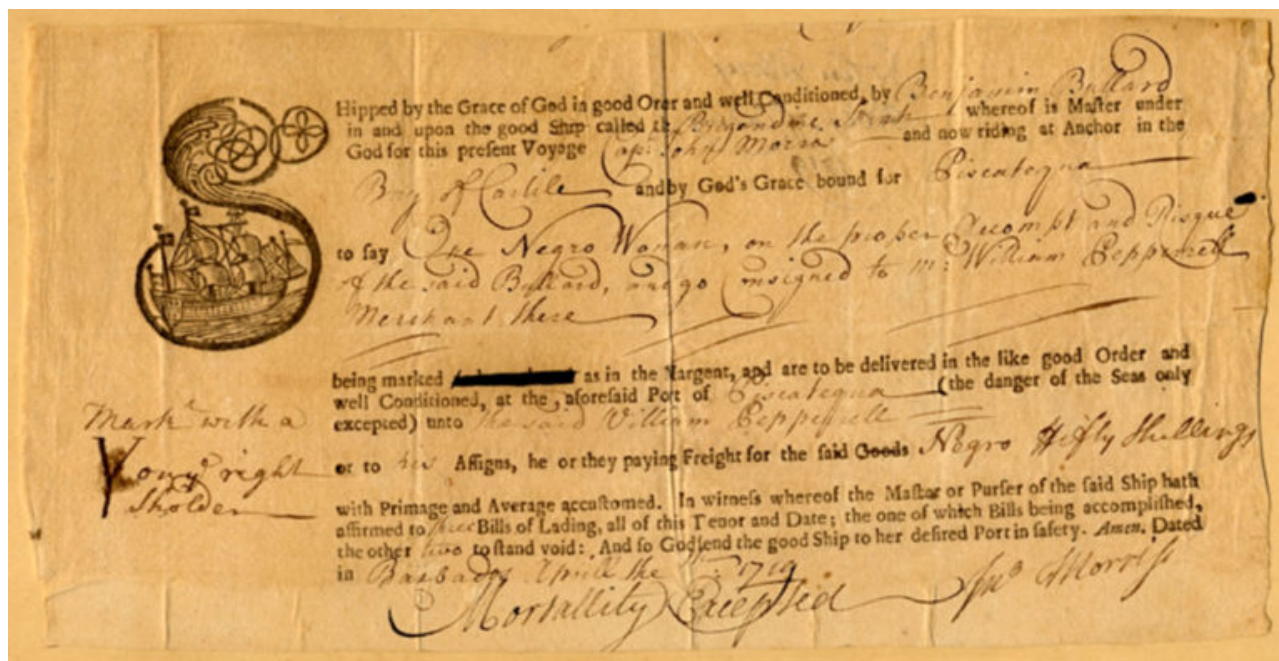


from Markd Y (Archives & Invocations)

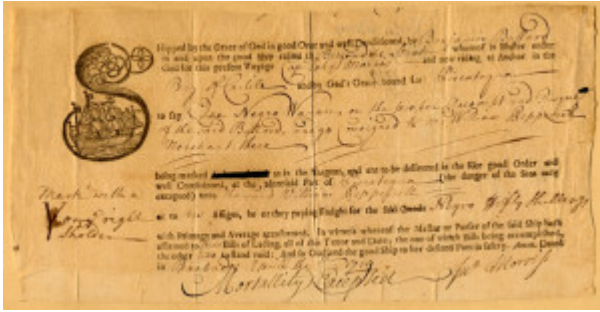


The first pages of the poem (the pages directly preceding these), can be read at the online journal [Poor Yorick](#).

