolt in Santo Domingo, he wrote to James Monroe in 1793: “It is high time we should foresee the bloody scenes which our children certainly, and possibly ourselves (south of Potomac) have to wade through, and try to avert them.” In 1797, referring to the need for a plan for emancipation and removal, Jefferson anxiously confessed to a friend: “If something is not done, and soon done, we shall be the murderers of our children.” Three years later, an attempted slave revolt shook Jefferson like “a fire bell in the night.” The Gabriel Prosser conspiracy was crushed, and twenty-five blacks were hanged. Though the insurrectionary spirit among the slaves had been quelled in this instance, Jefferson warned, it would become general and more formidable. He predicted that slavery would be abolished—“whether brought on by the generous energy of our own minds” or “by the bloody process of St. Domingo.” In Jefferson’s nightmare, slaves would seize their freedom with daggers.<sup>58</sup>

By Jefferson’s time, it had become clear that the seventeenth-century planters had failed to consider the tragic consequences of changing from white indentured servants to African slaves. Driven by immediate economic interests, the Virginia elite made choices that would ricochet down the corridors of time. They had created an enslaved black “giddy multitude” that would constantly threaten social order. “As it is,” Jefferson cried out, “we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”<sup>59</sup> Jefferson wanted to abolish the institution that had denied “liberty” to the people he owned as property; it represented a “moral reproach” that “tormented” his conscience. But, by then, it was too late. Unlike Prospero, the slaveholders could not simply free their Calibans and leave the island. “All torment, trouble, wonder, and amazement inhabits here,” the English theatergoers heard the old counselor Gonzalo pray. “Some heavenly power guide us out of this fearful country.”<sup>60</sup>