

Version of Record that has been published in Early American Literature by / edited by Lindsay Dicuirci in the series Two Ships, Two Shores. The original work can be found at:
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Dicuirci, Lindsay. "Two Ships, Two Shores." *Early American Literature* 56, no. 1 (2021): 131-156. doi:10.1353/eal.2021.0006.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2021.0006>

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Two Ships, Two Shores

Abstract: This essay examines how nineteenth-century writers and orators made meaning and myth out of the arrivals of the Mayflower ship in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and the White Lion at Point Comfort, Virginia. The arrivals of these two ships, one carrying the vaunted Pilgrims and the other carrying the first enslaved Africans to British North America, were almost always misdated as 1620 and thus situated as rival ships representing divergent purposes. I show how this misdating was leveraged by very different groups, from Black ministers speaking in the midst of Civil War to white colonizationists fantasizing about a Black Plymouth. The fraught but tidy imagery of the dual 1620 arrivals also brought to the fore a deep historiographical divide between those that viewed the nation as the triumphant realization of the Pilgrim's mission and those who saw that mission as indistinguishable from the slaveholding planters' to the South. Finally, I turn to the significance of the 1619 dating of the White Lion and the New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project to illuminate why dates matter in the writing and righting of Black history in America and how the work of early Americanists might contribute to reorienting the stories we tell and their timelines.

KEYWORDS: New England, Virginia, colonization, slavery, historiography, abolition, American Colonization Society

The question is simply between the Mayflower and the Slave-Ship, —
which of these two to choose?

— Charles Sumner, 1860

A cavalcade of ghost ships
wash their hands of all they carried

— Clint Smith, 2019

In 1839, Robert C. Winthrop, descendant of Puritan governor John Winthrop, stood before the New England Society of New York and repeated an old myth. “The year 1620 was unquestionably the great epoch of American destinies,” he declared, for it was the year that two ships

landed on two North American shores carrying two very different cargoes. One ship was bound for Plymouth, Massachusetts, the other for Hampton, Virginia: "At the very time the *May-flower* with its precious burden, was engaged in its perilous voyage to Plymouth, another ship, far otherwise laden, was approaching the harbor of Virginia," he began. "It was a Dutch man-of-war, and its cargo consisted in part of twenty slaves, which were subjected to sale on their arrival, and with which the foundations of domestic slavery in North America were laid. I see these two fate-freighted vessels. . . . I hear from the one the sighs of wretchedness . . . from the other the pleasant voices of prayer and praise" (55–56). The ships represented "divided destines," "good and evil," "Freedom and Slavery"; one was blessed, the other its "accursed compeer!" (56). In short, "The Colonies of Jamestown and Plymouth had nothing in common" (50). But it was not in 1620 that the Dutch ship the *White Lion* carrying enslaved Africans from Guinea landed in the cruelly named port of Point Comfort in Virginia. It was August 1619.

This misdating may not appear to matter at all. But for the orators and writers like Winthrop who repeated the dating error, the image of two ships arriving on two shores in the same year "called up a terrible twin that was essential to the emerging division of North and South," John Seelye writes in *Memory's Nation* (280). In the early national period, the dual landing in 1620 proved rhetorically useful in constructing the democratic "destiny" of New England after the fact and for creating the "fantasy of idealized arrival," as Christopher Apap puts it, whereby the *Mayflower's* landing is blessed and the *White Lion's* cursed (45). Massachusetts was the nursery of liberty and harmony, Virginia the nursery of suffering and discord.¹ Further, Winthrop suggests that Virginia had all of the natural advantages of climate and New England none; there were "no *Mayflowers* for the Pilgrims" landing on an unforgiving rock, while Virginia's soil welcomed its planters with earth's bounty (51).

Winthrop's speech represents but one of many exploitations of this provocative image. For southerners who repeated the misdating, the two ships represented a shared history of the British slave trade, a shared dilemma, even a shared guilt. For the American Colonization Society (ACS), whose members often told this story, the two ships carried with them the spirits of liberty (the *Mayflower*) and civilization (the *White Lion*) that would meet and flourish in the repatriated Liberia. For Black historians, minis-

ters and orators, the distinction between these ships and their apparently disparate missions was not so sharp as their white compatriots claimed. How distinct can these two colonial ship landings be to those enslaved all over the subsequent nation? In all of these repetitions, it was critically important to the writer or speaker that the ships landed in the same year on two coasts carrying two different sets of passengers. The dating mattered because precise dates structure commemoration and commemoration dictates what and how communities remember and are remembered. It also mattered for the tidiness of the imagery, an imagery that did *not* perform the work of national cohesion that scholars often associate with the first half-century of nationhood, but explained its innate fragmentation both geographically and ideologically.² This essay examines how the 1620 misdating of the arrival of the *White Lion* in Point Comfort functioned as a lodestone for slavery's apologists and abolitionists alike, a story endlessly told (wrongly) but put to radically different uses from expunging New England's record of slaveholding to advocating Liberian colonization and justifying eventual disunion.³

In the nineteenth-century historiographical and rhetorical tradition I trace in this essay, writers cast the *Mayflower* and the *White Lion* as foils, the former's grandeur heightened by the sharpness of this contrast. Born of the early national culture of commemoration, celebrating the *Mayflower* landing became not only a provincial New England tradition but also a point of origin for genealogies of American democracy in nineteenth-century historiography.⁴ But in other contexts, such as Black liberation historiography or Liberian colonization, (mis)remembering the two ships together served complex and sometimes surprising purposes. As African American historian George Washington Williams wrote in his 1883 *History of the Negro Race in America*, histories of British colonial America had long "preserved a silence on the question of Negro slavery," with a particular veil thrown over the "darker crime of human slavery in Massachusetts" (172–73). Acknowledging the arrival of the *White Lion* only in the context of the *Mayflower* made clear that the former played a subordinate role in the development of the democratic experiment, just as its passengers were made subordinate in that experiment. More broadly, misdating the two ships' arrival served to erase 1619 as a distinctive historical moment out of which the eventual nation was born. With the release of the *New York Times's* 1619 Project, our revisitation of Plymouth 1620 invites us to also

return to Point Comfort 1619 and to scrutinize the continued influence of nineteenth-century historiography on the stories we tell about colonial America. If, as Camille T. Dungey's poem for the 1619 Project observes, "Revision is a struggle toward truth," then revising historical frameworks and reorienting historical moments is necessary justice work (78).