Statement of Poetic Research

In Search of the Woman Markd Y

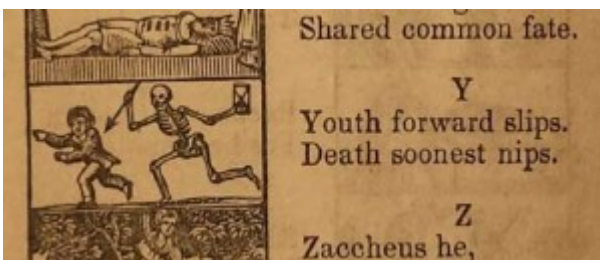
Since October 2, 2012, I have been searching for traces of an unnamed, African-descended woman, branded Y, and what were likely four, possibly nine, other enslaved people with her onboard the ship the *Brigantine Sarah* in 1719. Color made them cargo, and they were being sent from Barbados to Kittery, Maine, to be sold on consignment by merchant William Pepperrell. For a few weeks I did not know other enslaved people were companionship the woman. Originally, I found her alone in a bill of lading, a shipping document held at the [Maine Historical Society](#). I stumbled across it during an Internet search for other persons enslaved by Pepperrell.



Bill of lading for the enslaved woman branded Y, 1719. Courtesy of the Maine Historical Society (Collection 35). Click image to enlarge.

Between 2005 and 2010, I had researched slavery in the Missouri Ozarks after discovering my ggg-grandfather, Richard Steele, had held nine men, women, and children in bondage there (the black Steeles of Greene County, Missouri). This led me to want to explore other locales where slavery once thrived, but where one likely would not know it today. So I turned to my adopted home of Massachusetts and what, during the colonial period, would have been its Province of Maine. Over the years, I began to feel like I had read my way through about every horror slavery could perpetrate (including in how it is “remembered”). But coming across the bill of lading, and how the woman caught up in its works was seared with one of the 26 letters I’d devoted my life to as a poet—*this* caught me completely off guard.

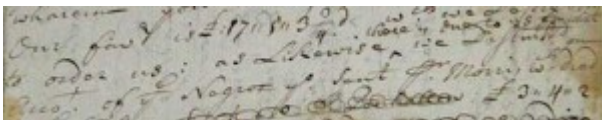
Audre Lorde’s words—*The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*—banged around in my head. Before my eyes, slavery was implicated in the English language *right down to individual characters of its alphabet*. In this case, a woman forcibly branded with a slaveholder’s initial. But Lorde’s words rose out of that alphabet as well. I started to write my way toward a response to all of this, in the process highlighting the more sinister linguistic workings of the bill of lading and creating an invocation to the woman caught up in its violence. I also crafted what I called a “Lost Lesson” from *The New England Primer*, a text I imagined accompanying that centuries-used school book in its usual presentation of the alphabet.



Since the mid-1600s, and through countless editions of *The New England Primer*, death has chased down the living in its alphabet. *The New England primer improved ...* (Philadelphia, mid-nineteenth century). Photograph courtesy of the author.

These first poems in the larger “Mark^d Y” manuscript, poems that directly precede the work published here in *Common-place*, can be read online in [Poor Yorick: A Journal of Rediscovered Objects](#). An interview and [blog entry](#) there also discuss the larger “Mark^d Y” project, including further commentary on the section of “Mark^d Y” published here. As with my work in *Common-place*, the work in *Poor Yorick* will be archived online as well.

I hadn’t expected to find out anything further about the unnamed woman. But a few weeks later, while under house arrest, so to speak, by Hurricane Sandy, I caught sight of her once more, this time in an anthology, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, I had randomly opened. She had completed the journey begun in the bill of lading, and it turned out she hadn’t been alone: four other enslaved people were with her on the ship. Whether they were friends, strangers, family, or enemies, what their ages were, their gender, their names—all of this was left unsaid in the June 25 letter William Pepperrell wrote to Benjamin Bullard, his agent in Barbados. He does tell Bullard that the woman had survived the weeks-long journey, only to die a few weeks later. What Pepperrell omits is how she had to carry to her grave the experience of watching each of her companions die. “All the rest died at sea” is all Pepperrell says, and what “grief” he extends to Bullard is entirely linguistic: “I am sorry for your loss” has nothing to do with grieving the dead, but with making sure that Pepperrell’s agent understands that the financial blow that comes with five dead slaves is Bullard’s and Bullard’s alone. In fact, later on in a mad search through three states and eight archives, trying to find the original of this letter, I came across the draft of *another* missive sent from Pepperrell to Bullard, on January 9, 1720. In it, Pepperrell enumerates the financial reimbursement of 3 pounds, 4 shillings, 2 pence he expects to receive for what he and his father expended trying to keep alive “y^e Negros y^o Sent p^r Morris w^{ch} died.”



