

Black History Month: A letter to my ancestors

by Vanessa Brown

As an African American born in the United States, it's rare when asked where your family is from that you'd have an answer. But I do...

Growing up, I heard about the [Middle Passage](#) and saw the TV series [Roots](#) before ever knowing my family history. I was certain there was a resemblance I wasn't prepared to embrace as a teenager – and I was right.

In the mid-80s, I heard the names “Trasie” and “Katie” for the first time.

- **Trasie is my 8th generation ancestor** who sailed from Cameroon, Africa, to the United States in the 1790s in the bowels of a slave ship. She was sold to John Martin at the Charleston Slave Market on July 1, 1799.
- **Katherine (Katie), Trasie's daughter**, was born in 1802 and had six children with Robert Martin, the slave owner's grandson.

The [history of the Martins](#) reflect the many achievements of African Americans in this country.

- **When we celebrate our heritage**, we also recognize the accomplishments of our family members—lawyers, doctors, judges, a scientist, an astronaut, elected officials, entrepreneurs, a bishop, ministers, actors and entertainers.

This is my letter to Trasie and Katie.

Trasie, you became my ancestral caterpillar. Katie, my chrysalis.

In 2019, while planning our 51st Martin Family Reunion in New York City, I received an email with information that literally brought me to tears.

- **Trasie, it was your Bill of Sale** – and it would change me for the rest of my life.
- *It confirmed the truth of what Granddaddy use to say: “You see all those trees back there? We own all that land.”*

It terrifies me to think of what you felt being torn from your family in what we now know as Cameroon, Africa. Who would ever call the belly of a ship that's not a cruise liner “home”? Pressed together like sardines to allow for maximum sale on the other side of this journey. No bathroom breaks, no food, no opportunity to get up and stretch your legs. I don't know what you endured – even though my mind wanders, so I quickly will myself to a place of admiration that confirms what I do know.

- **And that is this:** *The strength you possessed is beyond normal human capacity, because you made it to the other side.*

The images I've seen of the Charleston Slave Market were dismal. You had to be presented in a way where a potential owner could “see” what they were buying. \$300 in 1799 was no discount, but more a 5th Avenue store purchase.

- *I remind myself those are the shoulders I stand on.*

Katie, I want to imagine you running around the plantation chasing butterflies like I did outside Grandma and Granddaddy's house. But I'm sure that's not the case.

I often ask myself were you even able to be a child or at what age did you become a slave to Mr. Martin?

- *What I do know is you had six children by his grandson at a time black and whites couldn't be seen together – let alone marry.*
- *So I've asked myself what happened? Did Robert Martin love you so much he kept coming back – or did he take advantage of you?*

Even then I'm reminded you are the product of a strong woman who endured The Middle Passage – and she was your teacher.

My guess is you both did what you had to do, said what you had to say, were quiet when you had to be and cried tears many nights to make it to the next day. It's your strength I channel when the challenges of life come.

I know my truth and silently wear it every day – traversing the modern day of this society with the knowledge of my lineage that encourages me daily.

Thank you for a life that's rich in purpose, a solid foundation that is full of grace. I'm the butterfly that spreads her wings over the foreign country that took something from you yet gave your descendants something more: the ability to endure beyond human understanding.

*Sincerely,
Vanessa, Descendant of Trasia*

To my BlackRock family: My decision to write this piece wasn't easy because I still revisit my personal chrysalis. However, I hope the transparency in the links above reveal the past and help us see where we are today so we can plan for a better tomorrow.