MONSTROUS BERTH

The error in dating the *White Lion's* arrival likely originated more than a century before Winthrop's address, with Virginian Robert Beverley's *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705). Beverley observed that in August 1620, "A Dutch Man of War landed Twenty Negroes for Sale; which were the First of that kind that was carried into the Country" (37). Future historians on both sides of the Atlantic followed Beverley's dating and the error became canon, despite the fact that John Smith's *Generall Historie* (1624) had gotten the date right decades before. In this way, misinformation built its own textual corpus and legacy. The error was not rectified until the 1850s, when Virginia historian Charles Campbell sorted it out from his copious source material. Still, the wrong date would be invoked in antebellum commemorations, political speeches, histories and essays into the twentieth century. The misdating took hold, I believe, for several reasons not least of which is aesthetic: the imagery of two ships, two shores is extremely compelling, tidy, and rather stirring. A ship landing on shore after a tumultuous journey is an appealing metaphor for a nation lacking a cohesive origin story; it is an image that evokes struggle and determination, a special providence, and a birth (an evocative homophone, in this case).

By stressing both the coincidence of their arrivals and the marked difference in their "cargo," commemorations of the Plymouth landing allowed New Englanders to lay claim to the story of America's founding while offering them a site (Jamestown) on which to pin all that ailed the nation. Regional differences were reaffirmed in early national histories and geographies which, Jennifer Greeson observes, "[e]mbedded a North/South hierarchy within their descriptions that replicated the global core-periphery split on a domestic scale" (57). Indeed, Greeson tells us, in his *American Universal Geography* (1789–93), Jedidiah Morse "quarantined the five 'Southern States' on their own separate page," essentially "quarantining the problematic persistence of slavery in the new republic" (60). The

historiographical trend to position Virginia and Massachusetts as sister states and natural rivals also placed British North America at the center of the United States' colonial history, sidelining the colonial Spanish, French, and Dutch stories. This Anglocentric binary was bolstered by the rise of historical societies and antiquarian institutions whose collecting practices privileged Anglophone materials from the British Atlantic World.⁵

Commemorating Plymouth began as early as 1769 and while the commemorations continued into the twentieth century, they waned a little with the formalizing of Thanksgiving Day (Hebel 381). Forefathers' Day celebrations "once governed the national iconography" despite the regional roots of the story. Critic Udo Hebel's comprehensive checklist of Forefathers' Day orations runs 132 items with speeches from Boston and Ohio to Montreal and Sacramento. These commemorations cast New England's shores as national bedrock.⁶ In his 1820 discourse on the subject, Daniel Webster stressed the importance of the land itself: "There is a local feeling, connected with this occasion, too strong to be resisted; a sort of *genius of the place*, which inspires and awes us" (8) not least because it is America's "asylum of religious liberty" (15). On this spot, the "shore of Being" (55), Bay Staters would return to "hold communion at once with our ancestors and our posterity" (5-6). Asking his audience to pledge on Plymouth Rock to fight slavery, to stop manufacturing its manacles, Webster acknowledges that this land is not the same beacon for enslaved people, brought to this land "from beneath chains, and bleeding with stripes" (52). Webster's Plymouth is unsullied land (emptied of indigenous history) on which the continued threat of slavery is a stain or, in his words, a "contamination" (50).

Webster's common imagery portrayed American slavery as stain, evil, curse, and monster; phenomenologically "other" than the genius of the Pilgrim migration, the sacred landing, the future nation. His characterization made it easier to see the twenty or so enslaved people first brought to Virginia as a "diabolic dye," in the words of poet Phillis Wheatley, on an otherwise unstained land. In this grammar of remembrance, the whiteness of the *Mayflower* contrasted with the dark criminality of the *White Lion* collapsed the distinction between the "stain" of enslavement and the "stain" of dark skin, all while associating whiteness with acquittal. For example, John Quincy Adams's Plymouth oration of 1802 expressed the hope that when indigenous people "arraign their European invading conquerors" at the Final Judgment, perhaps "the fathers of the Plymouth Colony will

then appear in the whiteness of innocence" (Adams 25). As a writer for the antislavery *National Era* put it half a century later, "The ermine of the judiciary of the Puritan State has never been sullied by the admission of [slavery's] detestable claims" (J.G.W. 191). In this black-and-white rhetorical tradition, of which the two ships story was a crucial part, the presence of Black people in North America is cast as a discoloration and as a problem to be solved.⁷ Antislavery storytellers in particular narrated the history of the two ships in a "battle of obvious good versus obvious evil, with good triumphing in the end," as Ibram X. Kendi describes the false binary that undergirds the history of racist ideas (4). Positioning Plymouth as beleaguered but pure and Jamestown as excessive and sullied not only exacerbated regional divisions but also unmoored people of African descent from an identifiable history and legitimate claim to American belonging.