Detail of letter to Benjamin Bullard from the father-and-son firm the William Pepperrells, January 9, 1720:

Likewise there is due to us for what we Disburisd on accot of ye Negros yo Sent pr Morris wch died : £3⁴2

Courtesy of the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

www.AmericanAncestors.org.

But that letter of June 25, 1719, that I pondered and grieved over while Hurricane Sandy roared outside—the anthology said that it had originally been brought to the public’s eye in 1856 in a biography of William Pepperrell written by Usher Parsons. I went online with this information, hoping I might

find out something further about the woman and her four companions. The June 25 letter came up again, quoted this time in an 1881 article on Pepperrell by Fred M. Colby. It was this second encounter with the letter—verbatim except for an adjective, a comma, the number of people onboard the ship, the number of people dead and alive—that set me off on a yet unfinished journey through archives, museums, libraries, antiquarian bookstores, and online publications, trying to find the answer to “five? ten?” How many enslaved people were actually onboard the *Brigantine Sarah*? Where is the original letter that would settle this? And what does it mean that one of two authors found the existence of that small band of people to be so inconsequential he thought it acceptable to invent or erase some of their lives? Both versions of Pepperrell’s June 25 letter precede my poems in *Common-place*. They’ve become the basis for other work in the larger “Mark^d Y” manuscript dealing with language and historical memory.

What follows here—what might look like fragments of thought, but what I think of more as a poet’s meditations—has arisen during my field and archival research, searching for traces of the unnamed woman mark^d Y and her companions. There is a tension to the archive. It allows me to know that these people existed; it gives evidence of crimes committed against them. But it is also the archive that locks those people in language, in an alphabet that can brutalize literally and figuratively.

In her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman writes that “to read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to enter the slave hold.” For me, traveling from archive to archive, looking for the unnamed woman mark^d Y and her companions, has been more like entering a morgue: At each one, not only am I afraid that the people I’m searching for won’t be there, but that, if they are, they will no longer be recognizable. In cool rooms created to preserve remains, gently turning back the covers of files and folders becomes the metaphorical equivalent of lifting sheets off the faces of the dead: so many anonymous, unclaimed bodies.

Causes of Death: Whole families pulled from an inkwell, dropped, and shattered into letters. Men dragged across a page, left there in pieces. Women drawn and quartered with a pen.

So much language withheld and recruited, mutilating identities.

But even if I could, would I gather that ink back in its brimming well?

Return the quill pen to the wing of its bird, watch it fly off?

I've spent hours at New Hampshire's Portsmouth Athenaeum trying to decipher the unnamed woman mark^d Y out of the gnarled script of a nearly unreadable Pepperrell account book. One night, I dreamt her *Houdini*: a woman bound and gagged in tangles of ink, loosening 295-year-old knots.

As a poet, how to work with a language that threatens to tighten her bindings?
That would stuff the gag deeper in her throat?

Think about this: *There once was a typeface consisting of scars*. Where are the Barbadian branding irons it was composed with? Were they flung into the sea during uprisings and emancipation (not just by the enslaved, but by thwarted owners frightened their own initials might be held, literally, against them)? Or were those brands abandoned onshore, destined to burn as humidity fed rust's slow fire?

Who was the last person to carry scars of alphabet on their body to the grave?
What white family breathed a sigh of relief/got wistful for *the good old days*?

