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The Atlantic Creoles Submitted by Shaykh Muhammad Abdullah

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

By Ira Berlin

A 1624 map of Virginia.

A 1624 map of Virginia.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division

Excerpted from *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* by Ira Berlin. Out now from Harvard University Press.

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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.¹

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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.² From common experience, conventions of personal behavior, and cultural sensibilities compounded by shared ostracism, Atlantic creoles acquired interests of their own, apart from those of their European and African antecedents.

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.³ Placed in captivity, Atlantic creoles might be exiled anywhere around the Atlantic—the islands along the coast, the European metropolises, or the plantations of the New World. In the 17th century and the early part of the 18th, most slaves exported from Africa went to the sugar plantations of the Atlantic islands and the Americas. Enslaved Atlantic creoles might be shipped to Pernambuco in modern-day Brazil; Barbados; or Martinique and later Jamaica and Saint-Domingue (now Haiti)—all expanding centers of New World

staple production. But transporting them to these hubs of the plantation economy posed dangers, which American planters well understood. The distinguishing characteristics of Atlantic creoles—their linguistic dexterity, cultural plasticity, and social agility—were precisely those qualities that the sugar planters of the New World feared the most. For their labor force, planters desired youth and strength, not experience and wisdom. Too much knowledge might be subversive to the good order of the plantation.

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 grandees 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.⁴ Atlantic creoles were among the first Africans transported to the mainland. They became black America’s charter generations.

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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 *cofradías*, so that by the 17th century the network of black religious brotherhoods stretched from Lisbon, Portugal, to São Tomé, Angola, and Brazil.⁵ Although no comparable institutional linkages existed in the Anglo- and Franco-American worlds, there were numerous informal connections between black people in New England and Virginia, Louisiana, and Saint-Domingue. Like their African counterparts, Atlantic creoles of European, South American, and Caribbean origins also became part of black America’s charter generations.

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.

That black people could hold slaves and employ white people suggested that race was just one of many markers 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 François in Haiti.⁶

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.⁷ Freedom was measured by the degree of communal integration, not by ability to secure individual autonomy. Along the coast of Africa, Atlantic creoles often identified with the appendages of European or African power—whether international mercantile corporations or local chieftains—in hopes of relieving the stigma of otherness, be it enslavement, bastard birth, paganism, or race. They employed this strategy repeatedly in mainland North America, as they tried to clear the hurdles of social and cultural difference and establish a place for themselves. Many slaves gained their freedom. This was not easy in New Netherland, although there was no legal proscription on manumission. Far more than any other mainland colony during the first half of the 17th century, New Netherland rested on slave labor, and

manumission was calculated to benefit slave owners, not slaves. Indeed, gaining freedom was nearly impossible for slaves owned privately and difficult even for those owned by the West India Company. The company valued its slaves and was willing to liberate only the elderly, whom it viewed as a liability. Even when manumitting such slaves, the company exacted an annual tribute from adults and retained ownership of their children. To the West India Company's former slaves, who were unable to pass their new status on to their children, this "half-freedom" appeared to be no freedom at all.⁸ Hearing rumors that baptism would assure freedom to their children, they pressed their claims to church membership. Although conversion never guaranteed freedom in New Netherland, many half-free blacks achieved their goal. By the time of the English conquest, about 1 black person in 5 had achieved freedom in New Amsterdam.⁹ Some free people of African descent prospered, and building on small gifts of land that the West India Company provided as freedom dues, a few entered the landholding class.¹⁰

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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