As John Ernest observes, "Black history was, in effect, viewed as a kind of antihistory that justified its own exclusion from serious historical notice" (44). This antihistory is fed by the treatment of Black people in the story of the *White Lion*. In an 1832 speech before the House of Delegates of Virginia, for example, Thomas Marshall (a colonizationist and enslaver) bemoans the "fatal, fatal ship!" that sailed from the Guinea coast up the James River, bringing with it "her cargo of crime and misery, 'rigged with curses'" (381). The disembodiment and dehumanizing use of "cargo" in reference to enslaved people was incredibly common and doesn't necessarily reveal Marshall's individual politics; antislavery advocates used this language, too. However, the term *cargo* distressingly mirrors the slave auction advertisements and other economic and legal structures that fixed Africans' status as chattel. Marshall's story continues with a series of rhetorical questions, beginning with one about fate: "Can it indeed be that she [fatal ship] comes (and so soon!) to pour the deadliest of hereditary woes into our cradle?" (381). This can be read a few ways. First, America, the newborn babe, is cursed with the hereditary disease of slavery. Second, the "hereditary woe" is slavery itself, passed from mother to child thanks, first, to Virginia law in 1662. Using terms like *loathsome fright*, *accursed shape*, *deformity*, and *pollution*, Marshall's disdain for slavery and for the enslaved can hardly be disambiguated. His grief is that the land at once blessed with the "best growth of manhood" was also immediately cursed with "eradicable seeds" (381–82). The curse was the cargo, and the cargo had to go back from whence it came, he suggests.⁸ Here Marshall objects in the lan-

guage of “ethnic absolutism,” which sees cultural hybridity, miscegenation, or creolization as “a litany of pollution and impurity,” as Paul Gilroy describes (2). Below, I will discuss further the intersection of the two ships story with African colonization efforts, but what I want to stress here is the implications of the graphic imagery that defined the two ships story. It was picturesque, pathetic, and fraught. It was a mix of metaphors whose subjects—the ships, the land, the people—were indefinite and interchangeable and, in this way, easily adapted to slavery’s defenders and critics alike.

One common trope to emerge from New England’s antislavery set was a stress on not bodies but voices, asking the reader to lend a sympathetic ear. Bodies were supplanted to bodily emanations. In her poem “To the First Slave Ship” (1827), for example, Lydia Sigourney asks the sympathetic white reader to listen: “Hear’st thou their moans, whom hope hath fled? — / Wild cries, in agonizing starts? — / Know’st thou thy humid sails are spread / With ceaseless sighs from broken hearts? —” (176). Sigourney goes on to render the “mute despair” and “death-gasps” of the “Poor outcast slave.” Ultimately, Sigourney encourages the enslaved person to look to heaven and Final Judgment for freedom since, admittedly, “every brother shuns thy side” here on earth.

In contrast, the *Mayflower*’s passengers were depicted in song, lifting their voices to heaven from the ship’s bow and anticipating their reward of freedom in the present. In an 1848 discourse published in the antislavery newspaper *North Star*, Rev. C. Waterston of Boston imagines the passengers’ discordant sounds: “In 1620, two vessels crossed the Atlantic. [. . .] We might have heard from the one sighs of agony, and from the other anthems of praise.” Waterston’s two vessels “brought with them the conflicting principles which never have been, and never can be, reconciled together” (4). These aural invocations had the secondary effect of accentuating enslaved people’s passivity; they emanated only passive sounds—sighs, cries—or were rendered mute. Through the pens of Black abolitionists, though, the two ships story was recast as a battle between good and evil rather than a study in the inverse fates of intrepid Pilgrims and lifeless Africans. Centering the ships themselves, these depictions call up the legacy of Olaudah Equiano’s detailed description of arriving on the West African coast and seeing, first, the slave ship and then the apparently cannibalistic white crew (70). Equiano’s belief that the crew “lived in this hollow place” and his amazement at the ship’s magical navigation only heightened the natural

horrors of suffocation and starvation (71). By focusing on the paranormal quality of the ship piloted by aliens, Equiano establishes the abnormality of the slave trade itself and, in turn, rehumanizes the passengers treated as cargo on the Middle Passage.

Writing sixty years after Equiano published his autobiography, African American minister Henry Highland Garnet picks up the narrative thread in his rumination on the "Past and Present Condition, and Destiny of the Colored Race." The "Wonderful coincidence!" of 1620 represented two sides of an eternal spiritual struggle. "The angel of liberty hovered over New England, and the demon of slavery unfurled his black flag over the fields of the 'sunny south,'" when the two ships landed (13). Garnet's imagery invokes both piracy and sin, playing with "black" to mock the outwardly picturesque and fertile South. As John Ernest writes, white culture insists on "[turning] the lessons of history into yet another feature in the culture of control"; thus, narrating the familiar two ships story in ways that centered the cursed trade (rather than an accursed people) posed a critical challenge to the white literary imaginary (327).

Similarly to Garnet, William J. Wilson, or "Ethiop," the author of the series "Afric-American Picture Gallery" for the *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859, painted a mental picture of the slave ship as unearthly.⁹ Misdated as 1609, picture number 1 in the gallery is "ugly, even hideous to look upon." The picture is a confusing one in the hands of "Ethiop," because there are emaciated enslaved people on shore and more arriving in a small boat in the distance. Thus, this first image is suggestive of the slave trade more generally, the "slave ship" in the picture gallery a synecdoche for the whole cursed trade. It is Satan himself who oversees this trade; "with foot, tail and horns," he mocks the sufferers. Even the waters and skies are "angry" and "black" (53). The land and skies are the province of Satan, here. There is no nascent innocence, only a state of fallenness from the start and the promise of judgment to come. Ethiop's satanic ship, like Garnet's black flag, represents the "point of intersection of sacred and secular" that marked African American historiography in this period (Ernest 42). Further, this imagery raised the question of shared guilt in the origin and spread of slavery. Should not both ships be held to account for what was wrought in their wake?

SISTER STATES

In his essay “Chiefly about War-Matters,” published in the July 1862 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Nathaniel Hawthorne, writing as “A Peaceable Man,” describes the *Mayflower*, “the fated womb of which, in her first voyage, sent forth a brood of pilgrims,” as also responsible for “[spawn-ing] slaves upon the Southern soil,—a monstrous birth” (50). The *Mayflower*’s birth was monstrous not just because slavery was a scourge on the land, but because “two such portents never sprang from an identical source before,” the portents being white and Black “progeny.” In the spirit of criticizing Massachusetts’s role in the slave trade, Hawthorne’s remarks smack of the anti-Black rhetoric of unequal yoking used by white ministers to justify enslavement and, later, to legislate against interracial marriages. But the imagery of mother *Mayflower*, “our sacred ship,” giving birth to a Black child and a white child also reflects fears of miscegenation. If the child is to follow the condition of the mother, then all of America is tainted by slavery. This is consistent with the imagery I’ve discussed, above, but also reflective of a historiographical turn around the mid-nineteenth century that saw a strange consensus between slavery’s apologists and its critics. Especially following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, southerners found the occasion to indict New England’s slaveholding past. Black historians and white antislavery advocates were likewise turning their attention to the intertwined fates of both ships and *not* just to their divided destinies.

