

# The Hopefulness and Hopelessness of 1619

Marking the 400-year African American struggle to survive and to be free of racism

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Her name was Angela, one of the first known Africans in British North America.

His name was John, the first known antiblack racist in colonial America.

In 1619, this black woman and white man—what they embody—arrived months apart in 12-year-old Virginia, the first of the 13 British colonies that became the United States. Angela was the original embodiment of enslavement, of survival, of the 400-year African American struggle to survive, to be free of racism. John was the original embodiment of elite white male power, of the democracy of racists, of its 400-year struggle to survive, to be free of anti-racism.

Instead of David and Goliath, African America is the story of the petite Angela hopefully and hopelessly fighting off the giant John from 1619 to 2019 for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. She was, perhaps, the beginning of hope, the North Star essential to anti-racism. He was, definitely, the beginning of all that makes her hopeless, the eclipse essential to racism. African Americans have every reason to be hopeful and every reason to be hopeless on this 400th anniversary of our birth in this land.

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These 22 or 23 Africans, including Angela, who arrived this week 400 years ago were not the first to land in North America. Some Africans probably came before Christopher Columbus. During the 16th century, some probably accompanied Spanish explorers on expeditions to the Southwest and Southeast of the present-day United States. In 1526, a slave revolt stopped the Spanish from planting a slaveholding colony in present-day South Carolina. According to the historian Thomas C. Holt, “A muster roll for March 1619 shows that there were already thirty-two African slaves” in Virginia. But no one knows when and how they arrived. No one knows my ancestors’ exact birth date in this country.

African Americans, as a people, are like the enslaved Africans who never knew exactly when they were born. Some people were so young when kidnapped in West Africa, so young when sold down the river into Mississippi, that they never learned their birthday. So some folks chose a birthday, like African Americans choose a birthday—August 20, 1619—based on the first documented recognition of our arrival in Virginia. A different John, John Rolfe, married Pocahontas in 1614, and then produced African America’s birth certificate five years later, on this day.

Today feels more like the anniversary of the day I was diagnosed with metastatic cancer than a birthday. I live in fear of a reoccurrence like I live in fear that metastatic racism will never go away, that the African American will die off before racism does. It is a hopelessness that has always existed here, even among white people watching the war of worlds between Angela and John. As Thomas Jefferson put forth at the founding of the United States, “Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the white; 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 the one or the other race.”

It is an original hopelessness I battle each day, as I suspect Angela did during those early days of African American history. It is a battle against hopelessness that makes me not feel like celebrating today, although I should be celebrating. I feel lucky to be alive as an African American. The totalizing effect of John has been no life, has been shortened life. Black death matters to racist America. Black life matters to African America.

#### Read: Slavery made America

In recapping African American history, someone like Angela is indispensable. She is not the famed slave-revolt leader, the daring runaway, the author of an antislavery screed, the maker of an enduring cultural product, the anointed black leader, the Phillis, Sojourner, Mary, Malcolm, or Maya. There is history in regular African Americans behind the scenes surviving the regularity of racist policies, ideas, abuse, and violence for 400 years. Angela is the woman of today who works in a low-wage health-care gig, moving from crisis to crisis and joy to joy, all the while raising her hopes for a better day, or not. She is still surviving John, brewing our hope.

In recapping America’s racist history, someone like John is indispensable. He is not the unforgettably brutal or mediagenic slave-ship captain, master, Confederate, lynch mob, Klansman, cop, mass shooter, or Andrew, Pitchfork, Bull, George, or Donald. There is history in regular policy makers behind the scenes regularly instituting racist policies that yield racist inequities or injustices, or regularly refusing to institute policies that prevent inequities and injustices. John is the Mitch of today refusing to use his power as Senate majority leader to stop voter suppression, gerrymandering, and Russian hackers; to curtail white-supremacist domestic terrorism; to close the growing racial wealth gap; or to end mass incarceration and deportation. John is still harming Angela, brewing our hopelessness.

#### Read: The persistence of slavery

John Pory arrived first in Virginia in 1619, in January. He was a longtime disciple of the recently deceased Richard Hakluyt, the grand English collector of racist overseas travel stories and the chief promoter of English colonization of Virginia. John served in England’s Parliament from 1605 to 1611, before traveling around Europe and over to Virginia.

John’s legislative skills were put to use when he served as the first speaker of Virginia’s inaugural general assembly. From July 30 to August 4, 1619, 22 burgesses, including Thomas Jefferson’s great-grandfather, assembled for the first time in Jamestown’s newly constructed wooden church. They had been elected by Virginia’s white male settlers, formalizing their power and their democracy through disenfranchising all others, including white women, white indentured servants, and Native people whose children they resolved to “obtaine unto themselves by just means a certine number ... to be educated ... in true religion and civile course of life.”

It is hardly coincidental that this nation's first experiment in (wealthy, white male) democracy emerged alongside the first experiment with black enslavement (and Native assimilation), that the history of African America and American democracy are both rooted in 1619. It is hardly coincidental that both 400-year anniversaries are being marked this year, that John's freedom begot Angela's enslavement, that John climbed his elevated whiteness onto the head of Angela's lowered blackness. It is not coincidental that that all happened then. That that is all happening now. That that 400 years. That that racism and anti-racism. That that America.