There once was a typeface consisting of scars, so a man strove to make a billboard of a woman's face: "I. Hackett" seared his initials into her cheeks. If this branding was punishment for running away, it didn't stop the woman from escaping again. According to the *Barbados Mercury*, Saturday, September 22,

1770: "Absented ... from the Subscriber ... PHIBBA, a short yellow-skinned Wench, about forty Years of Age, marked on each Cheek, and on each Side of her Stomach with the Letters I. H. She has been absented upwards of fifteen Years, since which she has had several Children." Did it make "the Subscriber" (one of many slaveholding Hacketts on the island of Barbados) crazy that, in spite of initials burned into the most visible part of her body, this woman had eluded him for nearly a third of her life? Not only eluded him, but created *her own* family. Her children, a part of "his property," she withheld from him as well.



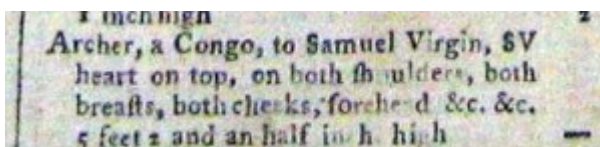
Runaway slave ad for the woman Phibba and her children, Barbados Mercury, September 22, 1770. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Did Hackett feel like the laughingstock of Barbados? For fifteen years, the woman Phibba, living as if the letters emblazoned on her face were written with invisible ink.

The 26 letters I've devoted my life to as a poet—for centuries throughout the West Indies, it was an alphabet strewn beneath clothes, stamped on a face, punctuated with numbers, diamonds and hearts. Nothing brought that home to me more than this notice from Jamaica's *Cornwall Chronicle Extraordinary*, Friday, August 19, 1791:

LIST of RUN-AWAYS in the Spanish-Town Workhouse, August 4, 1791

Archer, a Congo, to Samuel Virgin, SV heart on top, on both shoulders, both breasts, both cheeks, forehead &c. &c.



Runaway slave notice for the man Archer in Jamaica's Cornwall Chronicle Extraordinary, August 19, 1791. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Had the man Archer been branded as punishment each time he ran away, till his skin stammered with his "master's" frustration? Did Samuel Virgin magically think that to cover a slave with initials was equivalent to loading him with chains? That he couldn't *possibly* flee again?

S♥V

Today, cut loose from slavery's roots, Samuel Virgin's brand might be mistaken for the bottom half of a romance scrawled on a bathroom wall. After spending hours reading through slave brands in the American Antiquarian Society's Caribbean Newspaper Collection, I began sighting slaveholders' initials *everywhere*: carved into trees, scratched onto benches, embedded in text messages, license plates, and bumper stickers—even in letters from a lovesick niece, dotting her I's with hearts. They became a kind of pox erupting on the alphabet's face:

RecoGnizI♥Ng Slave branDs E♥MbedDEd I♥N T♦exT♦ I4S t0 SeT♦ The lanGuaGe SuPPuRatI♥Ng.

What did they experience onboard the *Brigantine Sarah*, the unnamed woman mark^d Y and her companions, dressed as though they weren't leaving Barbados? Locked in an almanac somewhere, or in a ship's lost log, is an answer to *weather*. As the group moved deeper into north, did they wake up to frost stiffening their "deficient/insufficient clothing"? Work to keep their (bare?) footing on an icy deck? Or was weather more subtle? Did the air dry out as the temperature slowly dropped? Or did wind whip the temperature into a plunge? As the woman's companions sickened, did they fall into delirium, try and slip overboard, escape into a woods they could smell long before land was sighted? Or was that scent (balsam?) just one more unknown to dread?