In 1824, a man from North Carolina wrote a letter to the editor of the New York-based religious magazine *Evangelical Witness*, angered that the blame for slavery was being laid at the South’s feet. “You were the first colonists,” he remarked, “you bequeathed to us your offspring this curse, and now we are anathematized, because, we received the legacy at your hands [. . .] whether is the parent or the child most to blame?” (411). Though the editor attempts to set the record straight, particularly by highlighting that enslaved people were first introduced by Dutch traders, the point captures the spirit of regional tension arising around the time of the 1820 bicentennial. Southern historians had tired of Jamestown being overshadowed by Plymouth and its settlement being cast as the site of America’s original sin.

The tradition of the Jamestown Jubilee was slower to emerge and certainly didn’t hold the same national cache as Forefathers’ Day in New England. Virginians could boast of being first, but they had nowhere near the

public patronage for the culture of commemoration that thrived in Massachusetts. Of course, their northern neighbors also had the handy metaphor of the two ships arriving in 1620; no Jamestown Jubilee oration was going to boast of the arrival of the slave trade to its shores. Instead, they turned their attention to 1619 and the first Virginia assembly. In an 1857 "Celebration at Jamestown" speech, former President John Tyler emphasized that "*here* planted the seeds of a mighty republic" (434). The assembly was often invoked as a counterpoint to the Mayflower Compact in the battle for republican origin stories. Further, any Virginia orators willing to address the advent of slavery there would, in the same breath, indict Massachusetts on grounds of complicity. Tyler got the 1619 date right (a rare thing at this time) and mentions the "twenty negroes from Africa, from a Dutch vessel" that arrived on shore. But he immediately quashes any distinction among the British colonies by noting that "shipping interests of Old England and New England entered actively into the trade, and all the then colonies became African slaver marts" (440). Anticipating objections to this characterization, Tyler levels what would become a standard refrain: "It deserves to be well considered by our sister States, whether they are not quite as much interested in preserving the existing condition of things as we ourselves."

Tyler's framing of the sister states undermined the binary of the two "fate-freighted vessels." They weren't on a path of divided destinies but one of mutual benefit from slavery. In 1860, a speaker before the Central Agricultural Society of Virginia repeated the accusation, calling northerners' bluff about their eagerness to abolish the peculiar institution. Labeling enslaved people "a class of involuntary immigrants," the speaker not only lists the statistics of enslaved people in the New England colonies and states, but argues that the bulk of enslaved people now laboring in southern plantations descended from mass sell-offs in the North; economic expediency, not "any sentiment of negrophilism" animated the North then and now (329).

Southern writers weren't alone in surfacing the story of Massachusetts slavery, however. In an 1835 report of the New Hampshire Anti-Slavery Society, a speaker admitted that while the first enslaved people were "landed and disposed of at Jamestown," there was "too much evidence to prove that the practice was sanctioned by our Puritan fathers" and continued for more than a century after their landing ("Miscellaneous" 116). Antislavery

sympathizers tended to absolve the Puritans specifically from wrongdoing but acknowledged that when “that brave old generation passed away,” slavery “crept into the Commonwealth like other evils and vices” (*Friends*’ 198). The way that writers pardoned Massachusetts and other New England states from responsibility for bolstering chattel slavery in the colonial period was to point to climate and agriculture as the drivers of slavery. Yet, as I discussed above, southern writers pounced on the chance to link the two economies together.

In an ironic rhetorical confluence, Black abolitionists and white apologists for slavery agreed that both shores benefited from the Jamestown landing. Taking this relationship further, though, Black writers also invoked and identified with the *Mayflower* and its Pilgrims, as Kenyon Grader has recently observed, imagining themselves “as the culmination of a sacred destiny that was both Black and American, traceable to the *Mayflower* and the slave ship alike” (65). They reserved the right to criticize the Pilgrim “fathers” while also cosigning their proto-republicanism (a version of the Puritans advanced in early national historiography). Yet, by invoking the *Mayflower* and the slave ship, Black writers also challenged a historiographical tradition keen on separating their means and ends. In his 1841 *A Textbook of the Origin and History of the Colored People*, for example, Black historian James W. C. Pennington reminded readers that “Indians were stolen from the coast of New England, and sold at Malaga, 1615” and this predated both the Virginia slave trade (which he correctly dates at 1619) and the New England trade of 1638 (41). The precise dating and collapse of regional distinction are important given the ways that the colonial slave trade had been reduced to the story of those who *had* and those who *hadn’t* immediately engaged in its operations. Pennington makes clear that Europe viewed the New World as a place to traffic in people, that this slaveholding spirit “broke forth [. . .] like a lion from his cage, pinched with hunger” (42). The simile of the lion is apt given the name of the Dutch man-of-war that sailed up the James in 1619: *White Lion*. Even as abolitionists like Robert C. Winthrop were keen on depicting the two ships “advancing side by side on the same great ocean of human life” (56), Pennington takes in the whole transatlantic trade and he sees “blood, blood and blood only in its train” (43). He saw no tempest-tossed ships of freedom or misery, just the insatiable appetite for colonization and enslavement.