#### Read: A house still divided

No one knows when Angela was born. But she was probably young. If she was 19 years old in 1619, she'd have been born in 1600, the year John translated into English and published *A Geographical Historie of Africa*, a book of racist ideas about Angela's race. First written in 1526, and popular as late as the 19th century, its racist ideas apparently had to be true since they were written by an African Moor, Leo Africanus (who probably sought favor from the Italian court that had freed and converted him). "The Negroes likewise leade a beastly kinde of life, being utterly destitute of the use of reason, of dexteritie of wit, and of all artes," Africanus wrote. "Yea they so behave themselves, as if they had continually lived in a forrest among wilde beasts."

In his introduction, John praised Africanus for having "largely, particularly, and methodically deciphered" the African countries better than "any writer." His mentor, Richard Hakluyt, praised the book as the very "best, the most particular, and methodicall" that ever "was written" on Africa. John probably carried a copy of his book with him to Virginia in 1619. He had "some good book always in store," he wrote a friend that year, not long after he may have met Angela.

Angela was no wild beast, but she was enslaved like one. She was among the 350 Angolans herded onto an overcrowded slave ship at the port of Luanda sometime in 1619. The San Juan Bautista sailed from what is now Angola for Vera Cruz, Mexico. On the middle passage, it was attacked by death—120 Africans died—and then two pirate ships, the White Lion and the Treasurer. The pirates kidnapped from the kidnapers about 60 Angolans, probably among the healthiest and youngest of the enslaved people aboard, including Angela. They divided the human bounty between the two ships and headed north. Did they leave the rest to die slowly? It's a central question in African American history we are still asking.

Four hundred years ago today, on August 20, 1619, the White Lion arrived at Point Comfort, near current-day Hampton. The captain "brought not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes" and traded them for food, noted John Rolfe. According to a recent discovery by James Horn, president of the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation, the Treasurer arrived in Virginia four days later and left two or three Africans. One of them was Angela.

John Pory did not use his legislative power to corral the burgesses to ban the importation of enslaved Africans or slavery. And it is not hard to figure out why.

On September 30, 1619, John sent off a letter to the English ambassador to the Netherlands, Sir Dudley Carleton. "All our riches for the present doe consiste in Tobacco," he wrote. "Our principall wealth (I should have said) consisteth in servants."

#### Read: How a museum captures African American history

The laborers were mostly white then. But by 1719, John would have written, "Our principal wealth consists in African slaves," planting tobacco on plantations along the James, York, Rappahannock, and Potomac Rivers in Virginia. By 1819, a planter down in Georgia would have said, "All our riches for the present do consist of cotton." The plantations were growing and spreading south and west as were the factories up north manufacturing slave-made goods into white American wealth and the Industrial Revolution.

By 1919, Angela's descendants were still mostly disenfranchised domestics like she was, or working in the fields for subsistence wages, or escaping Jim Crow for northern lynch mobs during the Red Summer. African Americans that year were returning from World War I to something worse. As W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, "WAR IS HELL but there are things worse than Hell, as every Negro knows."

Imagine living in a hell for 400 years that the gatekeepers keep calling heaven. Ministers such as Richard Baxter telling you about a voluntary slave laboring on plantations. Slaveholders such as Senator John C. Calhoun telling you slavery is a positive good. Judges such as Henry Brown telling you the South is separate but equal. Republicans such as Newt Gingrich telling you American policies are color-blind. Black intellectuals such as John McWhorter telling you the nation is post-racial. White supremacists such as Donald Trump telling you they are going to make America great again.

It is unbearably tough to be hopeful amid all this denial, while living in this so-called heaven that feels worse than hell. I feel connected to the hopelessness Angela must have felt stepping off that ship of terror into the terror of slavery.

Then again, I know hope is essential to African Americans surviving racism another 400 years. In order to bring about change, we have to believe change is possible. We can't be cynics believing racism is permanent, since it has been ailing us for 400 years. Cynicism is the kryptonite of change.

I also feel connected to the hopefulness Angela must have felt when she figured out ways to resist and survive. Connected to the Angela who heard about the successful Haitian Revolution. The Angela who survived the Underground Railroad and stepped off into freedom. The Angela who saw Frederick Douglass practically will into existence the Great Jubilee in 1865. The Angela who felt Ida B. Wells unflinchingly stare down the lynch mob. The Angela who felt chills as she heard Martin Luther King Jr. boom "I have a dream!" from Washington, D.C.; Whitney Houston boom "Let us march on till victory is won!" from television; the presidential candidate Barack Obama boom "Yes, we can!" from Iowa; and Opal Tometi boom "Black lives matter!" from Twitter.

I feel connected to the Angela who believes that she can be anti-racist, that she can make America anti-racist. The Angela who believes racism will die off before the African American does. The hopeful Angela fighting off the hopelessness.

That Angela is filled with another 400 years of hope.