Today, what may have been that little group's first experience of Maine is a pine forest stuffed in little pillows, marketed to tourists, destined for underwear drawers. Four-by-four inches of fragrance leaking from blueberry-

patterned cloth. At this point in my knowledge, upon entering any Maine gift shop, closing my eyes and lifting one of those pillows to my nose, I should detect the slave ship floating at its heart. But all my mind registers is *vacation* or *Christmas*. How to make the brain override nostalgia? Recognize that even the holiday's tainted? That, according to the *Barbados Mercury*, July 5-9, Christmas is a man fleeing his master in 1788.

One of my only clues to what might have greeted the unnamed woman mark^d Y in 1719 comes from a letter written in 1754. That year, Pepperrell's son-in-law, Nathaniel Sparhawk, sends six enslaved women by ship from Boston to his Kittery home. (Don't bother looking for the scene of that crime: In the 1900s, the owners of Sparhawk Hall began to dismantle the house around themselves. Room after room sold off for its fabulous paneling. In the sixties, Portsmouth's Strawberry Banke Museum bought the colonial mansion, gave it one final gutting, then burned its shell.) Like the unnamed woman, the six women Sparhawk enslaved were also to be sold. In his November 29 letter, Sparhawk anxiously directs his business associate that:

" ... they must have Cloaths & shoes sufficient, & more shirts & shifts ... see they have a good fire & good room & an old Sail to lay upon & the Ruggs to cover them ... Be sure they don't suffer, for w^{ch} end see them 2 or 3 times a day ... pray see they have good care taken of them, & let me know they are well ... "

At the Pepperrell home (*that* house still stands), did this same anxious attention greet the unnamed woman as she stepped (was carried?) off the ship? Was she shocked at the care likely lavished on her physical well-being? Warm and dry for the first time in weeks, sufficiently dressed, fed, doctored, and allowed to sleep. Or did she recognize *concern* for what it was: father and son merchants attempting to mend a piece of damaged merchandise?

In Sparhawk's case, his "investments" were already healthy. He just hoped to save money on feeding the women until he could sell them off: "I Hope you will be able to get some Body to take them for their Victualls w^{ch} I shall like much ... "

Be sure they don't suffer, for w^{ch} end see them 2 or 3 times a day ... pray see they have good care taken of them. When New England slavery is broached in nineteenth- and twentieth-century local histories, it's often lauded as short-lived and benign. But in Sparhawk's exhortation, there's also admission: Threat of mistreatment and injury were constants in the lives of the enslaved.

But for the unnamed woman branded Y finding herself another voyage, another climate, another continent away from home—when it came to *care* (and even with the possible care of other enslaved people that the Pepperrells always seemed to be holding in bondage) was it all too little, too late, for all the wrong reasons?

“They believe in a Resurrection, and that they shall go into their own Country again, and have their youth renewed,” wrote Richard Ligon, speaking of the enslaved people he moved among in 1640s Barbados. What did the woman branded Y, whose name is lost to us, believe? What did her companions believe? One way or another, soul makes its escape. But where are the bodies to mourn? Where are the graves to mark? Whether I want to or not, I keep returning to the archive, hoping it will give up an answer (especially to the question of *five? ten?*), hoping I will recognize the figurative remains. This hope travels next to the Rhode Island Historical Society: an archive recovering from water damage in a state steeped in its own active role in the Middle Passage.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all of the archives I have so far visited in my search for the unnamed woman and her companions, but special thanks to William David Barry and Sofia Yalouris at the Maine Historical Society, Timothy Salls at the New England Historic and Genealogical Society, and Carolyn Marvin at the Portsmouth Athenaeum for their assistance. My gratitude as well to Stefanie Kennedy, PhD candidate at the University of Toronto, for her kindnesses as I was searching out Barbadian runaway slave notices. Her dissertation explores the intersections between slavery and disability in the British Atlantic World. And, finally, thank you Dave Petee for lending me the volume of *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade* that set the larger “Mark^d Y” search and manuscript in motion.