Black abolitionist writers had to tread lightly in this territory. One can

imagine the risks involved with collapsing the distinction between the two ships that had become a favorite structuring image. In a December 1850 speech just two months after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Frederick Douglass retold the origin story in a way that reflected the new and alarming reality. Slavery, he declared, “dates back to the landing of the pilgrims on Plymouth rock.—It was here more than two centuries ago. The first spot poisoned by its leprous presence, was a small plantation in Virginia” (“Lecture” 165).¹⁰ Douglass’s syntax leads to some constructive confusion. Does slavery date back to Plymouth Rock? Where is the *here* of its origins? Like the writers I’ve discussed above, Douglass reaches for some metaphorical grounding in poison and leprosy. They are useful not as examples of fixity to the spot but of spread. Beyond engaging in linguistic play, Douglass also raises ontological questions of slavery’s existence in American life. He continues, “[Slavery] has become interwoven with all American institutions, and has anchored itself in the very soil of the American Constitution” (165). From poison and disease to fabric and anchor, Douglass captures language’s insufficiency to fathom 1619. That he lands on the anchor in the soil—the berth, the mooring—is important because he does not say the soil of Point Comfort, but the soil of the Constitution. The keyword for Douglass is *all*—all affairs, all institutions. Thus, unlike his contemporary William Wells Brown, who asked of the two ships, “When shall one of those parallel lines come to an end?” (181), Douglass asks his audience to recognize that they were never truly parallel to begin with, that they held the same course and were anchored in the same waters.

THE PLYMOUTH OF AFRICA

After the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the image of a divided history grounded in two separate ships collapsed even further, for no person of color was thought safe from enslavement. As Martin Delany warned in 1852, African Americans should “depend upon no promised protection of citizens in any quarter” (201). In the context of this heightened precarity, both Black and white colonizationists seized on the two ships story to cross purposes. The American Colonization Society (ACS) returned over and over again to the colonies of Plymouth and Jamestown as a way to cast Liberian colonization as a reversal of the slave trade’s damage, a damage done not just to people of African descent but to those European Americans who felt

that racial integration was anathema to a national identity. For Black nationalists like Delany, removing to Africa would achieve a necessary reversal of the *White Lion's* journey. Indeed, in 1878, Delany dubbed the *Azor*, a steamship used to transport African American families to West Africa, the “African Mayflower” (qtd. in Callahan 157). Delany leveraged the 1620 misdating to highlight Plymouth’s complicity in Jamestown’s deeds. Inasmuch as he would use the reference of the “memorable emigration of the Puritans” to the wilderness to justify the establishment of a republic in Liberia, Delany also used that same Puritan origin story to paint life within the bounds of the United States as untenable (203). In *Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent*, Delany uses the two ships story to render claims to regional difference and moral superiority moot:

The Dutch ship landed her cargo at New Bedford, Massachusetts—the whole coast now comprising the old original States, then went by the name of Virginia. [. . .] Beginning their preparations in the slave trade in 1618, just two years previous,—allowing time against the landing of the first emigrants, for successfully carrying out the project—the African captives and Puritan emigrants—singularly enough!—landed upon the same section of the same continent at the same time—1620—the Pilgrims at Plymouth, and the captive slaves at New Bedford, but a few miles, comparatively, south. (261)

Delany’s facts aren’t correct, here, but his conflation of the two landings is striking, especially in light of the ways that white abolitionists had so surgically separated them. He first makes clear that the Virginia Company had laid the groundwork for the slave trade and that while slavery might have flourished over time in Virginia, the same foundations were laid in the other British North American colonies. He uses repetition—“the same section of the same continent at the same time”—*not* to highlight this singular irony but to demonstrate that the journey of emigrants and captives were of a piece with British colonial expansion. For Delany, it didn’t matter that two different ships had landed on different shores. The result for Black people was the same.

On the issue of emigration, Delany and his *North Star* coeditor, Frederick Douglass, disagreed. In 1851, Douglass’s speech at the National Convention of the Liberty Party decried the colonization effort. On the question of whether people of African descent have a home in America, Douglass

repeats the story of a simultaneous landing as a way to suggest not two different fates but one shared history. "We have grown up with you; we have watered your soil with our tears; nourished it with our blood, tilled it with our hard hands. Why should we not stay here? We came when it was a wilderness, and were the pioneers of civilization on this continent" ("Free Negro's Place"). Claiming a pioneer's status for those who had long been dubbed the "wretched cargo" or the stain or the cursed progeny, Douglass flips the script. Douglass was not naive about the immense challenge of making this rewritten history a felt reality for white Americans and even white abolitionists. Indeed, no one harnessed the metaphorical possibilities of the Pilgrim landing more than the white members of the ACS.

In the first volume of their print organ *African Repository and Colonial Journal* (1825–1919), contributors regularly praised the efforts in Montserrat, Liberia, by comparing them to the first North American British colonies. "The time may come when the present emigrants to Montserado [sic] shall be remembered by thousands with gratitude, such as inspires ourselves when we think of the New England pilgrims, or of those who first landed in Jamestown," one orator declared (341).¹¹ The "those" of Jamestown are surely not the enslaved people, but the British. The suggestion in all of these comparisons between Liberia and Plymouth or Jamestown is that the Black émigrés would arrive as Pilgrims and not as slaves, that the reversed course of their ship would return them to a place of belonging in just the way that the British laid claim to the New World. The ACS annual meetings revisited this theme frequently in the 1830s when the society was establishing its first Liberian colony. The parallel with the Plymouth/Jamestown story was all the more effecting because "in 1820 (just two hundred years after the landing of the Blacks at Jamestown,) the Elizabeth sailed for the coast of Africa," one writer for the *Southern Literary Messenger* reflected. Their "adventures," he writes, "were strangely like those of the first settlers of Virginia" (Slaughter vii). The key to these historical gymnastics was a reversal of the perception of Africans as "cargo." This reversal was made possible by the ACS's emphasis on Christian conversion. Émigrés to Liberia could be the "pilgrims of Mesurado" because they were now "free and Christian men" (*Repository*, 1831, 169). And crucially, they were capable of self-government because in slavery, "he has grown with our growth and strengthened with our strength" (Slaughter iv). The Plymouth parallel was predicated on the belief that enslavement was a civilizing

force and a necessary one for Africans to achieve self-government even in their own lands.

These lands, in the eyes of the colonizationists, were more amenable to cultivation than the East Coast had been two centuries before. A common refrain found in ACS discourse is that the hostile ground of Plymouth and Jamestown was tamed by Anglo-Saxon vigor. This antebellum chauvinism was leveraged in the context of Liberian colonization to assuage fears about the difficulty of colonizing work. When it was politically expedient to do so, writers drew a contrast between Plymouth Rock and Montserrat to highlight the easy time the new settlers would have. The Pilgrims faced “the rigours of the long and tedious New England winters to combat, together with numerous hordes of hostile savages, and far beyond the reach of any friendly power to alleviate their sufferings” (*Repository*, 1832, 395–96). In addition to praising the white settler’s hardiness, then, the writer raises the specter of a white paternal protection over the Liberian colony. With a “climate uniformly warm,” how could they fail?

When the mortality rate skyrocketed in Liberia and the colony was floundering, the comparison shifted again, pointing to Jamestown and Plymouth as examples of colonies that had initially failed but soon found their footing. Everyone at Roanoke died; Jamestown took generations to build. Time would surely do its work. But perhaps more telling than this disingenuous comparison are the words of Reverend Phillip Slaughter (descendant of Virginia historian Robert Beverley), whose 1856 writings for the *Southern Literary Messenger* on “Africa in America” envisioned another ship and another destiny for America’s Black population. “With the Anglo Saxon for their guide, they may pass the Isthmus and spread over the valley of the Amazon, or like the crew of the fabled Phantom ship, they may be, Wanderers o’er eternity,/Whose bark rides on and on,/And anchored ne’er shall be. That the destination of many of them is Africa, we have no doubt” (xv). Slaughter’s wistful depiction of African Americans doomed to wander the seas on a phantom ship strikes at the heart of where Douglass feared colonization rhetoric was headed: an erasure, an expulsion, a profound othering of Black people into a perpetual stateless state. Despite Slaughter having spent much of his essay praising “a Republic of free blacks” (vii), this final image of the precarity of the African diaspora shattered any fantasies of a Black Plymouth that would truly dismantle the racist social order.

THE GREAT CONTRAST

The relationship between African colonization, American expansion and Plymouth nostalgia only intensified as sectionalism frayed the union's tenuous threads in the mid-nineteenth century. Some politicians, seeking to mend the rift, seized on the *Mayflower* landing as an emblem of national manifest destiny, a way forward (or westward) out of sectional conflict. In a speech printed in the *National Era* in 1859, Governor Salmon Chase of Ohio (later President Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury), compared the voyage of the *Mayflower* to the Ohio-bound wagons of 1788 whose occupants "there laid the foundations of a new Plymouth" (133). Chase was speaking at the laying of the Plymouth monument cornerstone in Plymouth, Massachusetts; it wouldn't be finished and dedicated for another thirty years, an eternity considering all that would pass in those decades. Recognizing the symbolic heft of the moment, Chase encouraged New Englanders to reach out their hands to "their brothers of Virginia to build another monument at Jamestown to commemorate the settlement there" (133). Such an act would go far in repairing the union, Chase believed, for Plymouth is the "inseparable" coequal with Jamestown in the operations of settlement, and Ohio their younger sister of the Northwest Territory. If nothing else, land seizure would unite these histories. But one year later and twenty-five miles west of Plymouth, Charles Sumner delivered a speech before the Massachusetts Meeting of Republicans characterizing Plymouth and Jamestown not as co-heirs in a colonizing project but as two "mighty influences" locked in a "holy conflict" (9). No hands stretched out in brotherhood. No monuments to the fathers.

Sumner's speech, reproduced in *The Liberator* and elsewhere, settled on the topic "Example of Massachusetts against Slavery," rallying Bay Staters to see themselves as righteous actors in a centuries-long drama. Sumner covers familiar territory, repeating the 1620 dating, describing two ships and two manifests. But now, in September 1860, with a contentious presidential election on the horizon, Sumner is able to describe these two ships as careening headlong toward each other in "the final grapple" for the fate of the country. Slavery never flourished in Massachusetts, he proudly states, a place of "hardy industry," prayer, and a "civil body politic." In Virginia, though, the first slaves to touch the soil "desecrated it" (8-9). Sum-

ner's strategy for cohering various factions of the Republican state party is to invoke the two ships as representing a contest for the future, rooted in their original colonial antagonism: "The question is simply between the *Mayflower* and the *Slave-Ship*, — which of the two to choose?" (9). Massachusetts Republicans must not only speak "in the voice of the *Mayflower*" (the past) but must reembark on the *Mayflower* into the country's future. To abandon Republican principals would mean "turning from the *Mayflower* [. . .] to embark on that dismal *Slave-Ship*" (16, 19).

Four years later, in December 1864, the month of General Sherman's march to the sea, Presbyterian minister and abolitionist Theodore L. Cuyler penned a short piece on the subject of "Plymouth Rock and Jamestown" with a version of the two ships markedly more inflammatory than Sumner's. The raging war is the result of "two hundred years of antagonism between Jamestown and Plymouth Rock," he declares, and "the seeds of that strife which has stained the soil of Gettysburg and Chattanooga were sown in 1620" (1). Cuyler, like Sumner, finds in the two ships metaphor a useful way of thinking about two opposing futures. The origin story that begins at Plymouth yields the future republic and the one beginning in Jamestown yields only a "monstrous oligarchy of rebel slave-holders." When the slave ship issued its "evil birth" on the shores of the James, it also planted the "seeds of death" in its soil. The result? Jamestown languishes in bankruptcy and ruin while Plymouth thrives and expands its influence. In this apocalyptic battle for the fate of the nation, "Plymouth Rock, led by Abraham Lincoln, and Jamestown, marshaled for its forlorn fight by Davis and his oligarchy" represent the fight between enlightenment and barbarism, industry and idleness, free government and anarchy. In a culminating flourish akin to Sumner's "which of the two to choose?" (9), Cuyler's confidence in the outcome of the war is clear: "Who fears that Jamestown can vanquish Plymouth Rock?" (1). The defeat of the Confederacy was borne in the ship itself two and a half centuries ago.