Further Reading

For blackness equated to slave status, see Ira Berlin, “Coming to Terms with Slavery in Twenty-First-Century America,” in *Slavery and Public History*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006). For more on the black Steeles of Greene County, Missouri, see Catherine Baker, “The Slaves of Richard Steele of Greene County, Missouri,” *Ozar’Kin* (Fall 2006), and Catherine Sasanov Baker, “The Steeles, Their Slaves, and the Civil War,” *Ozar’Kin* (Spring 2007). Audre Lorde’s famous quote can be found in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, N.Y., 1984).

The edition of the *New England Primer* from which the Y illustration was drawn is Moss and Brother, *The New England primer improved, or, An easy and pleasant*

guide to the art of reading; to which is added, the Assembly's shorter catechism (Philadelphia, between 1849 and 1857). The complete January 9, 1720, letter to Benjamin Bullard can be found in the Pepperrell Family Papers, 1689-1764, at the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston. The anthology where I first found mention of William Pepperrell's June 25, 1719, letter is Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America, Vol. III: New England and the Middle Colonies* (Washington, D.C., 1932). For more of Saidiya Hartman's powerful thoughts on the Atlantic slave trade and the archive, see Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (2008).

The slave brands quoted in this Statement of Poetic Research were drawn from Barbadian and Jamaican newspapers in the American Antiquarian Society's Caribbean Newspaper Collection. For the destruction of Sparhawk Hall, see Rita Perry, "Sparhawk Hall to Fall," *Portsmouth Herald*, February 21, 1966, and Steven Burr, *Lost York County* (Charleston, 2009). Nathaniel Sparhawk's letter can be read in its entirety in Reverend Henry S. Burrage, *Colonel Nathaniel Sparhawk of Kittery* (Portland, Maine, 1898). For one example of the nostalgic take on New England slavery, see Samuel Francis Batchelder, *Notes on Colonel Henry Vassall (1721-1769), his wife Penelope Royall, his house at Cambridge, and his slaves Tony & Darby* (Cambridge, 1917). For more of Richard Ligon's observations, see Richard Ligon, *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes* (London, 1673). Finally, for two important books on the deep roots of the African-descended people of Maine and nearby Portsmouth, New Hampshire, see H. H. Price and Gerald E. Talbot, *Maine's Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People* (Gardiner, Maine, 2006), and Mark J. Sammons and Valerie Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African American Heritage* (Lebanon, Maine, 2004).

Parsons, Usher, *Life of Sir William Pepperrell, bart: the only native of New England who was created abaronet during our connection with the mother country (1856), pg. 28*

On one occasion Benjamin Bullard, a merchant of Antigua, shipped to Kittery Point five negroes, consigned to the firm of Pepperrells. He received the following answer, dated June 25, 1719:

*Sir,—I received yours by Captain Morris, with bills of lading for **five negroes** and **one hogshhead** of rum. One negro woman, marked Y on the left breast, died in about three weeks after her arrival, in spite of medical aid which I procured. All the rest died at sea. I am sorry for your loss. It may have resulted*

fromdeficient clothing so early in the spring.

**Colby, Fred M.,
"The First American Baronet," *Potter's American
Weekly* (Vols. 16-17, 1881), pg. 235**

He [Pepperrell] also dealt to some extent in slaves, thus laying the foundation in New England of that system which has proved such a bane to the South. In one of his letters—a large number of which have been preserved—he refers to the traffic in such a way as to show the purely mercantile way in which he regarded it:

SIR : *I received yours by Captain Morris, with bills of lading for **ten negroes and twenty hogsheads** of rum. One negro woman, marked Y on the left breast, died in about three weeks after her arrival, in spite of medical aid, which I procured. **Two of the others** died at sea. I am sorry for your loss. It may have resulted from **insufficient** clothing so early in the spring.*

Weather had a name Sandy
the night had a name Monday, October 29, 2012
in a pool of light,
a borrowed book. had a name Documents Illustrative of the History of the
Slave Trade to America

... MORE TO CONVERT... INCOMPLETE

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