Sumner and Cuyler's speeches follow the tradition of interpreting the two ships as essentially antagonistic and participating in a zero-sum game. Yet no white writer from this period envisioned reversing the course of the *Mayflower*. No one recommended that this ship be turned around; no one imagined that blood and violence arrived on Plymouth's shores even though countless histories testified to it. Thus, while the charting of two

ships on a collision course proved rhetorically powerful in the midst of the Civil War, observers like Garnet were quick to remind the public that this contrast was not so sharp on the subject of slavery.

For Garnet, two “radically hostile principals” that were actually at war, here, were the ideals of human equality to which America nominally ascribed and the lived reality of Black people on its lands. To a packed crowd in DC just days before General Sherman captured Columbia, South Carolina, Garnet delivered a powerful condemnation of the present-day scribes and Pharisees, American legislators. The hallmark of their behavior is their claims of love and fidelity to the founding documents of human rights, self-government, and the promises of salvation. “With just pride they tell us that they are descended from the Pilgrims,” he intones, “who threw themselves upon the bosom of the treacherous sea, and braved storms and tempests, that they might find in a strange land, and among savages, free homes, where they might build their altars that should blaze with acceptable sacrifice to God” (71–72). As the Pilgrim standard-bearers disembarked on Plymouth Rock for the “*Freedom to worship God*,” another story was unfolding on another shore but *not* outside the Pilgrim’s purview. “But others, their fellow-men, equal before the Almighty, and made by him of the same blood, and glowing with immortality, they doom to life-long servitude and chains,” Garnet laments (72). The referent for the pronoun “they” in this latter statement is vague and, I would argue, intentionally so. Could it be, for Garnet, that *both* the Pilgrim Fathers and their Pharisical descendants doom, enslave, “chattelize” their fellow man, made in the image of God? (73). In Garnet’s comparison, Cuyler and Sumner’s martial imagery of a vanquished Jamestown misses the point. The story of two ships tended to cast the enslaved person as a cursed seed, a monstrous birth, a stain, a corruption, a contamination but “nevertheless he is a man,” Garnet affirms (75). The bloody conflict before them may have been fated, but not because of some ancient Anglo-Saxon strife but because all of the power of a slaveholding nation “cannot unmake him” into cargo.

Following the war, Black historians and white southerners turned back to the two ships for clarity; the Civil War they had all just lived through required new histories of what led them there. In 1882, George Washington Williams set the record straight on a long-standing misdating. “No event will be more sincerely deplored than the introduction of slavery into the colony of Virginia through the last days of the month of August in the year

1619!” he exclaimed (116). Williams proceeds to describe all those histories that repeated the erroneous 1620 date and other errors, but his point is not to quibble over minutia.¹² “Whether the number was fourteen or twenty,” he continues, “It is a fact, beyond historical doubt, that the Colony of Virginia purchased the first Negroes, and thus opened up the nefarious traffic in human flesh” and “there was nothing in the moral atmosphere of the colony inimical to the spirit of bondage that was manifest so early in this history of this [English] people” (119–20). Virginia did not carry the responsibility for this nefarious traffic alone. For “the poor Negro of Massachusetts found no place in the sympathy or history of the Puritan,” (172) and “slavery followed hard upon the heels of the Pilgrim Fathers” (179). If the dissolution of a robust Reconstruction effort had shown Williams anything, it was that whites would hasten to disavow responsibility for slavery and would look to paper over its centrality in the American story. Williams introduces a third ship, the *Desire*, built in Marblehead as a slave ship, to remind readers that the story of two ships on two shores has always been a partial one, that every ship that trafficked in people was a fatal, fatal ship, and that tidy origin stories tended to give cover to the powerful.

While Williams and other Black historians in the post-Reconstruction period “restructure[d] the race’s image of itself,” as Henry Louis Gates describes, writers like Thomas Nelson Page, a sire of one of Virginia’s First Families, were busy crafting plantation nostalgia to feed the Lost Cause narrative (qtd. in Hall, 152). Bemoaning the fact that schoolchildren weren’t taught about Jamestown, Page obliges with a history lesson on “Civil Liberty” and its Virginia origins in a 1907 tricentennial essay. Page lays claim to the Pilgrims’ landing by citing their sponsorship by the Virginia Company and then dismantles the novelty of the Mayflower Compact by citing Virginia’s 1619 representative assembly. He does not mention the arrival of the *White Lion* but instead extols the cast of the Old Dominion’s republican sons, presidents, judges, and revolutionaries (63).¹³ Page recognized that history itself would be a crucial battleground in the post-Reconstruction South. Telling a certain kind of story about Virginia’s visionary colonies entailed not the *embracing* of the Dutch man-of-war that arrived on the James, but its erasure; this erasure would allow the Civil War to have been about something else entirely. The work of historical negationism required assuming a position of noble victimhood and invoking a luminous past shipwrecked by northern aggression.

1619

In the inside flap of Nathaniel Philbrick's 2006 Pulitzer Prize-nominated book *Mayflower*, the publisher poses the book's framing question: "How did America begin?" A belief that the course of the pilgrims on the *Mayflower*—of all ships, of all passengers—marks the first point on a line that runs to and through the American Revolution persists in part because of the historiography I have traced. Casting American beginnings as intrepid, ordained, and embattled helps to obfuscate American beginnings that are also imperialistic, hostile, and anti-Black. The *Mayflower* and its famed compact positions Americans as destined for self-government and it positions Americans as white because this destiny would be theirs alone. In the preface to the *New York Times*'s 1619 Project, the editors ask "what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year" (4–5). They invite Americans to scrutinize how "so many of our national narratives feature the arrival of ships to the New World" and yet the arrival of enslaved people in 1619 is rarely "treated with grandeur" (7). Indeed, as I have explored in this essay, the language available to talk about the first landing of enslaved people often dehumanized them even if the rhetorical posture of the writer was one of condemnation or mourning.

Unsurprisingly, the 1619 Project has faced criticism, some from within the high ranks of American historians. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning opening essay, editor Nikole Hannah-Jones declares, "The year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776" (17). The critique that the 1619 Project gets its history "wrong" is ironic when placed in the context of American historiography which, as this essay has shown, is defined by its fluidity. That is, those that claim a "wrong" history are often those that place a fuller-than-deserved faith in some "right" version. In a critique published in the *Atlantic*, Conor Friedersdorf contends that "[p]lacing America's founding moment in 1776 honors the diversity of its people in a way that 1619 does not" and, indeed, using 1619 as a founding date threatens to "unwittingly set back, rather than advance, the causes of equity and racial inclusion." The year 1776 is so critical, he argues, that "any other choice is divisive and arbitrary." Friedersdorf sounds a little like the bi-centennial orators laying claim to 1620 or the disgruntled Virginians pinning for a Jamestown Jubilee. Fixing dates matters as an act of identifying oneself in the past. "I see back then a glimpse of who I would become,"

the celebrant might wistfully reflect. This wish to peer into the past and meet one's reflection underscores Friedersdorf's critique, too. "And what about me? [. . .] If English Virginia circa 1619 was America's true founding, I'm not sure what that means for me." Taking issue with Hannah-Jones's claim that "black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true 'founding fathers'" (17), critics like Friedersdorf echo the structural logic and tidy imagery of the two ships as two choices. But the hardest truth about 1619 and 1620 is that they are part of the same broken colonial project that gave rise to the same fractured nation. As Matthew Desmond put it in his 1619 Project essay on capitalism and the plantation, "Given the choice between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above" (32).

This is not to say that the two ships, two shores image is not useful to our understanding of a sharply divided American experience. When historian Nell Irvin Painter was approached to sign on to a group of historians' letter of objection to the 1619 Project, she explained, "I feel like [Sean Wilentz] was asking me to choose sides, and my side is 1619's side, not his side, in a world in which there are only those two sides" (Serwer). The problem with the story of two ships and two shores, two manifests, two destinies, is that it grants an unearned narrative balance to an asymmetrical reality.¹⁴ Nineteenth-century thinkers often used the two diverging ships to ask, "Who will America be?" The question presumed that Americans must align with one scenario or the other; one cannot get on board both. But as the 1619 Project and other decolonizing efforts in the field of early American studies make clear, the question is not "Who will America be?" but "Who will be American?" Who belongs? And who will insist on accountability to its promises? The final image in the 1619 Project's collection is a photograph by Danielle Bowman of two tracks intersecting on the outskirts of Savannah, Georgia, the semi-abandoned site of a massive slave auction. Historian Anne C. Bailey describes the image this way: "What you see are two tracks, intersecting but going in different directions, toward different outcomes—a fitting metaphor, perhaps, for black and white life in America" (98). Remembering Point Comfort 1619 does not erase Plymouth 1620 because they intersect even as they go "in different directions." After centuries of getting this story wrong or not telling this story at all, we are compelled to follow the "cavalcade of ghost ships" from Guinea to

Virginia, Leiden to Plymouth, from the seventeenth century all the way to their twenty-first-century haunts.

NOTES

1. For a full discussion of this particular regional tension, see DiCuirci, *Colonial Revivals* chap. 3; Cheng 175–88. See also Waldstreicher on the role of commemoration in the crafting of nationalism and Apap on the rise of sectional geographies in the Jackson era.
2. See chapter 1 of Schulten for a compelling discussion of the relationship between geographical and historical knowledge and formal education in the early republic.
3. For a comprehensive history of the 1619 arrival of the *White Lion*, see Musselwhite, Mancall and Horn.
4. See Seelye and Waldstreicher on the ways that New England's historians, antiquarians, and fiction writers nationalized New England history.
5. On the rise of historical societies in the early national period, see Henle, DiCuirci, and Cheng.
6. For a provocative discussion of the relationship between national cohesion, commemoration, and mourning, see Sayre.
7. In her introduction to the 1619 Project, Nikole Hannah-Jones poses the question this way: "What if America understood, finally, in this 400th year, that we have never been the problem but the solution?" (26). Hannah-Jones's question identifies the degree to which the "solution" was always figured as the ideological union of the states, not acknowledging the full personhood and citizenship of Black people.
8. For a discussion of the relationship between discourses of race and disease in early America, see Otter.
9. For a full discussion of the "Afric-American Picture Gallery" series, see chapter 7 of Wilson.
10. More than thirty years after this speech, Douglass would marry Helen Pitts, a descendant of *Mayflower* passengers. She was denied admittance to the Mayflower Society, formed in 1897. In a letter of objection to the society, she accuses them of "trampling upon Constitutional rights." She asked, "If the descendants of the Mayflower give themselves up to it, whom may we look for fair dealing?" (qtd. in Fought 299).
11. Dalila Scruggs argues that daguerreotypes played a critical role in portraying "Monrovia as a blossoming 'city on a hill'" (203) in the visual and print culture of the American Colonization Society, circa 1856, while also depicting Liberia as "distant, a 'separate but equal' place where African Americans could conduct their parallel lives" (230).

12. Williams also introduces the arrival of *The Treasurer* in 1618 as the first ship to bring enslaved people to Virginia, which is inaccurate (118).
13. Valorizing Virginia's founding fathers was common throughout the antebellum and postbellum periods. Knowing this, Williams reminds the reading public, "Virginia was the mother of slavery as well as 'the mother of Presidents'" (115), introducing readers to the notion of a complicated legacy of the founders.
14. As Benjamin Quarles wrote years ago, ever since Jamestown "the experiences of black and whites, though profoundly different, have always been intertwined and complimentary, even symbiotic on occasion" (182).

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